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An Interview with Professor John Bowen

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An Interview with Professor John Bowen¹

Margarita Maira

We had the pleasure of meeting Professor John Bowen for a chat about Dickens exclusively for *White Rabbit: ESLA*. This is how the conversation went.

Margarita Maira: I'd like to start with Dickens's 200th birthday. It has been widely celebrated everywhere in the world, it has been an international event. I wanted to know what you think about it, what were the highlights? What do you think was missing? And also, I know that you have been personally involved in it. What have you done to participate?

John Bowen: It's been very exciting and the sheer scale of it has been astonishing, with events not just in England or in Europe but throughout the world. When Dickens was quite a young author it was predicted that he'd go up like a rocket and down like a stick, and that clearly hasn't happened: he's still in print and still finding new readers two hundred years since he was born. What's been most exciting? The new BBC television adaptations of *Great Expectations* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* have been very interesting; the new biographies by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Claire Tomalin have made us think again about his life in fresh ways. But I think there's a strong sense that there are still lots ahead of us to find out and understand, particularly in the way that people are starting now to map the phenomenon of global Dickens. He was translated very early, he appeals to readers all over the world and criticism has probably been rather slow to catch up with that. I think

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now people are getting a sense of what a towering figure he is for the whole of modern world literature.

MM: And what about your own involvement, what have you been doing?

JB: I've had a lot of fun this year.

MM: I'm sure you have!

JB: So I've been to lots of conferences in many different countries and spoken to lots of different audiences. One of the great pleasures has been talking to non-academic audiences and the sense you get everywhere is of this astonishing popular appeal. So people might not have read very much of his work but they know about him, or have seen television or film adaptations, and often feel very warmly about him, that he seems somehow to speak to things that are still current and important for them. One of the most interesting events was at Buckingham Palace where the Queen held a big celebration, a party for Dickens. Of course he was a republican, probably, and certainly an anti-aristocratic and radical thinker so it's both strange and nice to see him being celebrated right at the heart of the British establishment. And so many people, not just academics like me, but lots of actors and famous literary figures turned out to show their feeling for Dickens.

MM: It sounds very good!

JB: It was lots of fun.

MM: I'm sure it was great. Do you find there's anything you would have liked, like a certain manifestation or celebration for Dickens that you feel hasn't happened and it should have?

JB: That's a good question. I think sometimes what can get lost is the sheer pleasure of reading him. And, you know, one thing you do in academic context is you look very closely at the power of the language and in the celebrations, which are completely justified, often the literary nature of him can get a little lost. People get very interested in his life, or adaptations of his work and the whole phenomenon of Dickens, which is very interesting, but those quiet reflective moments when you read Dickens tend to get lost. The novelist Graham Greene speaks about "the delicate and exact poetic cadences, the *music of memory*" in *David Copperfield*. And people often think of Dickens as a

rather loud, noisy and exciting writer but there's also that more subtle and contemplative side which is easy to lose sight of in the all the brouhaha.

MM: You mentioned now how it's a global phenomenon and how he was translated from very early. He has been translated to all languages and people everywhere in the world are reading him but there's a special relationship with the text that of course, happens just in English, because he wrote in English and every word he used he picked it out, specifically. How do you feel about Dickens being translated, do you think that something is lost? Do you think it's actually possible to convey that into another language?

JB: (chuckles) Well, I don't know because I never read Dickens except in English, so I don't know. But I think in a way translation is always there with Dickens so that, as early as *Pickwick*, there's a very funny scene where Mr. Pickwick meets a Russian Count called Smorltork who keeps getting his name wrong and calls him "Pig Vig" or "Big Vig" or "Peek Weeks" and all sorts of silly things. So Dickens is thinking about translation right from the start. He himself speaks pretty good French and pretty good Italian, he spends a year in Italy, he spends a lot of time in France, spends time in Switzerland, he goes to America, he thinks about going to Australia, so he's very interested in cross-cultural experiences. And in *Tale of Two Cities* or *Little Dorrit*, at the core of those books, is the question of translation not just between languages but also between different cultures. So yes, of course you'd say to anybody, if you can read it in English, that's the thing to do. But at the same time he clearly speaks to things in the human situation or in the modern world that exist for people in the most radically diverse societies. Cultures and languages, and that can only be a good thing. It's true, of course, that if you're what's called a native English speaker then, in some ways, Dickens is easier. But even that is a process of translation too in that one reason we have editions with footnotes is because lots of the vocabulary and the idiom has changed over the years, so for a native speaker born a hundred or a hundred and fifty or more years after Dickens, there's an act of translation going on. For me, any reading is always also an act of translation. Of course there are more or less radical translations that you have to undertake depending on what your language and place and time are, but I don't think we should be afraid of that. In a way, it just means that there are many more Dickenses, many more translations, many more idioms of Dickens, many more insights into him. In a way critics too are translators of Dickens in their reinterpretations of him.

