1. **You’ve spoken in informal interviews with WTR Fiction Editor D. W. White about first-person present tense, especially in contemporary fiction. Can you expound on that a bit here?**

It comes from YA fiction and a self-excited culture.

Take the following sentence: ‘I shut the lid and push my laptop across the desk, breathless at my own audacity.’ Demanding attention like a child who’s just discovered it can *do* something. The impression of experience is lacking, as if the narrator were born only this morning. Gravity, anchorage, are lacking: a world afloat ensues.

The past tense tells us that what happened has been worth remembering, so as to be told. Present tense does not confer this value on its matter.

A novel should be a party no one wants to leave. Like a bad host, the present-tense voice keeps speaking in your face, just when other people are coming up.

No variation of volume: Copland’s ‘Fanfare for the Common Man’ came on the radio while I was writing this; one can tolerate a fanfare for three minutes – not 300 pages.

With present tense, no horizon.

Present tense is smartphone text; past tense carves in wood pulp and time.

1. **How does teaching creative writing in the classroom, and working with young writers at their most formative stages, intersect with your own work?**

We’re a community of apprentices, is what I tell students – I’m just an older one than they are. I don’t actively encourage students to write like me (after all, they want to make some money from their art). The main business is recognizing what *they* are doing, developing its potential, whatever the subject, or genre. If you will, the novel is the spirit of this community, and has chosen each of us for its varying expression.[[1]](#footnote-1) I’m consistently impressed, even astounded, by the vitality of much of the writing I supervise – and also by its maturity. Young writers may be older than they seem.

Certain things I advise (or nag) young writers about remind me of the importance of the sound of my own work; these include control of tense and management of dialogue. I also try and teach them about the power of humour: if they have talent for comedy, let them cultivate it! We need to get away from the prejudice against laughter in the novel. And I do urge them away from a writing manner influenced by TV; the novel itself is our tradition, and an important part of the classes is discussion of extracts from classic and modern novels that illustrate our particular theme – this gives me the chance to introduce students to many writers they may never otherwise come across …

Eg?

Benito Pérez Galdós

I’ll tell you about an instance of intersection in the novel *Talbot & The Fall.* Here, one of the principals is a creative-writing student (Charlie Talbot). A major task of the book is intensifying and making strange her experience at a writing retreat in the English countryside. I daresay, the book might have been written from the point-of-view of one of the accompanying academics; but then, her experience is being processed; and who wants to read about academics anyway? Instead, we take the risk as writer and teacher of becoming a student again – and a female one at that.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **You write both critically and creatively, in addition to teaching. How do find this balance, not only thematically and formally (in the infusion of one type of writing with another), but practically, in your day-to-day schedule?**

A peculiarity of *British Story* is that this novel grew in part from an academic essay on Sir John Falstaff that proved too much for august journals such as *Shakespeare Quarterly*. The last piece of critical writing I attempted was the essay on Modernism and Creative Writing (see *L’Esprit* Winter Quarterly 2). I’ve largely given up straight academic criticism, because I’m convinced that the novel is a more comprehensive place for thought (moral, critical, spiritual, philosophic) than formal academic discourse. DH Lawrence wrote, ‘I am a novelist. And being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog. The novel is the one bright book of life.’[[3]](#footnote-3) A modest, and vital, affirmation of the novel as an holistic form.

As to the practical balance of writing and teaching, I do try and work every day at fiction, even if it’s only editing or submitting material, or keeping up the observational notebooks. It’s good for my nerves.

1. **You’ve done so much work on Wyndham Lewis, a writer I’d like to know better. But what a giant – he wrote and did so much! What’s a good point of entry?**

As a point of entry, I’d recommend *Blast* 1 (1914). The energy and form of this periodical interests (in some cases, electrifies) students; it also provides a kind of key to Lewis’s style as that develops over his career. Lewis’s first published novel was *Tarr* (1918; 1928); I’d suggest that Part 1 isn’t easy sailing, without some exposure to the avant-garde techniques of *Blast*; the rest of that novel is a marvellous experiment in comic phenomenology more or less unique within the modernist canon; it’s also a serious attempt at self-criticism (this tends to go unnoticed in Lewis criticism). I’d recommend as well the *Wild Body* stories, and accompanying essays on laughter.

