An Interview with Harry Mathews

By John Ash

Part 1

JOHN ASH: I've always thought there was an affinity between the opening of Firbank's "Vainglory" and the opening of "Tlooth." This is "Vainglory":

"And then, oh yes! Atlanta is getting too pronounced." She spoke lightly, leaning back a little in her deep arm-chair. It was the end of a somewhat lively review.

And this is "Tlooth."

Mannish Madame Nevtaya slowly cried "Fur bowls!" and the Fideist batter, alert to the sense behind the sound of her words, jogged to first base. The wind from the northern steppe blew coldly on the close of our season.

HARRY MATHEWS: I see what you mean. The prose rhythms are extremely close. I'm delighted to discover that I've been influenced by Firbank. There was one passage in "Tlooth," or it may have been "The Conversions," that John Ashbery told me I couldn't get away with because it was too close to Firbank. Perhaps it was just a row of dots. Of course Firbank was "the" great formal innovator. He invented modernism, more so than Joyce really. You feel the same way, don't you?

JA: Yes, that's how I first got hooked on your work. When I read the first paragraph of "Tlooth" I knew I'd stumbled across something utterly original and at the same time I was reminded strongly of the opening of the Firbank, so I just had to read on to the end without a break. I was up all night.

HM: I'm glad to hear that because I always feel that the beginnings of my books are very hard to get through. I was talking to Ted Castle about this the
other day and I described my openings as a wall the reader had to get over, a kind of test or initiation.

JA: I suppose the Pidgin English in "The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium" is very difficult at first, but even so you don't actually begin with that.

HM: In the opening paragraph of "The Conversions," the sentences are very simple, but there's something slightly out of kilter about them. There's something about their lack of emphasis or the way the emphasis falls in an unexpected place. Firbank did this first of course, and it's almost a source of irritation that there are so many things one can't do without sounding like him.

JA: But the important thing is not that your opening paragraphs are a little like Firbank's, but that they succinctly establish a compelling prose rhythm that carries you through the novels almost as if you were reading some crudely gripping narrative--a detective story, a thriller, a mystery . . .

HM: Which they also are.

JA: Except that you don't explain the mystery. When I got to the end of "The Conversions," I screamed. I thought, "How dare he?" Then, of course, I had to go back and read it all over again.

When I first read your work I felt that I had discovered a path which had not been followed, at least not in the English novel, and not by the mainstream anywhere. It was the path of wit and artifice, of fantastic inventions and intellectual play. Obviously Firbank has a lot to do with this, but I also felt that many of my favorite European and Latin-American writers were somehow present in your work--Kafka, Walser, Borges, Nabokov, Calvino, and so on. On the other hand, you were never merely derivative. I suppose that I felt you were writing for me.

HM: You write for the readers of your favorite novels. Isn't that one of the most important reasons one writes--to fill the needs of an imaginary readership which exists only in you? There are an awful lot of better ways to get rid of one's angst and one's anger than writing, so I think the aim is to write for pleasure even if you're writing about concentration camps and the black death; and the pleasure one imagines is the reader's pleasure.

JA: That reminds me very much of something Marcuse said in "The Aesthetic Dimension." He says that artists, or at least good artists, will only deal very indirectly with the great twentieth-century atrocities because they can't stop submitting them to the "mitigating catharsis" of art, which is to say, whatever you're describing the result will be pleasure of a kind if you describe it well.

HM: Of course there are many different kinds of pleasure in writing. My inspiration and aim was to write prose that was as densely satisfying as poetry--not that it would be "poetic prose" in the traditional sense. Walter de la Mare's "Memoirs of a Midget" certainly is. It seems to me a perfect, utterly
original novel, and no one but a poet could have written it. The marvelous thing about it--and this may be the poet's privilege in prose--is that it takes as a point of departure this impossible premise: as the title suggests, its about the life of a midget. One thinks of pathos or quaintness or persecution and there's a little of that, but only because she chooses it. She's her own sublime creation. She leads a complete life that none of us will ever lead. The book is totally idiosyncratic and yet there isn't a line you couldn't identify yourself with.

JA: Nowadays it seems almost essential when writing a novel to take a very eccentric angle. The marginal has become central.

