‘Terminal Moraine at the End of the Glacier’: Interview with Will Self†

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AKC: Might we begin by you shedding some light on your obsessive compulsive order or your everythingitis for objects that need must populate the world of your writing. Rather than being a passing trend in your works, it has almost taken the form of a new aesthetic—which one suspects is not all that new, just rare.

† This interview was conducted in two parts, in January 2018, in London. The first part of the interview was published by *Writers in Conversation*, by the Flinders University, in February, 2018 <https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic/article/view/30/35>

This interview was conducted at The India Club restaurant, the Strand Continental Hotel, London. The restaurant has come under threat from developers, since the current freeholder of the site intends to redevelop the property, comprising the lounge, bar and restaurant building, into luxury hotel rooms. It was built in the 1960s, by the India League, as a monument to the postcolonial alliance between Britain and India. Since then, it has been frequented by officials of the Indian High Commission, and many Indian and British intellectuals, including Will Self. Most recently, the restaurant has been described as a ‘little slice of the subcontinent in the heart of the capital.’ See Martin Evans, ‘Future of India Club on London’s Strand under threat from developers,’ *The Telegraph*, December 1, 2017 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/02/future-india-club-londons-strand-threat-developers/> Accessed: 15/01/2018.
Will Self: Everythingitis really relates to a tendency in my fiction over the last ten years or so. It’s really to do with the modernist turn that I took in my writing. I see modernism as the appropriate naturalism of the twentieth-, and now, twenty-first-century. It seems to me that the conventional ways of constructing long full narrative prose are not fit for the purpose of conveying liquidity of experience today—I just don’t know how they can. One of the things that leads to everythingitis is when you think about the contents of a human psyche five years ago, let alone fifty years ago, you have to conclude that most of it is utterly ephemeral. So ephemeral, that taken out of context, it wouldn’t even be legible to you; you wouldn’t even know what that person was thinking about unless you had some magical way to understand the contents of their thought. So, at least in my prose, I have to do something paradoxical, which is, I have to include—as James Joyce did of course in Ulysses—allusions that readers can’t possibly follow immediately.

Then you have a paradox which is the emergence of bi-directional digital technology; the internet and the web, meaning that not only are those allusions easily found by a reader but a reader in theory could find them on the very platform that they are reading the text. It seems to me that my everythingitis is a symptom of—to use a favourite phrase of J.G. Ballard’s—the terminal moraine at the end of the glacier of the novel. I don’t know why all writers at the moment aren’t suffering from everythingitis, and the only reason they can’t do is because they are trapped in an old-fashioned way of viewing what the novel is and can do. My everythingitis is a symptom of…it’s my version of the kind of social media diseases that people are getting in response to the internet and web.
AKC: In the Indian pantheon there is a god called Shiva, who consumed poison so that other gods and lesser mortals could live…

Will Self: Creative destroyer! Maybe, that’s me, in the sense that the trilogy of novels that I had just completed is a literary praxis because it is enacting in its own form the impact of the technologies that in my view are marginalizing the novel any way. The literature itself becomes a kind of practical demonstration of the problem of fiction now.

AKC: Your first short story book, The Quantity Theory of Insanity was kissed and as has been described, by a very fine ‘baptism of caresses.’ It also won the Faber Memorial Prize in 1993. Your book Umbrella came exceedingly close to winning The Booker, for which it was shortlisted. Later Phone was shortlisted for The Goldsmith’s Prize. You’ve also won the Aga Khan prize for fiction and The Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize. Notwithstanding the accolades some all too treasurable you have received since your first work, twenty-five years ago, you seem to have rather elaborately indifferent opinions on literary awards. Why is that so?

Will Self: I think that the reliance on literary awards is a part of the increased commoditization of fiction in what is a declining market. I think it’s more so a function of the loss of the curators in culture, the loss of the importance of editors, the loss of the importance of critics, you can even see it as a kind of echo of the kind of Brexiters’ argument, fed up with experts. Why is it that people are more prepared to read a book because it’s won a prize than because it is being recommended by a respected critic, who’s critical judgements
they have respected in the past? In other words, why is it that these gatekeepers have been downgraded with the prizes that are seen as so significant? I don’t argue that it is even because at some weird level, the reading public believes in the goddess Fortuna more than they believe in the goddess Athena.