1. **In your discussion with WTR Fiction Editor D. W. White for *L’Esprit Literary Review,* you mentioned a tension between a literary work’s density and its dynamism. The tension reminded me of images elsewhere in that interview: Hamlet in the cemetery gripped with a mania among the old bones, the man in the field kicking dense clods of earth. Pulling the earthy image through: I’m a gardener, and I add lots of things to the soil to make it less dense and more generative. What kind of “soil amendments” do you add to your writing or your preparation to write, to make the result less cloddish, more dynamic, or just less dense?**

I think humour/comedy is one answer. Laughter, if you will, turns the soil, breaks the clods. Gathering, it also energizes the dense line or passage because it works quicker than thought (who thinks before they laugh?). In dense writing, the reader’s getting a pay off each time they laugh, or grin.

Take a junk shop.[[4]](#footnote-4) Creative HQ. Musty, cluttered place; no one coming in – they’re all at the boutiques. Open the door – storm blowing: junk transformed. China, pewter, fire irons, furniture, figurines of Churchill, Colonel Custer, mantel clocks, collected works of Sir Walter Scott, they withstand the blast; it blows the dust off; behold now an enchanted place! Meanwhile, the costly tat at the boutiques falls off the stands and cracks. Laughter is such a storm.

Variety is another means of energizing density: variety of character, of point of view, of voice, tone, register, idiom; also, of reality levels by means of shamanism, surrealism, the occult, the visionary, dreaming.

1. **Music is such an important element to your work; when writing, do you prioritize rhythm at the sentence level? Regarding that balance between density and dynamism, how much does your ear determine when a line or a paragraph is correct?**

I wouldn’t go quite as far as prioritize; there, we’d be getting into the territory of *Tender Buttons*, parts of *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, where music’s taking over from meaning. But it’s cardinal with me that the rhythm must be right (I’m thinking of tempo, stress, tone, so forth): this is how I judge that a line is meaning the way I wish it to. I do trust my ear (eg, on the balance between density and dynamism). I never learned to play instruments, but I’ll tell you a trick I have: very often, I can name a song (rock, soul, pop, whatever) from the first note/chord or two – and not everyone can do this. I can’t write without music playing either.

‘Writing with the ear’ is something I try and teach students. An instance in the class is what I call ‘Had Thump’, which is line-by-line use of the pluperfect; it causes an oppressive rhythm, as if you can hear nothing else but the drums, or someone walking overhead in heavy shoes. It’s surprising how many literary writers fall into this error in composition; their editors must have tin ears. The remedy is simply to preserve the initial pluperfect statement, then go into the ordinary perfect or imperfect for the remainder of the passage (the reader will know where they are in time).

1. **You also mention in the *L’Esprit* interview the Nagg-and-Nell nature of literary agents in meeting with ‘challenging’ writing, and the difficulty of finding a publishing home for you work. How do you balance the purity of your artistic vision with the realities of wanting your writing to reach an audience, and to have a voice in the conversations in which you engage? Does marketability enter your mind at all during the compositional stages? If it does (or if it does not), do you want it to?**

A challenging question; I fear my answer isn’t especially coherent.

I don’t know if it’s about purity on my side; one of the things we’re up against is the craven pursuit of purity in agents and publishers who are trying to atone for history, and are more interested in the identity of the writer than the merit of the work.

Anyway, people say to me, ‘With your skill in writing, you could easily turn out a best-seller.’ No I couldn’t. When/if you tell a lie, don’t you get a sensation of nausea, or falling? That sensation would make artistic compromise physically, morally impossible. So maybe it’s honesty that motivates, or calls, me: the voice at the shoulder – ‘Are you telling the truth here, pal?’ But since I’m making a song and dance about honesty, I’ll admit I couldn’t technically compose a market-friendly novel. Around 1910, Wyndham Lewis tried a potboiler (*Mrs Dukes’ Million*); it wasn’t published until 1977 (Lewis by then dead 20 years).

