



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## John Thieme on Text and Context in Postcolonial/Colonial Writings

Sunil Sharma

**John Thieme** is a savant dealing with words.

He loves to travel and teach. The popular professor writes back through fictional texts into a context going back hundreds of years and finds out the implicated epistemologies and power structures embedded in the cultural practices of reading, writing and theorising via language. For many, he is a Barthes-like figure, regulating the way of our looking at the world.

Professor John Thieme is a Senior Fellow at the University of East Anglia, UK. He has held Chairs at the University of Hull and London South Bank University and has also taught at the Universities of Guyana, North London and, as an annual Visiting Professor, at the University of Turin. His books include *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (1987), *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1996), *Derek Walcott* (1999), *Post-Colonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (2001), *Post-Colonial Studies: The Essential Glossary* (2003) and *R.K. Narayan* (2007). He was Editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* from 1992 to 2011 and he is General Editor of the *Manchester University Press Contemporary World Writers Series*. His book *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place* has just been published by Macmillan Palgrave.

As a critic, Thieme knows the value of the afterlife of iconic texts and how they can be sites of contested readings. As a person, he comes across as positive, accessible and friendly, rare with well-known personalities.

He talks of many intersecting issues in this long e-mail interview with Mumbai-based writer **Sunil Sharma**.

**Q:** Recent critical discourse is characterised by a renewed emphasis on context. A welcome departure from the agnosticism of post-structuralism. This insistence for contextualising texts within historical contexts is a return to a materialistic understanding of writing and reading and cognitive processes. How do you view its gains?

**A:** I think the gains are considerable, Sunil, not least because, as your use of the word 'agnosticism' implies, post-structuralist approaches have tended to side-step ethical issues. Post-structuralism's

concern to move beyond ‘humanist’ approaches, which often weren’t all that humane since they privileged a certain strain in post-Enlightenment Western thought, was commendable enough, but in its most puritanical manifestations it ran the risk of a very sterile kind of formalism. Often, of course, it was coupled with particular readings of Marxism, particularly those that held sway in the French academy from the 1960s onwards, and many of us learnt a lot from this. But to me post-structuralism and Marxism were always strange bedfellows and so the move towards less ideologically grounded materialist approaches has been healthy.

My own more recent work has been as much concerned with geographies as histories and I think the two need to be put together in any consideration of contexts. Bakhtin has given us the term ‘chronotope’ for time-space configurations and I’d suggest it’s essential to remember the inseparability of the two. You’re Mumbai-based and must be acutely aware of how the physical and particularly the demographic landscape of the city is changing on an almost daily basis. Like all cities Mumbai exists in time, but it’s acutely so in Mumbai, which Suketu Mehta calls a ‘maximum city’.

Q: You are the critic responsible for a hyphenated term ‘con-text’, now in large currency within certain discourses and theoretical praxis. How did you arrive at this neologism?

A: I don’t remember how I came to it and have a feeling that I didn’t invent it, though I guess my book *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon* helped to popularise it. I’d previously used the term in a paper on Caribbean writing that I gave in the Netherlands in 1994. So by the time I came to write the book around the turn of the Millennium, it was already there in my lexicon of possibilities and it fitted my purpose better than terms such as ‘counter-discourse’, which Helen Tiffin had brought into postcolonial discourse from a critic called Richard Terdiman, who had used it for work on nineteenth-century French literature, and which I also referred to. ‘Con-texts’ was perfect for the emphasis I wanted, because with its hyphen, it enabled me to embrace both the idea of context in the usual sense of the word and the kind of adversarial response that one often, not always, finds in postcolonial texts that write back to the canon. And the canonical ‘pre-texts’ to which they are responding both provide an earlier source (‘pre-text’ with the hyphen) and an occasion for writing – pretext in the usual sense of the word.

Q: Why not begin with your context? The early intellectual and philosophical influences, please?

A: I don’t find these easy to summarise, because they’re eclectic. Basically I think I’ve always been a pragmatist, even when I haven’t necessarily realised it. As a small boy, I was a Christian. I grew out of that fairly quickly and saw myself as a socialist in late adolescence and early adulthood. I suppose I still do, but I’m totally disenchanted with the various incarnations that socialism has assumed in the UK in recent decades. I did a year of philosophy as an undergraduate before switching to become an English Honours student and that involved reading the early Greek philosophers and Plato (not Aristotle, though I read him for pleasure and preferred his more empirical approach to Plato) and European philosophers like Descartes and Leibniz. I don’t think that they influenced me very much, though.

Before structuralism and post-structuralism found their way into Britain, I was influenced by the early Wittgenstein’s thinking on language. Then in the 1980s, like many of my academic contemporaries, I was influenced by French theory and a bit later by some postcolonial theorists, but I was, and am, much keener on what one might call the non-Western humanist side of postcolonial thinking than on those aspects that grew out of post-structuralism. So I prefer Said to Bhabha, who,

influential though he has been, seems to me to be too much the product of an English post-structurally inflected education. Today I'm more influenced by ecocriticism and other bodies of thought that attend to ethical issues and challenge the Anthropocene, and my life-long love of animals, particularly dogs, has found its way into my academic work. I've devoted a chapter to animals in my most recent book.

But really all my life I have been far more influenced by writers than theorists and for me, from early on in my career, when I worked in the Caribbean, I was drawn to the wealth of Caribbean and to some extent Indian and African writing, which at that time wasn't receiving the attention it deserved globally.

If we're talking about early influences, I should perhaps add that at the time when I was a student I probably spent as much time watching films as reading books. I was a particular devotee of directors like Godard, Antonioni, Fellini and Satyajit Ray. Going back to them more recently, I've found some of them very dated, though Ray holds up as well as ever. Recently I've also been viewing and enjoying Italian neo-realist cinema, which of course influenced Ray and I've been looking at some more contemporary French cinema.

I suppose I should say that, rightly or wrongly, I'm a cultural and intellectual magpie. If an idea works for me, then I'll use it. Going back to 'theory', I'm still influenced by Foucault, who after all was always concerned with social issues, and by the Canadian novelist, Robert Kroetsch, who sadly passed away a couple of years ago. He was a friend and the most inspiring theorist I've known personally, since he combined a sophisticated and eclectic theoretical poetics with a strong sense of commitment to the specifics of a particular place – the Canadian prairies.

Q: What kind of family you were born into? Their moral-religious-ethical moorings? In brief, middle-class family reflecting larger narratives of nationhood and subjectivity?

