



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## An Interview with Paul Binding

Nick Turner

*Paul Binding is a British writer who has worked in many fields: he is a literary critic, novelist, reviewer and renowned expert in Scandinavian literature. His novels are Harmonica's Bridegroom (1984, recently reprinted by Valancourt Books), Kingfisher Weather (1989), My Cousin the Writer (2002) and After Brock (2013). He has given lectures at universities and participated in cultural events in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Estonia. His memoir St Martin's Ride, which focuses on his childhood in Germany soon after the end of the Second World War, was Sir Stephen Spender's Book of the Year, and was awarded the J.R. Ackerley Prize for the best autobiographical book of 1990. He has frequently spent long periods abroad, and his time in Jackson, Mississippi as a visiting professor led to The Still Moment: Eudora Welty, Portrait of a Writer (1994). The book draws on the many conversations he had with Welty about her work. More recently, he published Imagined Corners: Exploring the World's First Atlas (2003). He has frequently reviewed books for the Times Literary Supplement and The Independent.*

*His most recent book is Hans Christian Andersen: European Witness (2014), which was very well reviewed and described by Amanda Craig in the Literary Review as his best work yet. An in-depth and wide-ranging literary biography, it sets Andersen's work within a European context and pays close attention to his unjustly neglected work outside the fairy tales, such as the novel The Improvisatore, which Binding argues was a great influence on Charles Dickens.*

*I met and became friends with Paul through our mutual interest in the novelist Barbara Pym, and have since had many discussions with him about writers; he was the plenary speaker at the Barbara Pym Centenary Conference I organised in 2013. He lives in the beautiful small town of Bishop's Castle, Shropshire, in the Welsh Marches – the border country of England and Wales.*

*His website is <http://www.paulbinding.co.uk/index.html>.*

NT: Can you remember any point where you knew you wanted to become a writer?

**PB: When I was in the second year of Sixth Form the idea came to me for a novel set in Dorset where we had a summer cottage. The hero had to choose between two sets of**

people, two attitudes to life, and the book was appropriately – and rather boringly – called *The Two Strands*. I sat down and wrote it; doing so took a fortnight, though I later went back to it and enlarged it. I was obsessed by Mauriac at the time so I suppose – incongruous though it may sound – that he was the greatest influence on the book, which physically has completely vanished. No great loss, I am sure, but it was when writing it that I knew I would always want to write, especially novels, though I haven't published (as opposed to having written) as many novels as I would have liked.

NT: I wonder if any writer has? Have any writers been a particular influence on you? Or maybe there are some whose worldview or style you feel is close to yours?

PB: Mauriac was the first: I read him originally in English, in Gerard Hopkins's translations, then in French, and in my early twenties visited places he'd written about – Les Landes and Bordeaux. I loved the way he portrayed characters, often with great intensity, whose interrelations occurred within severe given contexts, usually familial. And I also loved his combination of psychological acuity with keen awareness of places and the natural world (vineyards, pine-trees). Turgenev has been another great influence on me – especially *Fathers and Sons*, the gentleness of which (springing from Turgenev's compassionate agnostic's worldview) aids rather than dilutes the way it faces up to the darker aspects of existence – disappointment, decay, disease, death. Then I have to name two Americans: James Purdy, who actually read and liked my work, and my friend the North Carolina novelist, Reynolds Price. Of English writers the only one I was conscious of being influenced by – in her painterly groupings of characters and in her middle-class milieus – is Elizabeth Taylor. Another great influence on me has been Robert Louis Stevenson's unfinished masterpiece *Weir of Hermiston* (which I edited and introduced for Penguin Classics). I deliberately gave a chapter in my last novel *After Brock* the same title as one in *Weir* with not dissimilar subject-matter, 'Enter Mephistopheles', but nobody noticed.

NT: I didn't, I'm afraid! The writers you mention are all primarily novelists, of course. Have you ever felt any desire to write poetry or short stories?

PB: I have had some short stories published, but though two writers I enormously admire, indeed no writers more so, Eudora Welty and Alice Munro, have given their best, their greatest, to the short story form, to say nothing of nineteenth-century giants Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hans Christian Andersen and (later) Chekhov, it isn't a medium that strikes me as at all suited to my own imagination. I have no inclination to write any short stories now. Poetry? I have had two little volumes of poems published – and some poems in journals etc. But I am not in general a poetry reader or writer, and that explains the great limitations of what I've produced. My friendship with Stephen Spender – which lasted twenty years – gave me insights into life through his own poems, and through those poets he admired: Lorca, Rilke, Stefan George, Georg Trakl, Paul Celan. But whereas I am always reading novels, and await a new appearance, a new 'find' excitedly, my poetry tastes are far more selective, one might say restricted, and, Wordsworth and Coleridge apart, basically confined to a handful of

**the great European modernists such as those I've just cited. There is no way in which I could be of their stature or even of their kind!**

NT: You've done critical work and taught in universities – did you ever consider becoming an academic full-time?