As you’ll know very well, the problem with the market is that it pretends to be responding to taste; in fact, it’s directing and managing taste, while temporizing with commercial pressure and the ideological weather. With the last novel (*The Treatment*), reviewers said, Why isn’t he better known, etc, etc? I am confident that I could have a reasonably-wide readership composed of people who want their intelligence and taste to be respected enough to rise to a moderate challenge, if only the market were more independent, less timid about risk. That, however, isn’t how markets work, is it? Like other products of capitalism, literature is subject to standardization; my instinct has always been to resist standardization.

But is that a matter of honesty, or mere stubbornness? Maybe it’s a sense of reality that motivates me.

Max Scheler defined reality as ‘what resists our desires’. The market stimulates desire, then satisfies it with maximum efficiency (this is why publishers want their novelists to keep writing the same sort of book each time – which I refuse to do). Regarding *Talbot*, publishers have said to me, ‘I love this – I just dunno if I can get it in the shops.’

My admiration, reverence, for Mark E Smith and The Fall is for a most unusual combination of creative talent and the capacity to back oneself over long stretches of time. One might think of this as blowing the castle down (where the castle walls fortify the marketplace of a complacent culture). For this, one needs a standpoint outside the walls, outside time and fashion (an issue we explore in *Talbot*); The Fall had this standpoint. They’ve developed from cult to classic status. All I can do is try and take my own stand – and wait, and blow.

1. **You often speak about the importance of character in your interviews. Would you say that your relationship with character has evolved over time? What advice would you give our readers and writers regarding the development of distinct characters?**

I think readers may be better able than me to observe critically or judge an evolving relationship with character in my writing. Around the time of *British Story*, I was studying the boundary between fictional character and actual human existence (some of my sources were Edmund Husserl, AD Nuttall, Kendall Walton): that novel imagined that the boundary could be crossed. In our common idiom, we often speak of either the being or existence of fictional characters; we speak also of the ‘characterness’ of people actually known to us. To me, that idiom is of the essence.

Something I’ve noticed is that in all my novels, the protagonist encounters a shamanic or legendary presence, who is crucial in the development of the protagonist: Whitby (*La Rochelle*); Arthur Mountain (*British Story*); John Fabian Morgan (*The Treatment*); the Captain (*Talbot & the Fall*).

Advice on the development of distinctive characters? The voice of the character is vital: how they speak, how they think. With Charlie Talbot, her voice and thinking are part of both her self-project and her creative project: she becomes aware that the latter can’t flourish until she has developed and practiced the former. We hear much nowadays about ‘identity’; I’d argue that it’s more important that we become a character or personality, to ourself and others (and voice is of the essence here).

More advice. I show students a passage from *Between The Acts* (Woolf). Here, Woolf shows how to introduce a new character (Mrs Manresa) to a group, and impose her personality thereupon. You can work several variations on this model with regard to how a new character reacts to the group she/he is joining.

I show students a passage from Proust (*Within A Budding Grove*): the Baron de Charlus is behaving in a way that arrests the narrator’s attention; there is no speech. From this. We learn how a personality may impose itself in silence.

Another model is the opening pages of Lawrence’s *Women in Love*. The two sisters (Ursula, Gudrun) are, respectively, embroidering and drawing, and chatting while they work. With great skill, Lawrence employs two means of distinction. 1) He makes this opening dialogue into a competition between the sisters that is marked by an uncomfortable but controlled tension. From this we learn that dialogue may be an event that discloses character, as much as any action scene. 2) There is an asymmetry in the description of the two women, which raises for the reader interesting questions – eg, is Ursula less fashion conscious than Gudrun (whose outfit is vividly described)? Are we to take it that her character is already more formed than that of Gudrun, who is, so to say, making her debut in these pages? Is she, perhaps, nicer, kinder?

In *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality*, John Bayley argued that a novelist needed to love her/his characters. One thing he meant that was to love is to let be: so, one shouldn’t be knowing one’s characters inside-out; they must have their privacy, and a capacity to surprise their maker; in this capacity, nature takes over from art.