A: My family background is also eclectic. Perhaps that's shaped the way I see the world, in terms of cultural relativism, I mean. I sometimes think I'm just an amalgam of fragments, but maybe many of us are like this. I don't know. My father was Canadian; my mother was English. My grandparents had four different nationalities; German (that's where my surname comes from) and Bohemian on the paternal side; English and Irish, of Scottish ancestry, on the maternal side. My paternal grandparents migrated to North America and my father came back across the Atlantic as a soldier in World War II. He met my mother in England and that's where I've lived most of my life, though I had a year in Canada as a boy and lived for five years in Guyana – my first job. I spent my early years in London and I guess I thought of myself as classless, particularly because my father's background was outside the English class system and he made me feel 'different'. At a time when English schoolboys wore short pants, he felt that was stupid and sent me to school in long trousers. The part of London where I grew up was very mixed, though, and I went to primary school with a very diverse bunch of children – some from privileged backgrounds; some from very poor backgrounds. I wasn't particularly reflective about this at the time. That's come later. I think I just saw myself as ordinary, apart from having a sense of somehow being Canadian. As a boy I believed I could speak with two accents – my mother's and my father's – but I'm not sure now that was really so. If it was, they blended together at some point and now I have an accent that several people have said they feel comes from 'somewhere else', though they aren't usually quite sure where that somewhere else might be (smiling).

Things changed for me when I took the 11-plus exam, which in those days determined what kind of secondary school one went to. I got very high marks – among the highest in London that year – and

won a scholarship to a public school, where I was a boarder for seven years. To give you an idea of my father's perspective on this, perhaps it's worth saying he had to be told what such a school was. Brought up in Canada, he thought everyone went to a public school, unless they were rich and could afford a private school! Looking back, I think I'd have to say that going to that school was when I entered the middle classes, without knowing it and certainly without choosing it. I did fairly well there academically, although it was the unhappiest time of my life. Perhaps it was my background, which in British terms must have been seen as more working class, despite my mixed-up origins, that meant that I didn't easily fit in, though again I didn't realise this at the time. I'm not sure, but although I was quiet and fairly introverted, I got into trouble more than once for questioning authority. It was the kind of authority that administered corporal punishment, tolerated endemic bullying and so on. As I was saying, places exist in time and I know that school is very different now. Thank goodness! Again in retrospect, I might see myself as ahead of my time in my attitude towards it (smiling), but at the time I simply seemed to be something of a misfit, and being academic didn't help me in a school where sporting achievement was more highly valued. I wasn't particularly good at sports. My sole claim to fame in this respect was being school table tennis champion!

But let me tell you something else that makes me feel how stupid the English obsession with class – not as bad now as it was when I was younger, of course – is. My maternal grandparents were both servants. My grandmother, one of the biggest influences on my early years, was a cook in one of the imposing mansions that ring London's Regent's Park. My grandfather was supposedly the son of a footman. He was to his credit a self-made man, a shopkeeper who built up a small newspaper empire in North London. In old age he spent most of his time reading and virtually all his reading was non-fiction on a single subject: the aristocracy. One day we discovered a possible explanation for this. He was a very sober man, but that day he got drunk and told my father, his Canadian son-in-law, that he was actually an aristocrat himself! It seems he may have been the illegitimate son of a young man from one of the most famous families in England. Whether this is true or not is hard to say. There's evidence to suggest it may be – his birth certificate was vague about his parentage – but it's made me feel that such things don't matter. I'm the same person whether I'm the great grandson of an aristocrat or a servant. I think nurture is far more important than nature and have little interest in the kind of genealogical searching that has become popular since the Internet made it so much easier.

Q: What made you, early on, to elect a career in university and then allied role of a public intellectual?

A: My first ambition was to be a creative writer. My second a journalist. My third a university academic. To some extent I've fulfilled them in reverse order. I wrote regular feature articles for the Sunday editions of one of the national newspapers in Guyana and I've spent most of my life working in universities. Now I'm partly, but only partly, fulfilled as a creative writer. My poetry gets published and my short stories, of which there aren't too many, have also found favour, but I've two completed novels, one of which in my own opinion is the best piece of writing I've managed so far, but it hasn't yet found an agent or publisher. I'm currently making minor revisions to this novel. People who have read it tell me it gets better and better as it goes on, so I think I need to do something with the opening to grab my readers' attention more quickly.

As for being a 'public intellectual': I don't really think of myself as such, and never set out to be one. Perhaps the fact that I'm talking to you as I am now, Sunil, makes me one, and I've done a few

similar interviews in the past. Obviously I've been involved in lots of academic activities over the years, but really I just see myself as a writer and teacher.

There was just one period of my life when I felt I was a public figure. This was when I was writing those feature articles in Guyana and also doing occasional radio broadcasts. For the newspaper at first I mainly did arts reviews – books, plays, films (the area I enjoyed most then), art exhibitions. These gave me a public profile in the country, and then the editor that I wrote for asked me to write on social issues and subsequently, since the paper carried my photo, people would come up to me in the street and ask me about what I'd written and much more besides. The most memorable instance of this, was when there was a global fuel shortage, which affected petrol supplies in Guyana, as it did almost everywhere else around the world. I wrote a humorous piece about how it had caused me to have a personal energy crisis, saying that my little motor was running down, but if I was found wandering the streets muttering 'octane, methane, butane', I wasn't ready to be taken to the country's only mental institution quite yet. In the days after this appeared, I had several people pointing to me and laughing in the streets, but fortunately no one brought a strait-jacket! Another amusing moment came when, after I'd written a series of articles on Hollywood films, someone approached me in a pharmacy to ask for inside information on what it was like to be in tinsel town. I had to disappoint him by admitting I'd never been there. But to return to your question: I've been involved with postcolonial issues and causes – and administration too – for decades. I played a small part in setting up the Commonwealth Writers Prize, served as an officer of ACLALS (the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) and edited *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* for many years. But that period in Guyana was the only time I ever really felt like any kind of public figure.

Q: What were you reading at bed-time during those days of early adolescence and youth?