**PB: I don't really think so, on reflection. I have felt very honoured to be a guest-lecturer – for example as Eudora Welty Visiting Professor in Jackson, Mississippi – and very happy discharging my duties, and as you say, a lot of my concerns actually connect up with universities, in US, in the UK, in Scandinavia and at St Antony's, Oxford. Certainly nothing in my literary career has given me greater pleasure than my relationships with scholars/critics at universities who share my interests: at Oslo University and University of South Denmark, at UEA and UCL, working on Ibsen, Andersen and related subjects. But that doesn't mean I would have liked to have been teaching or working full-time at a university myself.**

NT: I share your opinion! Denmark brings me to my next question. I've noticed that you are drawn to Scandinavian writers and writers of the American South rather more than British ones. Can you comment on this?

**PB: I ask myself this quite often. First of all I have to establish whether there's a similarity between these two fields. And I think the answer is yes. Both cultures are essentially non-metropolitan, and both Southern and Scandinavian literature show people in often scattered societies, sometimes deeply provincial, and often close to the natural world, allowing the characters a certain freedom from social conventions (though also often acted upon by them, sometimes at their very narrowest and therefore inviting passionate rejection) together with a concomitant ability to attend to their own depths of being. Really Ibsen's fjord-land or Strindberg and Bergman's Baltic islands are not so very far from Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Welty's Natchez Trace. This also means that the people in both literatures have access to folk-memory and tradition which interest me enormously. Of course the same is true of Wordsworth and Emily Brontë and Hardy and, to a measure, of D.H. Lawrence, so some of these elements can be found in British literature too – to say nothing of the Scots: Scott, Burns, Stevenson, Edwin Muir. Of course the Southern tradition fascinated me because of its relation to the dark past of the 'peculiar institution' of slavery and the Civil War, while Scandinavia appealed because it pointed forward to psychological liberation and social justice. So there's a paradox. Perhaps the answer really is that the great artists in both cultures – together with my own personal response to the landscapes behind them, which I had explored for myself) – appealed to me so hugely that I just had to write on them: Andersen, Ibsen, Strindberg, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, Reynolds Price, Anne Tyler. It is worth noting that the first five of these are Modernists, progressives in their art and yet profoundly concerned with the atavistic.**

NT: That's very interesting indeed – and complex. We could discuss this for hours, but for now, thinking of European writers, you've also written on Lorca, too, haven't you?

**PB:** Yes, and *Lorca: The Gay Imagination* has been in sales-terms my most successful book, I suppose because it has reached out to colleges and courses. It is born of the late 70s/earlier 80s feminist and gay movements, insisting that books address a wider range of the human psyche's demands for outward expression in behaviour and activity than hitherto – and in fact I was involved in these years with both Virago and G.M.P (Gay Men's Press), and wrote many introductions for classics done by both publishers. (And Virago published my study of Eudora Welty, *The Still Moment*.) Much of the work on Lorca was done in Spain (it's dedicated to a Spanish friend, with whom I'm still in regular touch). It was wonderful being in Spain in those post-Franco years, like watching a princess waking up from an evil spell. I am also fascinated by the fact of a marginalised individual, isolated by sexuality and related personal experiences – Andersen and Kafka are other outstanding examples, Tchaikovsky and Britten also – having the ability to plumb the depths of a whole society and the diversity of its components and in so doing represent, in near-universally accessible art, its very soul. Lorca couldn't have done what he did for his fellow-Spaniards unless he had been gay, and had suffered (and secretly exalted) on account of this.

**NT:** A truly inspiring figure. Another one takes us back to Denmark: what was it that attracted you to the work of Hans Christian Andersen?

**PB:** He was the first great Scandinavian writer to hold the world-stage, and the achievements of Ibsen, Strindberg, Grieg, Munch etc. owe enormously to his tremendous example – not least in the fact that they were able to address readerships and audiences favourably inclined to Nordic work by their enthusiasm for Andersen. But my desire to write the book was strengthened by what might seem a conflicting reading to this statement: that, compulsive traveller as he was, Andersen discerned – through imaginative antennae – currents within the whole continent of Europe, in upheaval after the Napoleonic Wars and undergoing unprecedented modernisation/industrialisation programs, currents which he then transmitted into his writings. One reason for the enormous appeal of his work outside Scandinavia (as well of course as inside it) – in Germany, the Netherlands, Britain etc. – was that his public, often unconsciously, picked up on this ability of his. All kinds of deep, only half-acknowledged, present-day concerns of their own were being given fictional flesh-and-blood, especially in that most universal of forms, the fairy-tale. But in fact (another paradox) I wrote the book also out of a belief, which got stronger the more I worked on it, that Andersen is as fascinating as a novelist and as a writer of travelogues and journals as he is of those so famous shorter pieces, the very perfection and originality of which have meant that they have overshadowed for posterity the treasures to be found in his work in other genres.

