

Conversation with Harry Mathews

Tamar Getter and Jonathan Wertheim-Soen, December 31 2008, Tel-Aviv – Key West

T.G

I strongly remember my first encounter with your books. I saluted their knock out to any old logic of writing. But the resulted skeletal "flatness", as in *Their Words for You*, *The Orchard*, or *Singular Pleasures*, has been long before my predilection in modernistic writing, so no *that* has been the great wonder. Rather the opposite hit me: as soon everything that was so successfully abolished; '*expression*', the *self*, psychology, 'depth', the 'truth', conflicts, morals, opinions and judgments, so called 'values', indeed all that goes into the making of 'drama' and 'romance', it all seemed to have been resurrected, it all "came back", sliding into your stories, I don't know how, almost matter of fact wise. I can't think of your ultra dry inexpressive texts *but* in terms of big drama occurring in the thick air of romance. You seem to hold a very strange position within the shepherds of the *Readymade* legacy, if you agree to this description, could you tell us about this strange contradictory effect?

Harry Mathews

The reappearance of what is typical of romance and typically absent from modernist writing may simply be the result of (a) "Don't think about George Washington's white horse!" and (b, more importantly) factors become present when they are left unnamed or undescribed. A writer pretends to be doing something eccentric, the reader wonders why isn't he doing what he might normally do, and that becomes what he *is* doing – the white horse gallops onto the stage.

I also realized a while ago that all my life I had as a writer denied acknowledging the romantic sexual passion that Wagner's *Ring* had inspired in me when I was ten and eleven; so that inevitably it is lurking out of sight but never out of mind.

J.W.S

In Kafka's story, *The Father's Worry* seems to consist in a twofold chance of being "outlived": on the one hand, by that which has no word to suite it; on the other by that which is but a word, *Odradek*, who is quaintly attributed for being capable of "producing laughter without lungs". While this could serve as a brilliant way to get traditional notions of 'depth' intrigued in the act of telling, what is it then that could possibly "outlive" it?

Harry Mathews

What can outlive something that does not exist?

J.W.S

You suggested once that *Tlooth* could be the way Chinese people would pronounce the word 'truth': Truth demands a detour; truth *is* a detour. It appears to me you never renounced the possibility of truth within your writing, what would be the prospects of such an event?

Harry Mathews

My feeling about truth is that it is what cannot possibly be told: there will always be something left unsaid. Truth may be present in my writings to the extent that the reader learns that there is *only* what is said and that (for this moment at least) nothing else need exist; that it's only a book.

T.G

Agreed: *Realism* is a set of literary conventions, but what of the aspiration to be a realist? To continue Jonathan: Has the writer a chance to tell a 'Truth', rise above the 'Tlooth' he puts on the page?

Harry Mathews

The writer cannot tell the truth, but he can create it – “do” it. What Mallarmé intended when he shifted the meaning of a work from content to effect – what it does, not what it says.

J.W.S

Some of your methods could be described as sheer operators of irony; in fact, your technical inventions could work as modules of irony even without having to be executed in a literary piece. Writing under the sanction of the "Mathews' algorithm", for instance, is always-already taking in to account the ironic ontological gap as presupposition for any written piece to come. However plausible it is to view such inventions as methods for producing irony, I often find them as ways to overcome its ubiquitous presence. If I suspect correctly, could it be said that, being the king of irony, you are also the most un-ironic writer (Tamar's finale-)?

Harry Mathews

I suppose a story such as “Soap Opera” is ironic: the title after all indicates that everything stated is an unacknowledged expression of self-pity. (But so many readers take it as a “true” view of our world!) But most of the time irony isn't the point, there's another kind of disparity – see above: words are not doing what they say they are. This of course is natural to most written language, but using the disparity consciously should cure it of its usual hypocrisy.

J.W.S

Irony is usually considered as a medium of knowledge. For instance, an ironic gap is often introduced between the diegetic occurrence of a story and its ex-diegetic perceiver, whose singular position would allow him to grasp whatever is being withheld from the characters involved. However, your novels, in great proximity to the work of poetry, seem to challenge this standard knowledgeable criterion of irony while shifting its effect: from the informative sphere to the "material" ground of sound, "from knowing the truth to knowing the *"tlooth"*, wherein knowledge is no longer translatable to terms of "information". Could you agree with such a description?

Harry Mathews

That's a most satisfying description. Poetry is the greatest literary art because the disjunction of effect from nominal meaning is taken to its extreme; and that is something I've tried to approach in writing prose fiction.

T.G

Where resides the *épaisseur* of writing, or: if reading is to ride on an appearance of something only in its being an appearance of nothing, (no mirror to Life) what is its *épaisseur* ?

Harry Mathews

The density of writing depends on its being entirely its own justification. Of course there is the question of its referring to the things it names, and how it makes them “real”: but that, it seems to me, has always to be a function of its own validity.

J.W.S

A schlemiel secret agent would usually count as being unable of "keeping up appearances". *My Life in CIA* however, suggests a "spy" whose real problem is being mistaken for a spy (a figure who's being mistaken for "herself"). You seem to have a very special approach towards the standard literary accounts of "appearance", can you tell about it?

Harry Mathews

I can't really answer this question, at least in a general way. In *My Life in CIA* what seems interesting to me is my (the narrator's) need to reconstruct a mask that has been thrust on me, in the hope that I can now control it. This turns out to be a forlorn hope.

T.G

You told me once that *My Life in CIA* is no **OuLiPuian** text, i.e. not written under any specific formal constraint, that it is a 'normal' (conventional) story. Does it tantamount to an event in which – say - Marcel Duchamp would suddenly take a furlough in oil painting? How did you come about such an artistic decision? And more in this vein: Being an ardent inventor and pursuer of method, you seem to remain skeptical about any technique, about *technique* as such. Is it true?