A: Anything and everything. I remember reading Dennis Wheatley's black magic stories under the bedclothes with a small torch after 'lights out', when I was at boarding school. Hopefully they haven't been a lasting influence! I think the appeal must have been that they were suspenseful forbidden fruit and, after all, the forces of good always won out in the end. Younger than that, I shared a bedroom with my favourite uncle, who was a devotee of Tarzan books and Hopalong Cassidy. He passed the books he read on to me and I devoured them avidly and uncritically at a very young age, but I've no memory of their contents now and so I don't think they influenced me very much. I don't even remember who wrote the Hopalong Cassidy stories. Oh yes, and we read a lot of Sherlock Holmes. Solving mysteries – that may well have influenced me!

Q: What was the role of literature at that impressionable age? Was it for moulding the character for an elitist culture, hierarchical or radicalising it, making it subversive? Being an organic part of the power system or resisting it through words, images and actions?

A: At that early age, I think literature was just a source of enjoyment to me and that's been more or less the same for me all of my life. But if I had to choose between seeing it as some kind of bulwark of an elitist culture or a radicalising force for change, then I'd definitely prefer to see it as the latter. I wouldn't even stop to think about that. My interests in postcolonial writing are built around that, though they were also founded on a desire to see the unrepresented and under-represented receive the attention they deserved. I was reading Naipaul and Walcott and admiring them for the sheer literary excellence of their writing, irrespective of their politics – I should add I far prefer Walcott's

politics – long before they became world figures, winning the Nobel and so on. Now postcolonial writing has become widely accepted and it's as if the wheel has come full circle. Today in the West it's easier to get published if one comes from a 'minority' background and I'm not sorry about that, but it can have a negative side, if it means poor quality writing is getting preferred, because of its perceived politics, and of course it leads writers from 'minority' backgrounds to manufacture personae that fit perceived public expectations and that can compromise their writing. And in academic life, there's a corollary. Postcolonialism has become a bandwagon that aspiring career-minded would-be academics of varying ethnicities can be quick to jump on, though of course there are also many early career academics who are deeply committed to the field. When I started out, it was the opposite. It didn't really figure significantly in the curriculum.

Q: Who are your favourite writers?

A: Among postcolonial writers, Derek Walcott, Amitav Ghosh, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Earl Lovelace, Olive Senior and Robert Kroetsch, whom I've already mentioned. Among English writers: Laurence Sterne, Laurence Sterne and Laurence Sterne. I don't think anyone has ever surpassed the wit, the metafictional inventiveness and the humanity of *Tristram Shandy*— Uncle Toby telling a fly that the world is big enough for the two of them to co-exist has to be my favourite moment in all fiction. After that Fielding, who is a wonderful storyteller and does the kind of thing that Sterne would later perfect, and George Eliot – the Eliot of *Middlemarch*, not her early novels. Then James, Conrad and Joyce. Well, I'm calling these three writers 'English', but of course none of them actually was, though they've been seen as part of the English canon. I love the James of *The Portrait of a Lady*, which I find gut-wrenchingly painful to read, and also *The Ambassadors*, which has probably influenced some of my own creative writing, because of the wonderful way in which James handles the naivety of his worldly protagonist, Lambert Strether. I like the ambivalence of *The Turn of the Screw* too and I learnt a lot about point of view from James. I think it's a great shame that Conrad is so often talked about as the author of *Heart of Darkness*, when texts such as *Nostromo*, his masterpiece, and *The Secret Agent* are so much more thought-provoking. And *Ulysses* still inspires awe, even if Joyce is often too clever by half. Thomas Pynchon fills me with similar sentiments, but I think *The Crying of Lot 49* is a miniature masterpiece and I'd exempt that from the charge of being too clever. Among earlier American writers – the Melville of *Moby Dick* and the Twain of *Huckleberry Finn* – again there's a protagonist who doesn't really understand what's going on, but has a heart that's pure gold.

There was one English novelist from the second half of the twentieth century whose work I greatly admired. He was something of a lone voice at the time he was writing and ended up committing suicide at the age of forty. In recent years he's enjoyed something of a revival and several of his novels have been reissued. This is B.S. Johnson. At a time when postmodernism was very prominent in the States and conspicuously absent in English fiction, Johnson wrote postmodern fiction in Britain, with a distinctive socialist voice. He's best known for *The Unfortunates*, a box novel that comes in sections that readers are invited to shuffle and read in whatever order it then presents itself to them, with just the first and last sections being predetermined. It's a novel centred on a friend's death from cancer and the random order structure is intended as a trope for the randomness of cancer. I admire all his work, but the novel I like best is *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*. I won't attempt to go into the details of the plot, except to say that at the end of each section, the protagonist tots up the pros and cons of his recent experience in a double-entry format. This is very similar to Robinson Crusoe's inventory of the

credits and debits of his situation on the island in a similar double-entry accounting format and I think one can see Johnson's comic use of the form as a parody of the Puritan tradition in English fiction that Defoe effectively inaugurated. Here and elsewhere Johnson is clearly influenced by Sterne, whom I think one can also see as parodying the *Robinson Crusoe* kind of novel. I'll say a bit more about this as we go on.

I also like the Cervantes tradition in literature and see that as getting a wonderful shot in the arm from Borges, who in many of his fictions is Cervantes writ small. I've been reading a fair bit of Latin American and Francophone Caribbean writing more recently. I particularly like Patrick Chamoiseau's fiction. There's nothing quite like it in the Anglophone Caribbean.

Q: The poets that are still with you, post education days?

A: T.S. Eliot – the early Eliot, not the Eliot of the *Quartets* – and Walcott. Among Indian poets I like Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Fairly conventional tastes really.

Q: Is Lit. an art for a minority? Has it stopped talking to a middle-class audience?

A: I hope not, but I wonder where we're going in the years to come. We seem to live in a society where the media are putting more and more emphasis on sound bites and the Internet encourages twittering that's equally terse. So it may be that some of the traditional literary and artistic forms will be refashioned along with the generation of new forms such as flash fiction and perhaps these will reach a wider audience. I should confess that I've published a couple of short fictions myself and would never have dreamt of writing prose fiction that was less than two or three thousand words a couple of decades ago. But the pendulum swings both ways and there's often a counter-reaction. So I think there may be a pull in the opposite direction, just as vinyl is making a comeback in the age of music downloads. In fact, there's still a market for long sprawling novels, isn't there, though whether they mainly appeal to a minority readership is hard to gauge? A bit of both perhaps?

Q: In mass society, how can avant garde be revived as a means of resisting? Another Beckett or Althusser for the second decade of the New Millennium.

A: I can't think of anyone that's emerged as yet, but maybe tomorrow. I think, though, that any new avant-garde is likely to be more community-oriented than Beckett and less abstract than Althusser's Marxism. Who knows?