**NT:** We have discussed many writers from different countries in whom you're interested. Do you think there are any themes or interests that unite your own work?

**PB:** My novels have all come from my trying to join up two pictures that will not leave me alone: in the case of my first published, *Harmonica's Bridegroom*, it was the recollected one of a young man playing the harmonica in an Oxfordshire garden and the scenes of Franquista

celebrations that I witnessed in central Madrid. It's the same now with the novel in progress, *Chad Hedger*. So I think their very composition and the cast of mind behind that (fascinated by coincidence, chance meetings, unsuspected connections between people, certain cultural conflicts) and the consequent narrative methodology must be what unite my works of fiction – and indeed non-fiction. They are all also profoundly connected with my passionate interest in place and what it does to people – which leads one to the natural world itself: Eudora Welty's feelings for the Natchez Trace, Ortelius and Mercator's feelings for Antwerp (in my map-book *Imagined Corners*), Lorca's deep love of Andalusia and his bewilderment by New York and his almost hysterical evocations in the face of it of the natural world in Spain, New England and Cuba. As I have just said Andersen's travels interested me enormously, and my novel *After Brock* and its successor *Chad Hedger* are inseparable from the Welsh Marches where they are set.

NT: With this in mind, do you feel your writing and its themes and have changed much over the years?

PB: I am not sure, but I think that one of my most successful books, *St Martin's Ride* – about my early childhood in Occupied Germany and my return to Germany, to Berlin, for the dramatic events of Christmas/New Year 1989-1990 – marks a watershed in my work. From then on what I have wanted to do – and indeed my lifestyle – underwent a change. In my imaginative work I no longer wanted to be any kind of 'international' writer, and in my critical work, in what I write about Southern or Scandinavian literature, I deal with specific periods or cultural phenomena, and specific writers, with understanding, I hope, but also with a certain intellectual objectivity. I am not in the least interested in any self-presentation here. I have had no wish since 1990 to become a sort of roving intelligence, and have resisted such temptations to become this as have been offered me (though I did cover the politically important Swedish elections of 1994 for *New Statesman*.) But – a very different matter! – *St Martin's Ride* will, I am sure, prove my one and only attempt to write about myself and my birth-family. It's hard to convey my profound on-going antipathy to doing this in any form, even in a small, light or journalistic way. I see my 2002 novel begun about ten years earlier, *My Cousin the Writer*, which is so very English and which uses – and not only metaphorically – an actual English soap-opera of the 1950s (with which admittedly I had some personal connections), as a literary way out and forward from the internationalism or subjective memory of *St Martin's Ride*, and I have gone on from that point.

NT: As you look back, then, is there any of your work of which you're most proud?

PB: *After Brock*. It's the book of mine I know that I would most enjoy had I not written it; perhaps another way of putting this is that I do enjoy it *despite* having written it (as a rule I don't like rereading my work). It's my first book set in the area in which I have been living now for a quarter of a century, and it's the one most connected to my feelings both about and for animals: nothing in my life more important to me than they are. And I do feel that



**Pete and Nat, the father and son, and Sam, Mephistopheles to Pete, are alive and engaging and, with their flaws, sympathetic – including Sam.**

NT: I agree – it's beautifully done and I enjoyed the novel very much. Who are the contemporary writers you particularly admire? Who have you read recently?

**PB: Well, Per Petterson and Karl Ove Knausgaard pre-eminently. I think these two Norwegians the most bracing and truth-telling creative writers of our time (of those I have read, of course!) They are different from each other, more than you might think. Per, the older by quite a margin, is essentially a poetic novelist with an urge to autobiographical confession springing from the extraordinary tragedy of his family's deaths. Knausgaard, while giving us a remarkably full portrait of his evolving self, is in fact a greatly more socially observant, socially obsessed sort of writer than Per, and his self as it emerges has continually to relate to and then be extracted from the amazingly vividly rendered flux of society as he encounters it, whether in the suburbs of Kristiansand, in cultured circles in Stockholm or in the wilds of Northern Norway. Writing in English there is J.M Coetzee and also another younger South African, Damon Galgut, who seems to get better with each book. I greatly admired his last, *Arctic Summer*, a re-creation of E.M. Forster's emotional/sexual life. I would always read a new novel by David Mitchell, Adam Foulds, Tim Winton, John Burnside, and by David Nicholls too! Poets John Burnside (perhaps finer in his poems even than in his fiction) and David Harsent I also admire.**

NT: Some very interesting names there – I think in the UK we are not good at reading European fiction. Of course David Mitchell is a very big name, John Burnside less so. I was personally very impressed with his novel *Glister*. Moving from the present to the past, are there any writers you feel are currently overlooked, writers you really admire that seem to have been forgotten?