1. **Some reviewers have referred to your work as “strange.” From your perspective, what does it mean to write towards strangeness?**

On this, we could write a book. – I’m not sure that I write ‘towards’ strangeness, which suggests working from the inside out. To me, strangeness is quite familiar: having moved from South Wales to England as a small boy, and being of mixed race, I sounded and looked strange, lacked a feeling of belonging (I’m not complaining, mind); in adolescence, my experience wasn’t my own (it seemed to be behind glass). I decided to become a writer, either so as to get among the world, or to take my stand elsewhere, the practice of style being the means of bridging these contradictory ends.

In *Talbot & The Fall*, it is a gathering understanding of Charlie Talbot’s that an art of explicit strangeness (the films of Maya Deren are cited) is an art that fails to answer satisfactorily to life; this being the problem of avant-gardism generally – after the initial thrill, it’s as boring as airflight. And Charlie comes to understand that the art of the Captain (MES) has the capacity/power to make life strange, wonderful, and funny, while taking its stand within the ordinary – ‘wilding the ordinary’ Charlie calls it. This we argue is what distinguishes modernism from the avant-garde. I’d suggest moreover that this special capacity is related to that difficult and elusive theme of modern philosophy, namely, the ‘life-world’[[5]](#footnote-5). An art that succeeds in expressing the life-world in an idiom of its own, is apt to seem strange because our culture prejudices us against ordinary experience. Our expressive means are ready-made – you’ve noticed how virtually everyone sounds like everyone else, in public and institutional speech, and in writing? Not sounding like everyone else is strangeness; it’s an attitude that comes from where the soul or heart would be – not a choice of costume.

In the novel, I’d vote for Kafka as the most consistent practitioner of strangeness. His world is simply tilted a few degrees from the ordinary: this is genuine surrealism, as distinct from the programme method of Breton and co.

1. **In the interview for *L’Esprit*, you mentioned the writer’s ability and desire to straddle a work’s truth and its metaphysical potential in revision, with a reminder that writers can’t ignore the mediation between expulsion and explanation, try as we might. Where do you see this need for mediation the most in your own writing and how do you stay committed to that negotiation throughout the revision process?**

Thank you – it’s helpful to respond to this after the question about strangeness. In Question 5, I referred to varying reality levels by means of shamanism, surrealism, the occult, the visionary, dreaming. The management of these elements is for me a real creative task.

In *The Treatment*, I was pressed by my editor to remove a substantial hallucinatory episode that I’d been proud of; I daresay it was both over-explaining itself, and blowing the book off course. The plotting was improved by its removal, and there’s a school of thought (exemplified by Dennis Donoghue, who appears in your next question) for which coherence in plotting is cardinal for truthful fiction. Furthermore, because *The Treatment* is based in a notorious (in the UK) race crime, I had a degree of duty not to make it subjectively excessive. Nonetheless, it is still a pretty wild, generically unstable book (‘a maverick project that defies comparison’ wrote one reviewer). That wildness is, if you will, a metaphysical element insofar as it defies generic definition.

In *La Rochelle* and *British Story*, the variation of reality levels by means of certain elements

in that list is part and parcel of the life-world of those novels. In the first, we effect it through alcohol and reading to excess, and a rural excursion that becomes a pagan experience. In the second, an unworldly sensibility regarding Shakespearean characterization leads the protagonist to an encounter with a modern shaman. Both novels accept the metaphysical like a dancing partner.

In revising a large work, its metaphysical potential may be thought of as the forest or wood just beyond a garden: cross-pollination is quite probable (because of wind-born seeds, or the droppings of birds); there may be gaps in the fence. Wild nature was there first, beyond the cultivated patch; what came first, may come over – or through.

In *Talbot*, I suppose in having a spirit chorus, we’ve gone further up, or back, than before. The chorus manages certain historical visions of John Talbot, as part of the theme of alternative education. It also comments on his life; here, we’re literally supernaturalizing the mystery of narration, which we customarily refer to in terms of voice, though its agent is the writing or typing hand. In material terms (psychoactive, psychological) an envelope that’s handed over at a funeral may contain a drug that contributes to the visions and heightened thoughts of Talbot throughout; or these may be due to the way death is hanging round in this book.

With Talbot’s daughter, Charlie, it is poetry and song (the respective gardens of Edmund Spenser and the Captain) that bring about a kind of ecstatic experience, and knowledge of how she may write against death.