They may see the idea of literary success as being on a par with winning the lottery. But it’s also part of this kind of democratization of taste and the loss of economical and the literary world becoming…the paradigm now for a successful book is a book that’s got lots of likes on Amazon. It’s this kind of democratization of taste and in line with it. In England we have all these crazy writing programmes where people are even writing by committee in a way because they are getting constant feedback. That’s my antipathy towards the prize system. I think it’s part of a… it’s driven by a need in the publishing industry to have some means of valorising and selling work, without that valorisation being based on real literary judgement. Thence comes my opposition to it. It is always kind of arbitrary in a prize committee, there’s a lot of nepotism that operates there, and even when those factors aren’t in play because people who sit on literary prize committees are…you have probably done it yourself…I certainly haven’t or I’ve got fed up with it. It’s everybody’s second choice that wins anyway and not people’s strongly felt first choice. If you look back over prize lists, take the Booker for example, I would say there’s only been one or two Booker winners since the Second World War, where you could incontestably say that that was a deserving novel, that it’s the novel that’s lasted or is seemed to be influential.

AKC: What you’re saying is one of bleaker manifestations of how the author is truly dead, today—in the sense that the written
or published text is also practically in euthanasia. Here, Roland Barthes’ theory of the author being dead manifests in an entirely different way. The author has become much more present, a simulation of his book and those of others. In fact, the author and his dynamic and digressional biography is the text today given how important it is for literary discussions or even political discussions to feature and cast the author centre-stage. Are these perhaps the only two permutations literature or writing is meant to have, the alternating deaths of the text and the author and their alternate re-reincarnations or do you foresee more possibilities?

Will Self: No, I think this is it…I’m not quite so sure what else. I think writers of fiction in the English speaking world are losing authority as public commentators by the day, relentlessly. I’ve got a doctoral student working on a thesis on Norman Mailer at the moment. Think of the kind of status according to writers like Mailer in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and their significance in public debate because they were novelists not because they were political commentators—they were significant because they were novelists. That’s not the case anymore, surely. It’s more like the novelists are having to turn themselves into members of the commentariat, to maintain their presence in the public sphere, and they retain a little bit of their cache for that purpose.

The other captivating tendency is the death of the text…perhaps, not so much the absolute death of text but the transliteration or the transmogrification of the text into a kind of digital smear. I think that’s ineluctable, something that’s not going to change again. What you find in the English speaking world—the literary world particularly here in Britain—is the enormous support for events…author-based events. Hundreds of literary festivals, events under the
auspices of municipalities or educational institutions, that seem to me to be a direct privileging of the physical presence of the writer over the text which is now accessible anyway. The only thing again has to do with commoditization, the only thing that has value you can sell tickets for are the body of the writer being in a given place, hence the events.

I don’t think this is part of a dialectic disconnection to carry on in that way. I think this is again the end of a literary tradition, whence the text isn’t coming back—not in the older way. I don’t think in the future anybody would ever be listened to again in a public arena because they’re a novelist. For instance, the analogy would be easel painting or classical music. Nobody would listen to people—who are dead now—like Peter Maxwell or Davids to talk about politics because they a were great artists.

AKC: What characters or places in your works have been most memorable to you? Can you take us through the journey of their fictional lives? How they came to be conceived and fleshed out, or perhaps even a place?

Will Self: Since we are sitting here…one of the passages I most enjoyed writing in Umbrella—and the one the one that I read aloud most frequently—is a scene in which the protagonist is accompanied by a father on a journey into central London from their home in Fulham. They come across Whitehall, on a horse drawn omnibus. It’s about 1904. They’d just come along The Strand—where we are sitting now, we are sitting at the bottom of what’s called the Kingsway Axial Development, which is Kingsway the big road that goes up from beyond those buildings up to the north to Hulbert, and this all which semi-circled just here.
Those were being built at that time in which the passage is set. In this scene in the novel you actually see the enormous infrastructural works that are created, and you see there are war texts through Covent Garden and through the remains of what was called The Rookerie, a slum district, which was called Little Dublin; which is just where we’re sitting now.

There were two long streets which passed through this slum; one of which is called Hollywell Street, which was the sight of Edwardian London’s pornographic trade. Recreating all of that—the kind of rebuilding of the city and the elimination of these really very ancient areas—was an enormously exciting kind of retroactive piece of psychogeography; to create it and make it feel lived and felt. I very much enjoyed that, I thought a lot of the…in the trilogy, the family that we meet, various generations of it is based on my own family. One side of my own family, at least. Investigating all of those characters was in a way bringing me closer to the felt history of my own family in the city.

AKC: What with his pipe and tweed jacket, Will Self also personifies London, in many ways—a very different London perhaps—for millions of people outside Britain. London is often determined by its canonical texts and characters that the colonial experience shaped in other countries. Some very common examples are William Blake, John Keats, Percy Shelly, Charles Dickens; it’s a shame to lose one of my favourites Wilkie Collins from that list because he’s not all that popular or well known, thanks to Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, not to forget Watson. Then there’s T.S. Eliot, and to some extent Bertram Wooster and Jeeves, and others, from that age. And most recently, Downton Abbey.