Q: Is not pop culture some subtle form of incorporation into the dominant matrix of power and wealth? If yes, how it can be subverted?

A: Yes, all too often, but perhaps it was ever thus. I mean if something is popular, it's likely to find favour with a majority in the status quo, which is usually controlled by power and/or wealth. And beyond that, of course, clever marketing is behind many success-stories. But then things can operate conversely and the democratisation of information exchange that the Internet has enabled has thrown up some unlikely success-stories and culture heroes, who may or may not get swiftly co-opted into the dominant matrix. At its best, the Internet may offer bottom-up subversive possibilities, though of course it functions in all sorts of other ways too.

Q: Your most celebrated work now. With the ground-breaking 2002 *Postcolonial Con-Texts* that revolutionised the methodology of reading, much like Barthes in the France of 1960s-1970s. For me, as a reader, interested in enlightening epistemes, this book single-handedly radicalised the aesthetics of receptivity and cognising the world. What were the immediate motives of this study that somehow reminds me of George Lukács?

A: Well I've never thought of myself as a Marxist and so if *Postcolonial Con-Texts* comes across as such, then I think that's probably a reflection of the extent to which such thinking had pervaded academia in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. The book set out simply to read postcolonial responses to canonical texts and I had no predetermined agenda in mind. What I found in writing it was that, while radical theorists might want to argue that postcolonial writers are always attacking the canon, in practice there are a multiplicity of responses, ranging from the adversarial to the complicit. And the canon itself is a far from unitary formation anyway. Dickens can be read as a proto-postcolonial writer in some ways, whereas Defoe really can't, at least not in my reading of his economically driven world-view. What I discovered as I went along – in retrospect it's all too obvious – is that texts are unstable objects and so, to take a simple example, *Jane Eyre* can never be read in the same way again once one's read Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The counter-discursive works I discuss make one revisit the texts they respond to and see them in a different light. Perhaps that's the most interesting 'discovery' to be found in the book.

But Sunil, I have to say. It's kind of you to say that that book influenced you as it did, and coincidentally just three days ago another academic said something similar to me, but compared to a brilliant theorist like Barthes I'm minor league at best. I like what I do, because, while formal issues fascinate me, I've managed to keep ethics to the fore and I wouldn't want to attempt to do what theorists like Barthes and Derrida do. Put alongside them, I'm ... a nobody. A happy nobody who enjoys what he does and feels privileged to be moderately widely read, etc., and who wouldn't want to change in any way – apart from being a little more successful with my novel-writing!

Q: Could you summarise the central agenda of *Postcolonial Con-Texts*? The overarching motifs? Its subliminal effect and enduring impact on a professional class of dons and critics after 14 years, across the English-speaking world?

A: I couldn't begin to summarise its impact on others, which I suspect is very varied. What I was just saying is part of its agenda. Another important part – and hopefully this is central to its impact – is that the postcolonial con-texts I'm looking at approach the world in a more relativistic and open way than their English pre-texts. I still think *Jane Eyre* is a wonderful novel, but its world-view is much narrower than that of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, because of its xenophobia. Charlotte Brontë isn't just hostile to the Caribbean. Continental Europe is the scene of Rochester's earlier dissipation; to Jane the possibility of going to India, when the clergyman St. John Rivers wants to take her there as his wife, is tantamount to 'premature death'. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells its story from both sides of the equation (Antoinette's point of view and that of the unnamed 'Rochester' figure), and also briefly gives voice to a couple of the minor characters. Its polyphony (another Bakhtinian term, of course) makes it more open. If my book

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succeeds in demonstrating the openness and commitment to relativism that characterises most postcolonial writing, and if people enjoy the detail in my readings, then I'll feel it's achieved something worthwhile. Of course, openness of this kind is not the exclusive prerogative of postcolonial texts. I mentioned *Tristram Shandy* as my favourite novel of all time and it's hard to imagine a text that leaves more open and invites more participation than Sterne's 'cock and bull story'.

Q: Continuing the thread, this critical examination of some of the acclaimed texts that look back at the originals for finding continuities and disjunctions in contested world-views and recovery of voices, lost or submerged. Is it a brave attempt at radicalising hermeneutics in an age when theory – once radical in the 1960s-1970s – has been deliberately de-radicalised?

A: Well, I didn't think of it as such. I saw it as a contribution to postcolonial studies that examined one particular strand of the writing, as it were as a metonym for the range of positions to be found in postcolonial texts more generally. I suppose, though, that the book engages with reader response theory as it's applicable to the kind of texts I'm looking at and so from that point of view it proposes a particular kind of hermeneutics. To me it's not all that radical, but hopefully it's balanced and 'progressive', because it avoids clichés – or should I say it aims to avoid clichés. I think that throughout my career I've been trying simply to demonstrate that non-Western writing compares very favourably with what's been produced in the West, *pace* Homer, Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare and so and so on. I guess that was a radical position once, but hopefully not so today.

And then there's what I've just been saying, that con-texts generate fresh readings of their supposed – often not their only – departure-points. Of course, there's an element of this in all reading, isn't there? Putting new books on the shelf forces the ones that are already there to move along. The canon changes. But the process is more acute in the kind of cross-cultural dialogues that are initiated by postcolonial con-texts. So I suppose one could say that in that sense they facilitate a new, arguably radical, hermeneutics, which has broad implications for the way we read texts more generally.

Q: Do not you think the postcolonial as a theory is losing its relevance and vibrancy? Is it not time to move beyond this obsession? Time we talked of the enabling critical concepts and syntax reflecting newer realities?

A: Certainly the term has been so widely over-used that it's lost much of its force. Actually I've published four books that have 'postcolonial' in the title and in three cases this wasn't my original intention. I was steered towards the use of the word by publishers, who not unreasonably wanted to put the books concerned into a recognisable niche that would help with marketing. And, as we're talking now, I've another book *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place* in press and originally I'd wanted to call this *Out of Place*. So, yes, it is an obsession and the term is getting more and more problematic, but while various alternatives such as 'transnational' and 'global studies' are emerging, none of them has quite the same resonance. 'Postcolonial' is very readily, perhaps too readily, recognised.

And perhaps I should add that I remain happy with the title of *Postcolonial Con-Texts*, because there the texts in question are engaging in a fairly direct dialogue with 'colonial' texts. Very obviously so in the case of responses to *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*, but also with those that respond to the Brontës, Dickens and *Othello*.