MM: Do you think it actually adds some richness to it?

JB: Yes, I think it does. And many contemporary authors are influenced by Dickens or borrow from him or get ideas from him then, and they too are carrying out acts of translation and interpretation and that seems to me absolutely what major authors do in the world. They call out to readers to make them their own. It's an absolutely wonderful and positive thing that Dickens is such a global phenomenon and that may be because he saw a set of historical developments in the nineteenth century that were happening in Britain for the first time - industrialization and urbanization most obviously - and he's there like a kind of 'special correspondent for posterity', which is what Walter Bagehot calls him. Those processes have happened in many countries in the world since then and Dickens has helped people understand and live through the extraordinary transformations of modernity. Salman Rushdie, the novelist, recently said that when he was growing up in Bombay he thought of Dickens as an Indian novelist because what Dickens described seemed so close to the kinds of changes that Rushdie was seeing around him at the time, even though he came from such a different culture. That's a very common feeling. Lots of Americans seem to think that Dickens was an American writer in many ways, and feel a particular attachment to him.

MM: He can speak to people anywhere in the world.

JB: Yes, there's a big Dickens fellowship with branches all over Europe and America, in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India and South America. And there are Dickens readers throughout the world. There don't seem to be any limits to it.

MM: Well, that is a consolation, because coming from a Spanish speaking country there is always that issue. We always think about it in terms of Shakespeare who is *the* big English writer, and then Dickens, the ones in the canon that they teach in school. There's always that reminder: "it was written in English first" so it's good to know it still works to some level. Although, of course, other things are lost.

JB: It's partly that his characters often have a kind of archetypal or mythical quality. Some of the great figures he creates like Scrooge or Micawber seem to be so big that they can speak to you even when you don't know the particular idiom out of which they're coming, and Dickens's plots similarly seem to have a kind of archetypal power so that readily can be translated into film or theatre or television series. The power of the narrative still seems to come through.

MM: Concerning that, the question of women in Dickens, you mentioned Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, studies like his (*Becoming Dickens*) have revealed that apparently what has been thought of Dickens in relation to women so far has not been so accurate and that he wasn't as conventional as people tended to think before. There was a belief that they were conventional archetypes only there in function of and in relation to the male characters in the novels. Do you agree with that?

JB: It's complicated. I think sometimes when people say that Dickens is not very good at portraying women what they often focus on is the young middle- or upper-class women characters of a marriageable age, say between 18 and 30, and it's true. If you go to Jane Austen or to George Eliot or to Charlotte Bronte you'll have much more complex and subtle accounts of what it's like to be that kind of young woman. Dickens does tend to make them rather stereotypical and boring, often very idealized. But where he is much stronger is in the sheer variety of different women that he creates so that Mrs. Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit* for example is a drunken old working-class nurse and she's a huge Falstaffian sized character. Betsey Trotwood in *David Copperfield* is a similarly fascinating and powerful older woman. And there are many of those. He's often much better at working-class women or older women and he gives them linguistic and psychological complexities that many authors don't. I think as he develops as a writer he gets more complicated and one of the things that people have been interested in recent years have been the big changes that happened in his life when he broke up his marriage and began a relationship with a young actress called Ellen Ternan. Then the younger women characters get more complicated. Bella Wilfer, for example, in *Our Mutual Friend* is a richer and more interesting character than many of the earlier ones. But even in *Little Dorrit*, the figure of Miss Wade is an extraordinarily rich psychological portrait of someone who is in a very complex self-hating, self-defeating mode. People for quite a while were very dismissive of Dickens's treatment of women but in recent years, feminist criticism in particular has been extraordinarily important in making us think about these questions again. A lot of those questions come to centre on the way that people feel about Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, because that's the only time Dickens narrates at length as a young woman. Often people used to dismiss her as being too idealized, too perfect: Charlotte Bronte described her as 'weak and twaddling'. But there have been some very interesting feminist accounts by Caroline Dever and Hilary Schor and others which see her as a much more conflicted, complex and weird, almost uncanny, narrator. So when you get close to the text you can see, within the constraints of Victorian ideology, which can be sometimes very constraining, more complexity than traditionally people thought Dickens had.