**PB: There are many, but to me the most significant of them hasn't exactly been either overlooked or forgotten but – because of the unfinished nature of his great project – greatly and wrong-headedly underestimated: Richard Hughes (1900-1976). His *The Fox in the Attic* and its successor (in some quarters unfairly received) *The Wooden Shepherdess* are works of immense power and visionary insight, and the twelve chapters of the never-completed third volume of the (badly named) *The Human Predicament*, first published in the Harvill paperback edition of *The Wooden Shepherdess*, for me utterly vindicate all high opinions arrived at of the preceding work. Whether writing of England, Wales or Germany – or Morocco and Prohibition-era US – Hughes combines a mediumistic sense of place with a sympathetic yet unbiased apprehension of human behaviour, its unpredictability, its relation to a timeless metaphysic. Stanley Middleton's many sensitive delineations of life and relationships in a barely disguised Nottingham which takes on, easily and lightly enough, thanks to his careful artistry, a profound representative identity, still lack the wide recognition they deserve. He is a poetic Modernist master, no slogging realist middlebrow as references to him in books or articles can suggest. I also think, moving away from Britain, Lionel Trilling's one complete novel *The Middle of the Journey* is a real masterpiece which**

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should have a more central position in the literary pantheon than it does. Of course it is about historically datable American fellow-travellers, but beyond the specific situations presented is a powerful (and frightening) sense of how willingly people everywhere and in all times can surrender themselves (and others) to ideology, thus flying in the face of common sense and natural compassion.

NT: This makes me want to read Hughes's work especially, and hopefully it will inspire readers of the interview to do so too. Moving forward, you were considering doing some work on Angus Wilson, I think?

PB: I was, because his work meant such a lot to me when I was younger, and through my admiration for his novels I got to know him personally. He was a very lively, friendly, humane man, with an extraordinary capacity for literary appreciation and great insights into people. These qualities are present too, of course, in his creative work, but I have to admit – sadly, in common, with the contemporary publishing/reading world – that I admire it less than I did. His two best novels have long seemed to me *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* (1958) and *Late Call* (1958) in which the central consciousness is a woman's; this does involve a certain mental ventriloquism however, and also – because of the deliberately restricted milieus – a certain banishing of Wilson's own intellectual concerns, those that so animated their brilliant and morally bracing, but somewhat less sensitive and artistically satisfying predecessors, *Hemlock and After* (1952) and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), which also seem – in both a complimentary and a less-than-wholly-complimentary sense – to be inseparable from their age. The understandable esteem in which Angus was held as a man, as a public spokesperson for literature, led him as a writer, I am sorry to say, to venture into territories for which he was not imaginatively qualified. So, for all their energy, I now do not think *No Laughing Matter* (1967) or *As If By Magic* (1973) convince or satisfy (despite what I myself may have written to the contrary). So with these reluctant but firm opinions I felt I could hardly go ahead with a study of him. Of his contemporaries born shortly before World War One I find William Golding, Elizabeth Taylor, Patrick White and Barbara Pym have all stood the test of time better, almost certainly because they remained truer to themselves and their deepest interests. But my respect for Angus Wilson is undiminished.

NT: This does nonetheless make me want to read some more of his work! What is your current project – and future writing plans?

PB: I am writing a novel *Chad Hedger* which, though in no way a sequel to *After Brock*, contains in its cast the father and son at the heart of that earlier book – and is also set (for the most part) round Bishop's Castle (called Lydcastle) where I live. I hope to follow *Hans Christian Andersen* with a study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose dates (1804-1864) relate to Andersen's (1805-1875) and who shared his influences: Scott and the German Romantics, a passion for fairy-tales and for travel. In other ways Hawthorne was very different, a devoted family man, yet solitary rather than sociable, and haunted by the power of the past in which his illustrious ancestors (very unlike Andersen's) had played a key and often terrible part. The

book is to be biographical as that on Andersen primarily was not. I have not left Andersen behind, however; I want to make a new version in English of his first novel *Improvisatoren* (*The Improvisatore*, 1835) not translated into our language since the 1840s, when Dickens read it.

NT: And to end on a light-hearted question – if you could take one novel to a desert island, what would it be. Perhaps we'll allow you two!

**PB: Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* first, and then a toss-up between Barbara Pym's *Less Than Angels* and R.K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*. That makes three, I know – which is cheating.**

NT: There's always space for Barbara Pym!

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