Q: Are not we now independent nations? The very baggage of postcolonial theory seems heavy and unclaimed by nations moving towards new political and economic alignments? Postcolonialism seems to be stuck in a time warp?

A: If one is simply using the term 'postcolonial' as a temporal marker, then clearly, as the age of European colonialisms recedes further into the past, it's an increasingly anachronistic term – an irrelevant term for much literary and artistic production. Worse still, it's become increasingly vacuous, because it's used in so many ways – among them to refer to anything after the moment of first colonisation, the era after independence and a set of practices that have to do with contesting colonisation. I think there's still some mileage in this third way in which the term is used, if one is referring to the asymmetrical power binaries that obtained in the colonial period and have persisted in neo-colonial equivalents in the age of globalisation. Colonialism is alive and well in terms of American interference around the globe and China's ambitions may well mean that it won't be very long before we have to see *its* economic incursions as 'neo-colonial'.

Q: What are your observations on contemporary Canadian writing? Is it robust? Challenging the status quo? Or subservient?

A: I'd suggest that it's reflecting, and perhaps helping to establish, a new status quo, in which minorities are much more fully represented. Canada was one of the first countries in the world to institute multicultural policies, both at national and provincial levels in the early 1970s, but it took time for policy initiatives to be reflected in the literary and artistic mosaic. Now I think that's happened and First Nations writers and artists, along with writers and artists from virtually all Canada's other minorities – recent and not-so-recent migrant groups – receive the attention they deserve. My favourites include Thomas King and Eden Robinson. This is all very healthy and I think the contemporary Canadian scene is extremely vibrant, but if you ask me which decade of Canadian writing produced the most major works, then I'd say the 1970s: Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Robert Kroetsch, Jack Hodgins, Rudy Wiebe and several others. Perhaps what one has to say is that there's been something of a shift away from major writers to a sense of literature's communal importance.

Q: On Caribbean writing? Is its prime over?

A: I hope not, but it seems that the period just before and after the various nations' independences was a golden era for writing from the region. Apart from Walcott and Naipaul, it saw the emergence of Lamming, Brathwaite and Harris. And I shouldn't forget inimitable Sam Selvon. More recently, emigration hasn't helped and now much of the best 'Caribbean' writing is being produced in North America. We were just talking about Canada, and Olive Senior, Dionne Brand, M. Nourbese Philip and, to the best of my knowledge, Lorna Goodison are all living there now. It's a major factor influencing the nature of the writing in some cases. And this is true of so many non-Western national literatures, Indian writing in English included. With India, though, it's been a story of one success after another. I remember people saying that the 1980s was the decade of Indian writing in English, but the same was true of the 1990s and the output of first-rate work has continued into the first two decades of this century.

Q: Why is so much being made of the politics of identity? Why not about the struggles of the professional classes? The disgust with a rotten system across the world through public movements like Occupy Wall Street or Arab Spring? Why theory is deafeningly silent except a Chomsky?

A: I think you'll soon find there's an outcrop of writing about the Arab Spring and issues involving Islam around the world. Books such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* have already made a considerable impact in the West. I don't really keep up with US literature, as I once did, but I think a movie such as *Wall Street* has spawned a sub-genre of films that reflect the disenchantment with financial institutions that gained momentum in the wake of the global recession that was sparked off by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008?

Chomsky continues to talk so much sense, of course. I was watching him interviewed on TV the other evening and, quietly though he spoke, his words were like a rapier cutting through the confusing and unpersuasive verbiage of other commentators on the world economy.

Q: What are your own crucial findings about literature and cultural geography through your research?

A: The central thesis of my book *Postcolonial Literary Geographies* is that place is mobile. One of my main departure-points is the cultural geographer Doreen Massey's assertion that 'social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic' and so it is necessary to 'move beyond a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity'. In one sense, this is an age-old truth, of course. Heraclitus said we can never step into the same river twice, because other waters are always flowing. So in a way what Massey says so fluently is nothing new, but it's imperative to stress it, because during the post-Enlightenment era, when European colonial hegemony cast its shadow over most of the globe, other discourses that suggested the fixity of place often held sway, in the use of terms like the 'exotic East' and the 'Dark Continent', which established themselves as perceptual 'realities'. Obviously the East isn't exotic if it's your everyday world and you probably don't think of it as the East anyway – you probably pay more attention to the vicissitudes that are occurring in your daily life; and Africa is only dark to the outsider's imagination. All such discourses, as Said points out in *Orientalism*, say more about the speaker than the place being spoken about. And more than just this. Places can't be stereotyped, because the river is always flowing. They don't have a unitary, unchanging identity. Cultural geographers have made this abundantly clear and in so doing have helped to promote ecologically sensitive politics and poetics.

My forthcoming book was begun as a study in poetics, but along the way I realised I was writing a text that was concerned with environmental issues. Two of the chapters – chapters on ecologies and animals – address such issues directly, but elsewhere, when I'm writing about subjects like botany, they underpin what I'm saying and, without labouring the point, I try to show how colonialism and now neo-colonialism involve orthodoxies that are often, not always, harmful to the environment. Even the maps produced in the Enlightenment era – Mercator's Projection is the most famous instance – are colonially inflected and distort the 'realities' of world geography. Mercator's map is Eurocentric because it diminishes the land area of Africa, South Asia and Latin America by flattening out the spherical earth, so that the distance between the lines of longitude is expanded in the polar regions and contracts towards the Equator. It also places the Equator more than halfway down the globe. The German Marxist historian Arno Peters produced a map, the Peters Projection, that attempts to give a more accurate representation of the land areas of each part of the globe, and there have also been some wonderful Australian 'south-up' maps that make one see the world anew.

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In the book, I also discuss Greenwich, which became the international standard for both time and place – Greenwich Mean Time and the Greenwich meridian – by implication placing London at the centre of the world. Conrad hit on a great choice in *The Secret Agent*, when he made the Royal Observatory at Greenwich the proposed target of his would-be anarchists!(smiling) And you know *The Secret Agent* is a text that resonates interestingly with the chilling ordinariness of many of today's terrorists, spurred into action by the mundane and marginalised nature of their lives. Apparent lack of opportunities and the banality of the everyday seem to me to be more potent breeding grounds for terrorism than any deep-rooted ideological conviction. Obviously material success and a sense of having an investment in the society where one lives can help to counter this, but so too can imaginative engagement with culture in all its forms, and this perhaps is where literature and the arts have a vital role to play. I'd like to think that so anyway. I hope it isn't just wishful thinking!