MM: You mentioned Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen and George Eliot. Do you think that there's a barrier because he was obviously a man and not a woman? That he couldn't really understand them? As you said his relationship with women was difficult, to say the least. Do you think that came through?

JB: Famously, his daughter Katie said "my father didn't understand women", which is pretty damning. At the same time, although there's no direct evidence that he ever read Charlotte Bronte, I can't believe that he didn't. And my sense is that he tried to learn from her. It's hard to imagine Esther in *Bleak House* without Jane Eyre behind her. So I think there is a sense that he wants to learn, and to give his women characters a greater psychological complexity than they had before. I don't think he completely succeeds. You sometimes feel with Dickens that he shouldn't be allowed near any young women, because he so idealizes them. The way he characterizes people is often from understanding their idiom, manner and gesture, from the outside as it were, and whereas for his male characters that's often very revealing of inner states, it's less so for some of the women. I think he struggles to give virtuous young women much psychological complexity. That's partly because the constraints of the time made it is very hard to give young women any active desire, any active sexuality or any ability to make mistakes or get things wrong. It's hard to write a novel if your main female characters can't make serious mistakes or express desires. In that sense he is quite closely constrained by the fact that he wanted to write for a family audience.

MM: And lastly, I'm really interested in your current research that you are doing on Wilkie Collins and Dickens and their relationship, how they worked together. What are you doing, what have your discoveries been?

JB: I wrote a book on early Dickens and now I'm much more interested in the second half of his career. One of the things that is most distinctive about that period is that he has a very close relationship with Wilkie Collins, who is younger than he is. Not only does Dickens support him in various ways and give him opportunities but he also collaborates with him and that I think is pretty rare. You tend to think of authors in a kind of romantic way as being these great creative geniuses toiling on their own, whereas Dickens is very interested in collaboration, in working with people, in theatre companies but also with Collins and a few other authors in writing together. The project is to look at both the things that they write individually at the time that they're close but also particularly the Christmas stories and the other writings that they work on together. They don't just write

collaboratively but often write about the process of collaboration too, with what it means to work together with somebody.

MM: Which is what you're doing, right?

JB: Exactly. And there are some very interesting and different ways that they do that. I think that for Dickens it often frees him up a bit, so that if you can say about a piece of writing that it's collaboratively written in a way it frees you from taking responsibility for it and that allows you to do different kinds of things, more experimental things in a way. So that Dickens is a great monument of English literature but it's also important for us to think of him as a creative and surprising author who experiments. He's constantly reinventing himself and one of the ways in which he reinvents himself is through all this collaborative fiction.

MM: So you would say it's more him not being constrained rather than Collins being an influence.

JB: Yes. Some accounts of that relationship see Dickens as rather constraining of Collins, Dickens as rather conservative and Collins as more radical. I don't see it like that. I think it's a more equal relationship and that it enables them to do different kinds of things, that they can't do, as it were, under their own name. And of course, to start a story and then hand it over to someone else is quite a big gesture, and implies a lot of confidence between the two.

MM: And was that always their method? Because I know, for example, that "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners" was written like that: first Dickens, and then Collins, and the Dickens again. But with the plays and other things did they do that?

JB: It varies a lot. It depends on where they are. Dickens writes in one letter about them sitting at desks next to each other, so clearly that's a very close collaboration. At other times Dickens would write his bit and then send it off to Collins. Sometimes clearly they worked out a plan but when one of them gets writing and the plan seems to change. So in one manuscript there are two different versions of a particular scene: Collins writes one version to fit the plan, presumably, and then Dickens takes the story in a different direction so Collins has to write a different version. I think they tried all sort of different ways of collaborating.

MM: Even within that collaboration they were experimental.

JB: Yes, absolutely. For *The Frozen Deep*, Collins writes the play but then Dickens intervenes quite strongly in it. Then Collins writes it up as a story and revises it, putting back some things that Dickens had cut out and so forth. So it's very interesting to watch the process of collaboration because it takes you into the process of creativity. You can see the creative choices that they're making.