Harry Mathews

If I ever said that *My Life in CIA* is a conventional story, I was expressing myself stupidly. I've also since discovered that the work is much more Oulipian than I remembered. What I may have meant was that solving a technical problem of an Oulipian or similar nature wasn't my primary concern. As for technique in general ... but is there such a thing?

T.G

To young writers you often say 'give up expression, start to invent'. Are the forms we invent not the very meaning of expression? And choosing one form over another is it not *to express*, or to express *ourselves*? You describe the usefulness and the superiority of a materialist approach to forms in their being content wise indifferent, but are they really? Are effect and sense (or surface and substance) divorced?

Harry Mathews

The point of recommending invention is that expression and self-expression happen anyway. On the one hand, the view down the street expresses me perfectly; and on the other hand I can't write a sentence without having it be recognizably mine. I certainly agree that no form is distinct from its content – it often *is* the content (or an important part of it).

J.W.S

"The political" cannot be reduced to the number of times a novel addresses a concrete worldly event, or houses a reference to an actual happening. Some of your techniques create an ideal register of play, a novel composed solely out of its own "novelties". However this is possible, it would also seem idiotic to conceive of this machinery as a careless invention; for a whole set of representational ideologies this machinery is clearly a war-machine. Can you talk of a political thrust in your work; or rather, this is precisely where we should remain silent?

Harry Mathews

In general terms, genuine poetic writing undermines habitual patterns of thought and language: it is thus subversive in all societies. In my own small body of work, for instance, *Trial Impressions* reveals (among other things) the sexism buried in a seemingly tender and traditional expression of devotion and "constancy." But more broadly speaking, I don't think I've written anything that can be appropriated by the powers that be. (Not that they notice.) I'm not sure that qualifies what I do as a war-machine – it's not something I can decree.

J.W.S

"To speak about food or to eat words" – this Mallarmeian quasi-paradox seems to haunt many of your methods. It could also be thought of in terms of the problematics of translation; not so much as from one work to another (or from one language to another), but more fundamentally as a condition for the work itself; From the material bodily existence of words (not even spoken or read) to having them written down. Could there be a primal sense of translation, much closer to the *arche* of your writing than "writing"?

Harry Mathews

"A primal sense of translation": I cannot disagree, but I can no longer say such things. In so many courses and articles I've defended translation as the model of writing that I don't know any longer what I mean when I made such pronouncements. One thing that's sure is that when I've stopped writing for a while, translation is what I start with to relearn what writing means. I used to think that translation started with Babylonian shepherds "reading" the night sky, and that the night sky is the inexhaustible image of our desire for ultimate knowledge, and so the generator of language and thought. It may even be so, but I find it hard now to think in those terms. Perhaps I can say: it's what language can't express that I want to translate and know I never can.

T.G

Like many readers I too feel that all your stories involve some unattained quest; they are set to solve riddles, trifles? Mankind troubles make you chuckle, say some 'insulted' readers I met. This much ado about nothing marks the early books, *The Conversions*, *Tlooth*, and *The Sinking of the Odradek Staduim*. Later on it is about overcoming some existential crisis as in *The Journalist*, for instance. It is certainly so in *My Life in CIA* which is, I feel, the most farcical of all your previous stories of failure, ney - of mad, obscurely transparent panic, actually. It seems necessary that all those quests are not only absurd or preposterous to begin with, but that they are inherently idiotic, no fights for 'real' cause... For me this insistence on the daily, the overlooked panic of millions, including that of 'The' Writer/Spy... makes you a rare moralist, one of a species almost extinct, but indeed I met readers for whom this approach borders with decadence. If you'd tell them anything, what would it be?

Harry Mathews

I guess I would tell those readers that I'd hoped to transgress the borders of decadence. However, there's no denying that I'm a moralist: it's hard to be an American and escape that category. And what matters to moralists is ultimately the truth. And that's what I'm devoted to – as I said before, not to tell it, but to create objects that will let them, these benighted readers, recognize it when they see it.

T.G and J.W.S

You knew well Georges Bataille, and you translated to English his *Blue of Noon*. Please, tell us something about that translation work.

Harry Mathews

I never much liked Bataille except for this one book. Translating it was enthralling – I've been praised for the results, but the praise was mistaken. It's a "good" translation, but one that is radically flawed. From the very beginning, Bataille subverts his splendid sentences – for instance in the opening scene he refers to the *cage de l'ascenseur* as meaning the car of an elevator when its proper meaning is its shaft; and throughout the book virtually every sentence has something slightly "wrong" with it. These "mistakes" perfectly mirror and indeed execute the unease that permeates the narrative. I tried translating them as deftly as possible, and each deftness stuck out like a sore thumb. So I gave up. And no one noticed.

T.G and J.W.S

While the **OuLiPu** was still a secret society, Marcel Duchamp was its elected president. Please tell us a story about Duchamp.

Harry Mathews

This isn't a story about Duchamp, whom I knew before I was elected to the Oulipo. (By the way, Duchamp was never its president, and the Oulipo was never a "secret society.") He was nice as could be, but very boring.

T.G

OuLiPuian or not, your methods are almost always hidden; you keep yourself absolutely behind the scene. It is a very classical choice. Could you elaborate on this point?

Harry Mathews

This is a hard question. I might answer: I find what I write much more interesting than I am, and to have people see my writing instead of me brings me some relief.

T.G

You have often said there is no such thing as misinterpretation. What do mean?

Harry Mathews

If there is no correct interpretation, how can there be misinterpretation? In any case, every reader makes up what she reads as she reads it (or later).

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