Q: What are the literary responses to globalisation and ecological issues as examined by you in your different studies?

A: 'Globalisation' is one of those buzzwords that's coming to mean all things to all people. Possibly worse than 'Postcolonialism'? If we take it to mean multi-nationalisation, then its impact on communities and individuals depends on whether they are among the world's haves or have-nots. On an obvious level, it benefits the rich, the technologically advantaged, those with the freedom to cross borders easily; it doesn't do the same for the disadvantaged. In China, despite the present downturn in their economy, it has promoted large numbers of people into the affluent middle classes, while leaving others as increasingly impoverished wage-slaves in factories, or living in rural poverty, with which the ruling classes seem to have little interest. But it's not quite this simple, is it? There are other levels of polarised economies and one of the most significant is the gap between those with ready Internet access, an ever-expanding class, and those without. My profile on the academic.edu website and elsewhere means that I get a considerable number of people unknown to me writing for some kind of advice. Some of these are clearly in privileged situations, for example, academics and postgraduate students in good and not-so-good universities. Last year I even got into a dialogue with some schoolchildren from Bangalore. They were working on Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide* and their teacher made contact with me. If globalisation in the form of the communications revolution makes such things possible, then it has to be positive. Of course, one quickly has to add that one is still effectively talking about dialogues between the globe's middle classes, even if virtually everyone in the world's so-called 'developed' societies has Internet access.

Also one hears heartening stories of social media sites helping people with rare diseases to find support, people tracking down lost animals, missing relatives. So, if this is a by-product of globalisation, it has to be seen as positive. Again, the downside is that a very significant section of the world's population has no access. And of course the Internet is open to trolls and paedophiles. Then one has to ask whether the McDonaldisation of parts of Asia and the internationalisation of the English Premier League is a good thing. I don't know, but after weighing up all the pros and cons I'm suspicious of globalisation, since I think it generally means international capital promoting economies and discourses that serve its own interests. That said, the flow of capital works in so many ways now. As I answer you today, talks about the future of the Tata-owned Welsh steelworks are ongoing. Globalisation has facilitated certain shifts in economic power and control.

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I haven't altogether answered your question, though, have I, Sunil? You asked me about literary responses. Well, I think numerous postcolonial writers suggest the interpenetration of cultures that has been going on before, during and after colonialism. Walcott is fascinating on this in *Omeros*, and in *An Antique Land* Ghosh, again (smiling), does a wonderful job of illustrating the 'accommodations' of the free-flow of trade across the Arabian Sea before European militarism, in this case specifically Portuguese colonialism, disrupted it. Ghosh's more recent *Ibis* trilogy also proposes an Oceanic imaginary that isn't exactly global, but certainly interrogates the perceived Asian geographies of European discourse.

One last thought on this: Spivak and others have used the term 'planetarity' to suggest a different kind of worldwide linking and I think this is helpful. I've ended the book I've been talking about by referring to this, and it does seem to offer a healthy alternative that avoids the more pernicious aspects of globalisation. For the time being anyway!

Q: Relationships between eighteenth and nineteenth-century fiction and V.S. Naipaul as seen by you as a scholar?

A: I think Naipaul is much more influenced by the nineteenth- than the eighteenth-century novel. Much of his early work belongs in the Dickens-Wells tradition of the novel, with *A House for Mr. Biswas*, as several critics (myself included) have pointed out, being influenced by Wells's *History of Mr. Polly*. Naipaul's early novels are a Caribbean 'take' on this kind of novel – realism with a strong dose of comedy and caricature thrown in. Later Naipaul offers his own highly personal – I'm tempted to say self-absorbed – version of realism. But saying this still simplifies a bit, because he never quite fits the mould of any English writer and in that sense his representation of himself as a displaced person is accurate. Mr. Biswas can only find a qualified kind of happy ending and the corollary of this in formal terms is that the teleological formal movement that one gets in Wells's novel, a movement towards a resolution in which all the plot complications will be resolved (in the Edenic setting of an English country pub, of course!) and the social order reaffirmed simply isn't possible for Naipaul, because he doesn't believe that such a social order exists in Trinidad. In terms of literary influences I think he's at his most interesting when he compares himself with Conrad – another writer who transplanted himself into England. *The Mimic Men* is a very Conradian novel. I don't think it's a coincidence that Naipaul calls the fictional Caribbean island of *The Mimic Men* Isabella, since that echoes the Isabels in *Nostromo*. Naipaul is often pursuing Conradian motifs, though he never, in my opinion, achieves anything like the degree of subtlety that one finds in Conrad.

But your question prompts me to say something more about eighteenth-century fiction, Sunil. It's where I began my career. I wrote an MPhil on the late eighteenth-century radical, Thomas Holcroft, whom some novel historians refer to as the first proletarian novelist in England. Writing that thesis and my early interests more generally made me think about what was happening as the novel evolved in England in the eighteenth century. Today we refer comfortably to the eighteenth-century novel, as if it was some kind of immediately recognisable, well-behaved, domestic animal. At the time, of course, it was no such thing. Fielding speaks of writing 'histories'; Sterne purports to give us the 'life and opinions' of Tristram Shandy, even if this is subversive, since he doesn't get too far with the life. Each of the novelists is in effect making up his, or her, version of the genre as they write. Defoe, whose realism is so persuasive, and yet so often completely implausible, says he's writing a 'just history of fact' in *Crusoe* and then when he's challenged retracts this and says, well, what he was writing may not have

been *literally* true, but it was *allegorically* true. Necessary to backtrack, after he'd blundered into talking about Caribbean penguins! (smiling) In many ways Defoe is really just the flip side of the coin from Bunyan, whom few think of as a novelist, and so there's some justice in Defoe's claiming allegorical truth. Bunyan writes a spiritual allegory about Christian's journey to the Celestial City, but some of the landscapes he travels through are based on rural Bedfordshire. So he's an incipient 'realist'. Defoe pretends to be doing the opposite, and to be fair he is an amazing collector and chronicler of facts in books like his *Journal of the Plague Year* and his monumental *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, but it's as easy to read *Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* as allegories: spiritual allegories like Bunyan from one point of view; fables about economic individualism from another, as Marxists – even Marx himself – have pointed out.

