



**ART AND THE UNSEEN PATTERN IN THE UNIVERSE.
AN INTERVIEW WITH D.M.THOMAS**

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Rosa González - When writing a novel, are you specially concerned with any particular aspect: the formal design, the creation of character, the telling of a good story... What are your priorities?

D.M.Thomas - Well, obviously, telling a good story must be the basis of it, but there are other factors which are equally important. I find it necessary at first to find some image that interests me and excites me, and that I think I can expand upon, like the image of the hotel by a lake in *The White Hotel*, although in that book there was another image which is equally important: the train journey; each of the sections begins with that, very much like a poem. I have to have this sort of visual thing, to start to focus my imagination on, some kind of metaphor, like a sort of metaphysical image where contradictory things somehow come together and coalesce. Again, to take the *The White Hotel*, where I think I was most richly blessed by the muse, it would be the metaphor of the imagined horror of a Freudian patient, connecting with the real horror of a holocaust which she would have to endure, as so many others of the Jews, twenty years later. But the form is also important. In a poem you set yourself limitations and disciplines, there is perhaps a form to choose, a sonnet or some kind of metrical pattern and that's very necessary to work within, as a painter has the particular size of the canvas and a particular medium, and the problem with the novel is that it can be a loose baggy monster, as someone described it, and I hate that, I hate feeling along in the dark in a loose baggy monster, and I have to find some way, some sort of form which will limit the options and therefore allow my imagination, paradoxically, to roam freer. Very

important in that is finding a voice, or voices, as for example in my first novel, *Birthstone*, I chose the voice of a woman, a kind of emotional middle-aged spinster, and if you choose a voice that means you are choosing a personality. That again limits what you can do and at the same time, as with rhyme in poetry it can stimulate your imagination. So, there are many aspects which all kind of jangle around in your head together, things that must happen, but obviously, the absolute basis is and must be a story that people want to start and want to go into.

R.G. - You have compared *Birthstone*, the first novel you wrote, although it was published after *The Flute Player*, to an over-flavoured, indigestible dish, on account of the many ingredients you crammed into it, because of the fear you wouldn't have enough material to stretch across 200 pages. Now, all your novels are roughly of the same length. Is it just a coincidence, or do you think this is the ideal length?

D.M.T - Well, I suppose the ideal length would be about 250 pages, but certain laziness comes into this, I don't fancy writing a blockbuster novel of 500 pages. I suppose I still see myself not so much as a sprinter as I once was with a poem, but as a kind of middle-distance runner -800 metres or a mile- and I just don't fancy running marathons, so that's why I tend to write fairly short novels. Yes, I think that for that kind of huge novel you need certain qualities that I don't possess, like the ability to explore characters very minutely and to explore the texture of life very minutely and that a) I can't do and b) it doesn't really interest me, so, I come back to what I first said about expanding on a metaphor, and that has a certain limited length, it's like the pebble being thrown into a pool, it is still only a pool, you can't throw a pebble into the sea and have it expand.

R.G. - Do you plan your novels carefully or do you rather improvise like many of your characters do?

D.M.T - Yes, I do tend to improvise. Certainly when I started *Birthstone*, my first novel, I simply had no idea how it would develop, and that's why I started cramming these various ingredients in, like having my character being a multiple personality, having people crawl through a birthstone in Cornwall which would heal their sickness, or in one case actually, harm the man -his mother becomes younger as he becomes older- in short, to interweave ideas: fetishism, stones of Cornwall... That was where I was terrified of not knowing where I was going. I think later on I lost some of the terror although not all of it, and was content just to, as long as I had some of these ingredients, like the basic image I talked about, to let myself go. Further, it

is, for all that, pleasant if you know roughly how a novel is going to end. Again with *The White Hotel*, I did know that it would end with Babi Yar, although in fact the novel goes a bit beyond that, but I knew the beginning and the end, so it was a matter of filling it in. So, it does help to have a concept of how it goes, but I think I do need the stimulation of not having it all planned out; my ideal, I suppose, is what Pushkin did in Eugene Onegin, writing a free novel, one that can take you by surprise as you go along.

R.G. - You have said that you are not interested in writing the typical English novel, and in fact your work is highly innovationist, with its exploitation of stylistic devices, its reflection on the nature of the creative process, as well as the use of literary parody, typical of postmodern novels. But on the other hand, because of the many references to historical characters and events, the mimetic or realistic element is also very strong in your work. There is both innovation and tradition; how do you account for these two different impulses?

D.M.T - Well, I'm not happy writing pure fiction. There is probably a certain element of puritanism in my nature, for I like to deal with basic reality. I like fantasy to be used in the service of reality, and therefore I wouldn't be happy writing, you know, *Lord of the Rings* or something like that. I'm intensely preoccupied with the history of our century and I suppose all of my novels, except for *Birthstone* have been about that, they are just explorations of history, of modern history and therefore there are certain strong realistic elements. It also is a fact that I don't like boring myself, if I bore myself I bore my reader, and so I usually switch after a while from one tone to another, if I have been realistic for a time I get bored of being realistic and I want to launch out into fantasy, but after a while I get bored and so I bring it back to realism again.