As a writer, I’m on the look out for supernatural ideas that support an immanent metaphysics. In ’87 Special’ (a story I’ve been working on recently), I resort to a term from Welsh myth, *Annwfn*, which may mean an otherworld that exists within, or alongside, this one – rather than below or above it.

What d’you think of that?

1. **In regard to metaphysical potential, you mentioned tussling with Denis Donoghue’s strongly argued book, *The Ordinary Universe.* Donoghue, a fervent defender of traditional literary values, seemed a man whose sense of life was betrayed by the writers of his own time. Do you ever feel that particular pang of betrayal and if so, what keeps you motivated and engaged in today’s literary world?**

I’d have to say that I don’t get a sense of ‘betrayal’ from Donoghue’s book; my sense was of a powerful and persuasive critical intelligence that made me less comfortable about writers I favour (eg, Musil, Joyce), whom Donoghue seems (here and there perhaps) to catch out.

My own relation to today’s literary world, I suppose I accounted for sufficiently in Q7 (above) – grumbling enough there; and really, complaints of betrayal are the habit of the failure, narcissist, or demagogue (do the genuinely betrayed make a song and dance of it?). I will say that I’m used to disappointment and rejection; I’ll also say that I will keep on – because I back myself: ‘My signature against the world!’ **[Orson Welles]**

The betrayal of the novel itself consists in the fact that many of the people who work in publishing and literary agencies often haven’t actually read many classic or modern novels.

Enough.

1. **In terms of both form and social currency, where do you see the novel going in the next 10, 20, 50 years?**

Prophecy?! The state of things now is grim enough for anyone struggling to publish unorthodox work. It could get worse.

With a few dozen Dan Whites on the scene, things would be looking brighter for those of us who think the novel of consciousness, soul-inquiry, stylistic intensity really matters; a restoration might be effected.

As to form, I suppose we’ve a sense that the long novel of the C19th and earlier C20th has had its day? People ‘don’t have time’, as they say; or, ‘Life’s too short to read Joyce/Musil/Proust!’ (this often uttered with an air of being cleverer than the fool who, strange to say, *does* have time). Oddly, *they* have time to stare at their smartphones for two thirds of the day, and in bed as well; or to stare at TV series that occupy a great many episodes, until the media critics are telling us that ‘Netflix is the new novel!’ So it goes.

A couple of years ago, I read an essay by Stephen Marche on *Literary Hub*, proposing that the literature of voice had been supplanted by the literature of pose. (His model was Sally Rooney.) Broadly, this was an argument about the decline of distinctive or signature style, and the rise of a kind of writing that is diffident, careful not to give offence, and anxious about its own identity. You can hear the committee at work in the writing, if you have the ear for such things – or feel the presence of the censors. Style and complexity are suspicious, when a signalling culture can’t be immediately sure what the writer means.

It’s partly identity politics that has provided the soil for the literature of pose, though another formal cause is the Creative Writing courses in the universities. These have taught several generations of students on dietary or austerity principles, often in obedience to the culture of the screen, rather than the page. The ill-effect is a conception of the literary novel as a slim, poetic, earnest form, which is easy to read line by line – and ideally conveys an experience of trauma; its wardrobe is empty, so is its fridge.

Marche’s argument is strong, but limited by its own dichotomy (he doesn’t acknowledge current writers for whom style is still vital). He might have added that the line between YA writing and the adult literary novel has not been successfully held, and that the former is advancing into the latter, at the expense of style, complexity, liberty.

1. **You regard Modernism as an on-going form, whilst calling for a rebirth of Baroque, “Let’s have the baroque back in the novel. Let’s have a banquet on every page. Let us mix** [I think this should read ‘mix it’. MN] **with the philosophers, the scientists, and the priests…” What draws you to Baroque and in what ways do the two intersect and inform your writing?**

The attraction itself probably goes back to my undergrad days, when modernism and the C16th/17th were competing for my interest, and a man called John Peacock who specialized in renaissance studies introduced me to the idea of the baroque in sculpture and poetry (he was the best lecturer I ever encountered).

At any rate, as an instance of how my thinking has developed, I’d refer any interested reader to ‘Some Notes On Creative Writing and Modernism’ in *L’Esprit Winter Quarterly 2* (Jan 2023). In that essay, I’m suggesting the involvement of modernism as expressive form *within* the development of the idea and force that is the baroque.