And then you get Richardson inventing *his* version of the novel: as a series of letters, which are always a very particular kind of discourse, of course – first person, but directed towards a specific second person or people. Richardson with his agonisingly slow, shockingly prurient, scary stories about threatened women. Initially he read these to a circle of admiring female disciples, who seem to have had some input, giving him feedback as his first readers – hard to imagine anything like this today! *Pamela* begins as a fascinating pre-Freudian psychological study of a woman torn between conflicting impulses – duty and desire – and works well for maybe fifty pages, but then descends into pure farce, at least from this modern reader's viewpoint. The Brontës admired it and, if you think about it, *Jane Eyre* in particular is a much more sophisticated rewrite of *Pamela*, with the socially inferior heroine holding onto her virtue and winning the hand of the upper-class male. Then Pamela becomes awful as a parvenu, queening it among the local gentry. But *Clarissa* – *Clarissa* is very different, because the threat of seduction, which the heroine is smart enough to avoid in *Pamela*, is replaced by an actual rape. Here the psychology is again ahead of its time – Clarissa and Lovelace are genuinely attracted to one another, but the sexual *mores* of the time get in the way. And it goes on and on – a million words. In the edition I own, there are even three hundred pages of posthumous letters by Clarissa. Richardson just writes and writes and writes. He's a million miles away from the soundbite culture of today. Didn't he have anything else to do with his time? But seriously, this seems to be his whole *modus vivendi*. He writes, therefore he is.

Anyway, the novelist I wrote my MPhil on, Thomas Holcroft, took me into reading all these novels and very possibly sowed the seeds of my lifelong interest in intertextuality. Each of Holcroft's novels was a kind of rewrite of one of the earlier classics of the century. For example, his best-known novel, *Anna St Ives*, which was published in the 1790s, when the upheavals of the French Revolution were having an impact in England, is a kind of revisionist *Clarissa*. Like *Clarissa*, it was published as a seven-volume epistolary novel and to the best of my knowledge *Anna St Ives* and *Clarissa* were the only two eighteenth-century English novels that ran to seven volumes. *Anna St Ives* isn't nearly as powerful as *Clarissa*, but it's socially fascinating, because it adds a third character to the stereotypes of the upper-class rake and the persecuted woman. This is a character that we might call 'the noble gardener', and the heroine, who preserves her virtue in this case, eventually chooses the gardener over the gentleman. In one sense it remains very decorous and proper. It's nothing like *Lady Chatterley*, which has a very similar plot, in terms of its sexual politics. But in its day, it was a revolutionary challenge to the social order.

I'm jumping ahead, though. As I said, each of the novelists is making up the genre. Fielding says he's writing a comic-epic in prose and *Tom Jones* is full of mock classical analogies, which can be very very funny, though much of this is lost on contemporary readers who aren't steeped in the classics as

Fielding's educated readers were. In a way *Tom Jones* may seem to be a 'proletarian' novel too, since supposedly lowly-born Tom gets promoted into the gentry, but in this case it's because his real birth has been concealed. Pamela makes it into the upper echelons of society – and is a right pain in the neck when she does – through marriage, and this is a middle-class success story, not so far removed from Defoe, but Fielding for all his ribaldry and inventiveness doesn't upset the social apple cart at all. Tom is taken into the gentry, because that's where he should have been all the time. A pity my grandfather didn't enjoy a similar elevation, at least from his own point of view!

What Fielding also does, as well of course as telling a wonderful story, is give us one of the first metafictional masterpieces in English Literature. Aside from his main narrative, he does this in the introductory chapters to each of the eighteen books of *Tom Jones*, in which he stands back and reflects on a range of issues, but most interestingly on the novel form itself. The novel is seen as picaresque because it's episodic and it pivots on the journey undertaken in its middle third, but it's also picaresque in a more fundamental formal way. It's structurally picaresque in terms of those opening chapters that assert the right to roam at will. Fielding says as much. A century later, in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot would comment on the license he allowed himself to wander across 'that tempting range of relevancies called the universe', saying that the days must have been longer then, and one does have the feeling that, pre-industrialisation, people felt much less pressured by the clock. I've already implied that with regard to Richardson, haven't I? And the pressure to do things speedily seems so much more intense nowadays, though not equally so across the globe. I was recently in Trinidad, where people speak of modernisation and the major changes that the society has seen. Maybe, but even though the pace of life is faster than many parts of the Caribbean, Trinidadians seem to have time to talk in the kind of picaresque way I've been mentioning. It's a very different chronotope from Western Europe.

Anyway, Fielding is a kind of curtain-raiser to Sterne, who lets Tristram wander wherever his fancy leads him, while expressing supposed exasperation at his detours from linear narrative and following Locke's ideas about associative logic. *Tristram Shandy* is a stream-of-consciousness novel written nearly a century and a half before William James, Henry's brother, coined that term. And the beginning! Aristotle talked about the two main kinds of beginnings: *ab ovo* and *in medias res* – from the egg and in the middle of the thing – and Sterne manages both *simultaneously*. He messes around with us, by plunging us right into the middle of a situation, but at the same time takes us back to the egg literally: the moment of Tristram's conception, botched though it is. And then it takes Tristram three volumes to get himself born and so on and so on: the mottled page, the page that he leaves blank so that his readers can draw their own picture of the Widow Wadman. The moment when he tells a supposedly inattentive reader to go back and read the last bit again. Above all it becomes a novel that subverts linear movement. Digression not progression is the driving force. I don't know if this idea is original, but to me it can be read as a parody of the supposed realism of the *Robinson Crusoe* kind of novel and it frustrates the drive towards sexual consummation that obsesses Richardson. Of course all of this divides readers. It exasperates some people, but *Tristram Shandy* has to be one of the most open, inviting texts in world literature. And for me, the characters are among the most subtly drawn I've encountered anywhere, even if so much is conveyed elliptically. Only Don Quixote, who becomes a bit boring because of his repetitions, Huck Finn and Pierre in *War and Peace* can command the same degree of affection. I'd better stop here, though. I think our readers have probably heard enough from me on the eighteenth century.

Q: Your take on Indian writers? Are they the Other of the British-American canons? Or, the distant future?