R.G. - In the first paragraph of your recent memoir *Memories and Hallucinations* you state that "art is the Oedipal crossroads where dreams, love and death meet" and also that art terrifies you. Can you expand on this idea?

D.M.T - I think it is part of the effect of being a full-time writer that it inevitably becomes all embracing, all inclusive, and your mind becomes constantly preoccupied with art. When I wrote this I was struggling with the problem of both living my life and also being an artist and trying to find somewhere separate. I think this is very important. I didn't have the problem when I was a teacher, because there was a part of my life which was just being a teacher and I could forget for a while about being a writer; a poet like William Thomas Williams, who was also a doctor, could forget all about his

art when he was diagnosing a flu, but if you are a full-time writer you're always in that self-conscious mode, so that it can become very incestuous; if I had a character who was flying from Europe to America, as I do in *Ararat* with Surkov, around the time I myself would be flying from Europe to America, and if I contemplated having something nasty happening to him like a plane crash, I was terrified that art would imitate life and I would have a plane crash, so the whole thing was getting very mixed up in my mind, and I did feel that it was very dangerous.

R.G. - Your novel *The White Hotel* has been widely acclaimed but is has also been controversial...

D.M.T - Mightily hated...

R.G. - Criticism has centred mainly round the presence of violence and supposed pornography -or at least eroticism- in your work. Does criticism, and especially negative reviews, affect your writing?

D.M.T - Well, I think it does affect it, I try not to let it do so, I try not to take very much notice either of good or bad reviews, and in fact, after reading the first two reviews of a novel, I actually don't read most of them. I think you have to just go on in your own way, and no review ought to tell you how to write, but if you are aware that a book has had a strong condemnation, I think it does undermine your confidence and that is bad; it depends on whether you think it is fair or unfair, whether the review is serious and well thought out or not. I probably had most unpleasant reaction, not from *The White Hotel*, where most of the reviews were commendatory but from *Memories and Hallucinations*, which you have just mentioned, which had quite a lot of horrid reviews in England, some in America, because they seemed to be reviewing me rather than my book, they didn't say anything about how it was written, whether it was well or badly written, or what my purpose was in writing it, which was to try and show how memories can flash across periods of time and not work chronologically, so that your life is also following a different pattern from the one you are living at any day. Critics didn't take any notice of that, they were shocked that I had admitted having had affairs as though I had admitted being in a nazi death camp; that hurt because I thought it was very unjust.

R.G. - Your work has also been accused of plagiarism. Is Surkov's statement "all art is collaboration" in *Ararat* an attempt to answer this accusation?

D.M.T - It wasn't conscious, in fact I think I wrote this before the controversy over several pages in *The White Hotel* broke, but yes, it does answer it in a way. We are all part of the great stream, and in most ages of literature this has been absolutely accepted: in the eighteenth century it was accepted that you would be strongly influenced and could quote from the classics, and Pushkin was very aware that he was influenced by Byron. I think in poetry this still applies, there is a tradition in poetry of allusion and hidden quotations. Somehow it hasn't worked, it hasn't reached that point in the novel; if a novel had as much allusion and quotation in proportion as *The Waste Land* has, it would be absolutely savaged. Maybe it is because the novel developed in an age of capitalistic expansion and became tied up with this idea of property -that your novel is your property- in a way that the poem isn't so much. When I turned to the novel I was very consciously influenced by poetry: in my own mind I was still writing a poem, a long poem, a narrative poem, and it seemed to be quite natural to carry over with some of these techniques into the novel. I had my own morality about this: if something was documentary, an eyewitness account could be used; I was writing about history and if there was a historical testimony about Babi Yar, or the Armenian holocaust, this was usable. To have used a work of fiction in that way would obviously have been inappropriate and not right, but documentary sources, if you are writing about history, are fine. I was astonished by the amount of indignation, as though in a novel every word has to be out of the writer's own mind, which becomes absurd -it would mean that a novel by Jackie Collins or Barbara Cartland was considered original even though it's mostly cliché, whereas a work like *The Waste Land* isn't original because there are quotations from so many authors.

R.G. - Anyway, wouldn't you say in your case it isn't so much a question of plagiarism as of allusion and parody?

D.M.T - It is of course. Plagiarism is unacknowledged borrowing and my sources were acknowledged, so that charge didn't stick. But there are still people who think it is somehow wrong that I have used an eye-witness account and fused it into my fiction; I disagree with them, but that is a matter of choice.

R.G. - The O'Reilly episode in *Swallow* showed your gift for humour, which you exploited later in *Summit*. Have you considered continuing this humorous vein?

D.M.T - Well, yes, it's really a part of my idea that the novel ought to be able to embrace all kinds of genres, and tones, it is part of this "not boring myself".