An etymology of the word baroque is ‘rough pearl’. In a nutshell, this defines what I’m hoping to produce when I write. What attracts me to the baroque is the elements of energy, excess, vitality. I take the baroque as a shaping force, rather than its being restricted to a period. In the essay referred to above, I was greatly helped in thinking this through this by Marshall Brown (University of Washington), in an article which considered the baroque and the classical as opposing and fundamental aesthetic attitudes in the work of Heinrich Wöllflin[[6]](#footnote-6). Now Wöllflin’s initial preference was for the classical, but Brown demonstrates how the former readjusted his estimation of the baroque, as the force which makes art answer to life and give value to life, while the classical is, in one dimension, the art of death (owing to its stillness, silence, and freezing of time). Once the readjustment is made, we may see that what we thought we valued in the classical has in fact been sublated by the baroque (I think Goethe’s Roman Elegies could be an excellent example of this). In this way, genuine modernism (as I interpret it) is a phase within the baroque because the great task of genuine modernism is the revaluation and affirmation of life in the world. My argument here runs parallel with that late passage in Nietzsche’s thinking on art which I called a touchstone in the conversation with *L’Esprit*: ‘Regarding all aesthetic values I now avail myself of this main distinction: I ask in every instance, “is it hunger or superabundance [*Der Überfluß*] that has here become creative?”’[[7]](#footnote-7)

The baroque is the art of *Überfluß*.

1. **Playing off that, to the extent that Modernism is still an active interoperation of the novelistic form (which I agree with), how can it evolve and adapt the current literary landscape? Modernism in art of course was grounded in the peculiar attributes of the geo-temporal location of its birth—widespread disillusionment and shock from the First World War, the modernization and dehumanization of society via the Industrial Revolution, the regulation of time especially in Britain, and intellectual movements such as Darwinian evolutionary biology, Marxism, and Freudian psychology. How, then, does it adapt to our current times? It is** [should read ‘Is it’? MN] **simply a technical-formal matter, are there parallels between the turn of the last century and today, or is its evolution of another nature altogether?**

I’m dubious about the kind of grounding of Modernism sketched above, though it’s familiar enough from the textbooks. For one thing, it’s fishing history with a very large net, surely? In Britain, there was a century and a half between the Industrial Revolution and the Great War: other attitudes in art have their claim on that time, Romanticism for example. What about the French poets, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue? Are we to believe that their innovations were caused by disappointment over the revolutions of 1848? Only on the presumption that art trails history and politics – a theory of reflection or response that ignores, or fails to appreciate, how art may actually lead the way. If one does want to argue for an historical grounding of modernism, Ockham’s razor is required, as in Gabriel Jossipovici’s elegant and persuasive account (*Whatever Happened to Modernism?*), which begins with the Protestant Reformation.

Meanwhile, any understanding of Modernism as essentially a technical-formal matter is severely limited. It locks Modernism in a room with its own equipment. Remember the chatter of the culture experts in 2022? [[8]](#footnote-8) ‘Stream of consciousness’, ‘fragmentation’, blah blah blah. As I suggested in answering the previous question, Modernism is the spirit and force of revaluation and value-creation with respect to human life and experience; it needs to be understood not in terms of *taxonomy*, but of *morphology* (again, I’m indebted to Marshall Brown for the distinction between these terms). Or to use a distinction from Merleau-Ponty, modernism is *speaking*, not *spoken*, art.

Modernism: the Holy Spirit for *now*.

Life is crying out for modernism; culture turns a deaf ear.

1. **How have other languages influenced your work? Have you done writing in other languages, even in drafting stages?**

As a youth, I studied German, and was a pretty good scholar in Latin. Learning how to read, and write, a classical language was probably more important than I can account for; it *may* be responsible for my confidence as a writer.

For some years, I wrote every day in Spanish, though these were journal entries, not fictions.

Recently, I completed a long story, or ‘novelette’, ‘The Education of Dr Dirlewanger’, With Conference of Spirits to Comfort Us in our Fear’, some of which is in German.