A: Well, there are many kinds of Indian writers, aren't there and those who write in languages other than English aren't usually Others, though some like Rabindranath Tagore have been appropriated into Western circles and have enjoyed a kind of double life thanks to the differences in the way they have been received at home and abroad. I'm told Tagore's Bengali work is very different from the work that his Western fame was founded on, and with the Big Three, there was an element of English patronage in each case – and for R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao US fame later in their career, which I think had an influence on their writing. I've written about how Narayan experienced two kinds of make-over in his career. As a young man, he was partly anglicised by Graham Greene and his English publisher. Later in life, around the time of the hippie 'discovery' of India, he found himself being cast in the role of a guru, but although he wrote about his reluctance to play this part, he did so to some extent by unleashing the Tamil Brahmin side of his imagination in a novel like *The Guide*.

But I think you're asking me about today's writers and some have certainly made their reputations in the West. I guess it's natural for, say, women writers who have settled in North America to write about diasporic situations, with an eye on the wider American public, but when they do I think one has to ask how far are they pandering to a taste for supposed exoticism and how far are they getting inside the experiences they are depicting. The answer to that question may vary among readers, but, to take a single example, for me Jhumpa Lahiri is more satisfying than, say, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Then there's the issue of those who write about India itself and, again this must be a matter of personal opinion, but to me a work such as Adiga's *White Tiger* belies Indian realities. It's the opposite of Raj nostalgia, but this new-found obsession with the more unsavoury sides of Indian life reflects another kind of co-optation of Indian experience for an overseas audience. I was disappointed that this novel won the Man Booker Prize – Adiga's novel *Last Man in Tower*, which is a subtler comment on the changing face of Mumbai that very reasonably focuses on property development, is a good deal better in my opinion, but of course it was never going to be so popular in the West because it avoids sensationalising poverty and crime. To me the response to *The White Tiger* is a literary equivalent of the West's embracing *Slumdog Millionaire*, where literary tourism is blatant. There's even a side trip to the Taj Mahal! *Slumdog Millionaire* has been called a 'feelgood' movie, but it had the opposite effect on me and it irritates me that Western audiences are so naïve about this kind of representation of India.

Q: Is radical theory dead?

A: If by radical theory, we mean the kind of theory that emerged from France in particular in the 1960s and afterwards, then possibly 'yes'. For some time now, UK academics, influenced by this, have been asking the question, 'After theory?' What next? Well, there's always something new emerging and a tension between perceived radicalism and perceived conservatism. And of course, today's radicalism can become tomorrow's orthodoxy. New Criticism, with its emphasis on close readings and dispensing with any extra-textual information, must have seemed very radical when it first appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, anticipating Barthes saying there is nothing '*hors de texte*'. Even the use of the word 'New' promotes this idea, but today it's not just yesterday's discourse, but something that seems light years away from where we are today.

But to answer the question more simply: yes, but it will regenerate and emerge in new incarnations.



Q: On globalisation, what are your findings?

**A: There's a joke about a visiting lecturer who's asked, 'How do you find our students?', and he answers 'I just walk into the classroom and there they are.' I'm tempted to adapt this and answer 'I just turn on the TV or open a newspaper and there it is.' Globalisation: the term is everywhere, isn't it? But let me try to say something more discriminating, Sunil, to supplement what I've said already. Globalisation exists in many forms. If it refers to the activities of multinationals, then all too often it amounts to a new form of economic and cultural colonialism, even if this is perceived to have benefits, such as Internet access, iPhones, the availability of consumer goods, etc., etc. Along with this, it promotes non-nationalistic ways of looking at the world, which are a mixed blessing. But if we go a stage further, then its enabling subalterns, little people around the world, to talk to one another, is positive and so on the whole I feel there are more productive conversations promoting beneficial international exchange than there are paedophiles and recruiters for Isis (Daesh). And let's face it, it gives many people who were effectively disenfranchised from information in the past, access to a wealth of knowledge. That has to be positive, though there are major losers among the people who have been bypassed by the communications revolution – the biggest change to contact and understanding since Gutenberg. No, more than that. The biggest change ever! But it's only a medium and it can be soliciting aid for the famine-ridden regions of Africa and disseminating pornography at the same time.**

Q: Reification and resistance in a market economy, are they still possible through artistic modes?

**A: Yes, but, as I'm guessing you feel yourself, resistance is the exception rather than the rule. I'd like to think that what we're referring to by the troubled term 'postcolonial' plays an important role here.**

Q: Views on popular American fiction and best sellers?

**A: I've said something about my favourite American texts earlier, but I don't really read much American fiction now and it's only coincidental if my reading habits coincide with sales. I watch more American films and some US TV drama series. Perhaps the most interesting thing I can say here is that I'm part of a generation that was weaned on American culture, but today it appeals to me far less. Like a lot of people in the UK, I've been absorbed by Scandi *noir* in recent years and this popular genre seems altogether subtler and more provoking than its American equivalents. I found the US film of *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* unwatchable after I'd seen the Swedish original and the two sequels in the Millennium Trilogy. But then I gather that the books in Stieg Larsson's trilogy were very popular in the States and so one should be cautious about generalising. There are moments when phenomena like the rise of Donald Trump make me despair of contemporary America, but of course this only represents one strain of America today and I know most right-minded Americans are equally opposed to what he represents and there are many other Americas out there, at their best pioneering new modes of thinking and new cultural forms.**

Q: Views on literature in the twenty-first century?

**A: I think it's constantly having to reinvent itself and perhaps the biggest shift has been occasioned by the competition from the Internet. Earlier I was talking about seven-volume eighteenth-century novels and, while it's not impossible to imagine similarly long works being read today, there's a movement**

towards flash fiction that seems to be making this a minority pursuit. If, as seems increasingly to be the case, there's a major shift to reading online, then I think shorter works – stories, poems and non-fiction – will tend to replace the novel, though the pluralistic world we live in should have some room for both. We were talking about this earlier.

Q: Where is Anglo-Saxon-American criticism headed?

A: There's a wonderful sentence in one of the Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock's fictions, in which he speaks of a horseman riding off 'madly in all directions'. Perhaps that could sum up Anglo-American criticism today. One of the more negative – I won't say 'mad' – directions has been towards highly specialised studies of minutiae. At their best such studies can be wonderful, but all too often they involve a recondite narrowness that is quite remote from the lived experience of the average person. On the positive side, there's an ongoing healthy interest in ethical issues, to be seen, for example, in the rapid emergence of ecocriticism. Also a growing interest in disability studies and an attempt to redress past and present social iniquities in almost every walk of life, all of which I welcome very much.

Q: A pleasure interacting with you. Thanks for time and patience.

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