I greatly admire Chekov, who could both make you weep and laugh virtually at the same moment, and in my novels there is verse, fiction, prose, there is drama -in a section of *Sphinx*- there is autobiography -part of *Swallow*- I like to mix up, to be humorous and then later be serious, you know, this is the way I like to be, so in my most recent novel *Lying Together* there is the same mixture. There is an episode in *Lying Together* which I suppose does have echoes of those that you have mentioned, in which Russian poets turn up at a conference of funeral directors by mistake, so there is a total misunderstanding as the Russians are talking about art and the funeral directors about funerals and for example one of the funeral directors says "Is cremation obligatory in Russia?" and Rozanov doesn't understand and then someone painstakingly interprets it as "is it necessary to burn corpses in Russia?" and he says "Ah yes, and there are many many corpses in Russia, and there must be a great fire"; you know, he is speaking metaphorically, and they say "yes it must be, it is a big country". I like playing, I like having fun.

R.G. - One of your recurrent motifs seems to be the East-West divide. Is this one of your main preoccupations?

D.M.T - Yes, it is. I am fascinated by the way Russia presents, or has presented such horror, and yet along with that and seemingly dependent on it, the great beauty and lyricism of marvellous writers, and the way artists are respected and the artists are revered if they are genuine in Russia, in the way they are not in the West, where it doesn't much matter what you write. I mean, OK, I can get criticised but I am not to be killed for it, although of course, with the Rushdie affair you suddenly get, not the East but the Middle-East bringing about that fierceness into it, and into our comfortable writing scene and creating a horror of its own. But also in these particular books, *Russian Nights*, there is a metaphor at work because the hard East and the soft West are also reflected in the personal lives of the Russian poets, where there is a kind of trio set up, a wife, a mistress and so on, so that is trying to work those two things together.

R.G. - Another recurrent and important element in your work is the female figure. You have said that you decided to be a poet, or that you knew you would be a poet, after seeing a girl, who had had an accident, lying on the pavement. Moreover, many of your main characters and narrators are women, and there is also your almost obsessive interest in female breasts.

D.M.T - I suppose partly out of being a shy youth in a pretty inhibited environment made me feel a kind of forbidden excitement about the female

shape, and there is still that slight feeling that it's forbidden, a taboo to enter a woman; there is also the feeling that I had that a woman thinks in a more intuitive and a more magic or more poetic way, and so I enjoy for example writing in a female voice for that reason, for it helps along this process of improvisation. A great example is Molly Bloom's soliloquy in *Ulysses*, wonderful flow of images without logical connection, but an inward connection. And the breast... I think breasts are beautiful, it is primarily a sense of giving and overflowing.

R.G. - How do you decide on the titles of your novels? Some, like *Summit* and *The White Hotel* are both relevant and obvious choices, but others, like *Swallow* are more obscure.

D.M.T - The answer is with great difficulty, usually. The title either can come with tremendous ease even before you start, and that happened with *The White Hotel*, I knew it was going to be called *The White Hotel*, it couldn't have been called anything else. *Birthstone* was fairly obvious, as soon as I had this image of the stone in Cornwall. *The Flute Player* was difficult, it wasn't until I had finished the novel that I decided to make my character learn the flute and it seemed obvious then that she was this sort of muse figure who cherished people's writing, remembered it, and in part inspired it, and therefore the traditional image of the muse as someone who plays the flute. *Ararat* was a late thought. As to *Swallow*, I think that's rather a good title, because there is a poem about a swallow's flight, a swallow doing this beautiful improvisation simile, but also the word swallow is a slang term for a woman who betrays in the Soviet Union, for a KGB agent, who tries to seduce westerners so they can be blackmailed, so it seemed to embody both being an agent for an organization and the subtleties and intricacies of deception and disruption, so that's why it is *Swallow*. And my last novel is called *Lying Together*, a pun on the two words "telling lies" and "sleeping with" so I think that was the reason although again it didn't come easy. I think perhaps the one title that I am not altogether happy with is that of my memoirs *Memories and Hallucinations*. I knew it had to be Memories and something and I think I would have used the word Dream in it had not Jung already used it in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. I agonised for weeks and months over what the other word beside Memories should be; hallucinations isn't quite right, it has this sense of a false image, whereas what I wanted was something more positive, like a creative fantasy, or if there had been a word like "imagination" in English, if it were possible I would have used that, but there isn't, so I am not too happy with it. I think once you have got the title there is a sense in which the work is already finished, even if you are at the beginning, because you know what it's going to be about.

R.G. - What about "Coincidences"? Since coincidences have played an important part in your life and in your creative process, wouldn't it have been a good word?

D.M.T - Yes, it is the sense that when things are running for you, you somehow do seem to find coincidences happening, it is almost as though you are in touch suddenly, you develop a kind of radio antenna or aerial that picks up messages, you are in touch with some unseen pattern in the universe, which I think art is all about, is what art tries to do, it tries to get in touch with this secret patterning of life, and coincidences are often trivial examples of that pattern.

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