In a recently-completed novella, *Among the Many: The Education of Richard Thorndyke*, I proved to myself that I could write in an old voice, the voice of the early C17th; and was proud of this, since it may be at least as difficult as writing in another language.

1. **Your work touches on the personal, to some extent—you’ve talked about the elements of yourself you see, for example, in Mark, the narrator of your debut *La Rochelle.* How do you draw on your own life in your fiction, and to what extent is it intentional in your process—do you seek to actively infuse your own experiences, or is it closer to osmosis? Does this balance depend on the project?**

Hard question – delicately phrased! When I talk about seeing myself in Mark Chopra (a wretched wordy fellow) is this truth, irony, a joke, or the effect of wine on a hot evening in a garden of West London?

But soft! *Is* Mark wretched, or in fact a modern Don Quixote – or is that the same thing?

The world of self-consciousness, practical experience, sensibility, imagination, so deep, deceptive and restless, one writes just to keep afloat on it.

Unlike the autofictionists, I don’t write about writers. They need to look through the fucking window; get some fresh air. Granted, Kennedy (*British Story*) was an academic; but he went to the wars.

Experience of self, others, world: matter for conversion; indeed, offering itself for prose fiction, as a fish might ask to be caught, or a lump of ore roll itself towards the furnace. When students tell me they lack an ‘idea’, I say, look around, listen, the world is yours to work on.

Instances …

Some years ago, I spotted on the tube (London Underground) a lean, tired, handsome old man eating a pasty from a paper bag. He is now the minor, but significant, character Jack Warren in *Talbot*.

The shamanic blacksmith Whitby of *La Rochelle*, I myself encountered on a visit to the English countryside. Donna Juan, the maj0r domo of the male brothel in in *The Treatment*,lives on my street: we chat about the weather. The narrator’s wife in that novel used to date a pal of mine – in fact I was visiting him when I met Whitby.

See how it happens?

On a station platform, a young man in new shoes told me they cost him £937; he had to come into the writing; same went for a man with a clump of hair, drinking in the rain outside another station; while I waited for a taxi, I heard of the day he downed 87 Special Brews – and spent the next 27 months in hospital.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Contract issued by my journal notebooks: ‘You haven’t lived today, until you write it down tomorrow!” In truth, when I read these entries, I’m bored, feel like I haven’t lived at all. This may be a crooked way of gaining energy for fiction.

1. **You’re clearly a writer and thinker who considers deeply his influences and literary ancestry. In your view, what is the distinction between inspiration and, in your term, ‘mannerism’?**

Well, the etymology sets us on the way: ‘inspiration’ and ‘spirit’ are from Latin *spirare* ‘to breathe’]. Inspired, your writing breathes, lives. When Nietzsche compiled some notes on style for Lou Salomé, this was his priority: ‘1. Of prime necessity is life: a style should *live*.’[[10]](#footnote-10) My priority also. Living writing is *speaking* writing.

‘Manner’ derives from Latin *manus* [‘hand’]. Mannerism: the hand alone is working. As readers, we do not hear or recognize a voice. If you’re the writer, someone has taken all the air; you are copying the dead. Your words have already been spoken. Or, they seem stuck in your ear, as when you have a cold, or are daunted in company.

Revising a story the other day, I noticed mannerism in the style as a slightly-bureaucratic management of words; their feet were tied, they couldn’t dance with their subject.

From the same story, I deleted an opening simile that I was proud of, but was only there because it accorded with thoughts of mine that had nothing to do with the main characters, one of whom has had a dream of his dead wife, and is telling the other about it.

Here’s the simile: ‘When I suggested it [the dream] might not mean anything, Morgan watched me as miserably as a colonial subject whose temple’s being converted to an office where clerks scratch with pens.’

Now in its way, that’s a fair sentence; but there only because I liked it, not because it belongs. Which accords with John Gardner’s definition of mannerism as style that is more concerned with itself than its subject.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Writers who are successful early on, and encouraged by success (and their publisher) to continue in the same way for their next book, and the next, are at risk of mannerism; it becomes, in that wretched word of our time, their ‘trademark’ – whether of style, or fictional world.