Major broadcasting networks of Britain have also ensured from time to time that these characters stay virtually alive in people’s
imagination of London. It is as if the British as well as people from other parts of the world owe that fictional London a recurring debt, quite literally nowadays through BBC iPlayer or Netflix, Amazon and so on. Are any of these pristine and somewhat upper class figments in any way relevant to your work and thoughts today? Do you find any possibility of a balance of the class angle in these works, a sort of disruption from within the text, of the monopoly of the more influential characters in the universe of any of these literary characters or litterateurs? I am of course also referring to your antipathy—if I may use a strong word—towards the heritage novel, which is the novel which allows people to be away from worries and social realities, where time absolutely adheres to aspic.

Will Self: I certainly think if you look in the past there is a class-spell to writings about London. Normally it articulates itself around interiors as much as exteriors. It constructs history. The detective novel is really a history of urban interiors and why a murder is a pretext for drawing a floor plan. The heritage novel is very typical of the English. The English love the euchronic rather than the utopic. Merry England is an evocation of a time when social relations were happily organic and everybody was merry—a time that never really existed. Think about the English sensibility and even the wider British imperial sensibility or you want to think about how long lived that British imperial idea is, considering that Britain lost its colonies 70 years ago, and the idea of people still living there…it’s because of the power that the euchronic has on the English imagination and you certainly see it in that kind of writing. But it doesn’t interest me at all. To me it is performative and it is class-bound. It can’t possibly get in touch with the reality of the city then or now.
Just to give you one example, a lot of what drove of the kind of sensibility of the way I tried to write *Umbrella*, came from Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss*. There’s an early scene in it where London asks Thomas Cook, the travel agent, to conduct a tour of London’s East End for him. That was in 1902. The travel agent said it was too dangerous, that they will send him to the darkest parts of Africa, to India, but they won’t send him to East London. So London goes himself. I’m sure George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* was majorly inspired by *The People of the Abyss*, but I have never seen it referred to by Orwell or anyone else. London does what Orwell does at the beginning of the ‘London’ section in *Down and Out*. He goes and sells his clothes and buys cheap working man’s clothes and early in the text he’s queuing up for what’s called the *Spink*, the casual ward which was a very cheap hostel for down and out people; for beggars really. He’s talking to workmen, working class men in the queue, and he says in the text, they used a nasty epithet. The nastiest epithet there is, and the one that cockneys apply to everything, as a noun, as a verb, as an adjective. Some of you become aware that the men he’s talking to are going ‘you’re fuckin’ this,’ ‘you’re fuckin’ that,’ ‘fuck this,’ or ‘fuck that.’ This is how they still talk, the working class in London. It’s not just the word ‘fuck,’ but the entire linguistic ecology that the written English of the period could not represent. If you think about the fact that you can’t write the word ‘fuck,’ there are a lot of other words you can’t write. If you can’t write the sentence, ‘we’d a fuckin’ good lunch at the fuckin’ India Club,’ then you cannot evoke the social reality. So, suddenly it occurs to you that even the writing of the past was not about the past.
AKC: It essentially appears to me that if and when you visit a place like India, in a school or a college in India and you see the textbooks there, or the entertainment curriculum of people who are interested in British culture, you probably wouldn’t be able to recognize the London that they imagine.

Will Self: Probably not, but it would be fascinating to look at the way the city is represented from abroad…

AKC: I certainly don’t think it would fascinate you…

Will Self: I would imagine, it’s been turned into a set of workable icons of what goes into one another…

Will Self is a renowned British author, cultural thinker, journalist, broadcaster, and psychogeographer. He has authored ten novels, most recently *Shark* (2014) and *Phone* (2017); five collections of shorter fiction, and several volumes of nonfiction, most recently *The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Prawn Cracker* (2012). Self has been translated into over 20 languages. His novel *Umbrella* (2012) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. He has frequently published in many periodicals including *The Guardian*, *Harper’s*, the *New York Times*, the *New Statesman*, and *London Review of Books*. He is a regular presenter or panelist on BBC television shows and BBC Radio 4. His first book of short fiction, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991) won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. He won the Agha Khan Prize for Fiction for *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (1998), and the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for Comic Fiction for *The Butt* (2008). In 2007, M. Hunter Hayes published *Understanding Will Self* on the subject of his life and work. Self is Professor of Contemporary Thought at Brunel University, London.