1. **Where does literary theory come into your creative work? Do you actively engage with the ideas of theory with which you are clearly conversant, or do you try to keep separate your critical thinking from your creative praxis?**

In the conversation in *L’Esprit* 2, I mentioned a dislike of theory which went back to my time as an undergrad and postgrad. The dislike has persisted. Theory’s followers think they know better than something wider and deeper than themselves; they’ve built a bridge to cross it.

*British Story* speaks from the heart on this. Kennedy, the protagonist goes to university as a young man to learn all about character. He’s betrayed: the dons have become too smart for character; at Kennedy, they grin and shake their heads – all they want to spiel about is *discourse* and *hierarchy*.

Theory’s attitude to literature is colonial: knowing better than the natives, it would enlighten them about their practices, while stamping them out.

Literature makes; theory unmakes, dissolves.

Theory as ingratitude: what attracted me most to Nietzsche (and I read him steadily for years, with some free-spirited scholars) was his nose for *ressentiment* and nihilism. Theory is one of the disguises by means of which nihilism goes about its work.

In a review, I remember Frank Kermode’s saying that the theorist was more interested in what they were doing than the text itself. Kermode was a scholar critic I admired: scholar critics *are* interested in literature. They may even evolve a practice-based theory in defence of literature. A.D. Nuttall did just this in my favourite critical book, where he introduces a theory of ‘soft formalism’ to deal with the ‘competitive cynicism’ of the theorists and their followers; and successfully defends our non-theoretic intuitions about character.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the conversation, I also said that I’m attracted towards phenomenology, and this attraction is explained in the essay on Modernism and Creative Writing (*L’Esprit Winter Quarterly 2*). It is the attention to practice, experience and the ‘life-world’ that matters to me in phenomenology, since it seems to understand the task of the novelist; both phenomenology and the novel are concerned with what Aristotle called *phronesis* (‘practical wisdom’).

A few touchstones:

‘It is in fact experience rather than theory that normally gets results.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

‘”But human life is far subtler than any of its models, even these ingenious German models. Do we need to study *theories*  of fear and anguish?”’ [[14]](#footnote-14)

[Of language] ‘much more like a sort of being than a means.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. **Is there such a thing as the quintessentially British novel? If so, what might it be?**

I doubt it! ‘British’ is a word whose sense changes over the centuries; mind you, the original British were the Welsh, and their poetry and tales go back long before the English found their voice.

But as the question gives me an opportunity to recommend Tobias Smollet’s *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), I’ll take it! A marvellous roving novel, and fine example of epistolary fiction.

If anyone fancied coming to the wars, I’d recommend my own *British Story: A Romance* (2014).

1. **Including and beyond your current project, what does the future hold for Michael Nath?**

More prophecy? It’s getting like the ancient world round here!

Answer: something – or nothing.

Practically, we carry on the struggle to publish *Talbot*, the C17th novella and the long story on Dirlewanger. Beyond this, the next project is a novel where laughter itself is being suppressed by the virtuous. Over the summer, I’ve written a couple of stories on laughter – a fair form of training for the longer work.

Around January 2014, believe it or not, I almost laughed myself to death.

My style, I hope I can develop – into something rougher, and looser: development is everything – isn’t it?

Thanks to *West Trade Review* for your stimulating and testing questions.

1. I’m adapting here an idea of Jane Smiley’s, *13 Ways of Looking at the Novel* (2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reading Dan White’s novel *Seachamber*, I’m interested in the comparison between Charlie and his character, Elizabeth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. DH Lawrence, ‘Why the Novel Matters’ (1936) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. D’you have this phrase in the US? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Regarding this theme, any interested reader might begin by consulting Edmund Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences & Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Section 44)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Marshall Brown, ‘The Classic is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wöllflin’s Art History’, *Critical Enquiry*, Vol 9, No2 (December 1982), 379-404. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Gay Science*, Sec 370 (1887) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Centenary of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. American readers may not be familiar with this fierce drink: *4* cans are enough to get you leathered. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Lou Salomé, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Man in his Works* (1894; trans and ed by Siegfried Mandel, 2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (1983) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A.D.Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* (1983) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *The Ethics of Aristotle*, trans J.A.K. Thomson, Ch6 (1953) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (1960) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)