HM: Certainly that's quite common now, but what de la Mare was doing was much more farfetched, and of course it seems prophetic. Many of your own poems are spoken by people who live in countries or societies that aren't to be found anywhere, except in the works of other poets--St. John Perse for example.

JA: This is also true of writers of short fiction like Robert Walser or Christopher Meckel. Your short fiction reminds me a little of Walser's.

HM: Your making me very happy today.

JA: He's another prose writer who writes with the kind of density and concentration you find in poetry.

HM: Many people can't get beyond the fact that he went mad, and so they avoid reading him by saying, "Oh, this is where the poor man was headed. . . ." Did you know there are two different versions of "The Walk"? Each sentence says the same thing in both versions but in one he's telling the telling of the story and in the other he's simply telling the story. What I imagine happened is that someone said to him "It's much too complicated. Why don't you simplify?" So he rewrote it in declarative sentences. It's still beautiful, but much less so.

JA: That reminds me of Ted Castle's wonderful statement in "Anticipation": "People are always full of advice for those who have already done something. Why is it not, they ask, some other, simpler, newer, more traditional, clearer and yes cheaper thing?"

HM: And that suggests to me Pasternak describing Scriabin's difficult late sonatas as an example. The flip side of that coin is that Satie is very complex.

JA: The prose rhythms of your novels must have a lot to do with your knowledge of music. You conceive of rhythm in broad periods. For example, in "The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium" after the letter goes astray, everything seems to accelerate and then when we get to Twang's last letter, in which all misunderstandings are explained, there's a great ritardando. Then you reach the awful realization that the title, the name of the ship, tells you what happens after the end of the book which, as far as I'm aware, is a device no one else has used. You don't know throughout the novel why it has this
strange title, and the reference to Kafka is largely a red herring.

HM: And by the time you get to the end you've forgotten about the title all together. There's this set of words at the top of the page and they become a vague shadow, they become invisible, until, suddenly, they become integral to the plot. I think the main effect of this is to remind the reader quite brutally that he is reading a book. The title of "Tlooth" is also mentioned in the text and it brings the reader to a stop. His attention is drawn to the top of the page, to the cover, and that, for me, is very valuable. It's somewhat perverse, even sadistic, but then sadism has its pleasures, as does its opposite. I think it's an aspect of my books that irritates people a great deal. You can't just lose yourself in the narrative and there's never any satisfactory conclusion.

JA: It's impossible or delusory to write without self-consciousness.

HM: It's easier to read without self-consciousness, but it's also an illusion that's not worth keeping. You don't lose emotion or fun or pity or cathartic effects by being reminded that this is all in a book, and this reminder makes it clear that reading is as real as anything else in the world, and certainly as real as anything that might be reflected in writing.

JA: I've always insisted on this. I've often been criticized in England because I use a lot of material that I've found in books rather than "real life" whatever that might be. Reading books is quite as real as any other part of my life; therefore I can use the material, wherever it may come from.

HM: All books come from other books, especially when they're drawn from real life. Malcolm X couldn't write his story himself. He had to find a professional writer who could appropriate the forms of fiction, otherwise it wouldn't be readable. When you pick up a book, you have expectations before you've read the first page. Buying the book or borrowing the book and opening it puts one in a frame of mind that allows very little variation in your expectations. Now what you do with those expectations is something completely different. That's where invention can take place.

JA: The most brilliant comment on this is surely the opening of Calvino's "If on a winter's night."

HM: Not only the opening, but the entire book. It seemed uncanny when I read that. He knew exactly where I was as a reader. He even supplied me with a woman to share my pleasure.

JA: But this attitude to reading is already present in his earlier novels, for example in "The Baron in the Trees" with its extended joke about Richardson's Clarissa. Do you remember that brigand chief becomes so obsessed with "Clarissa" that he gives up brigandage and retreats to his cave to read it? Of course the members of his gang don't like it because he's not there to lead them on raids, so they steal the final volume and start to tear out the pages until he becomes absolutely distraught and agrees to lead them on one more raid. But he's so anxious to get back to the novel that he mismanages everything and is taken captive and hanged. It's very funny and terribly sad: a
man has died for fiction.

HM: And the readers of that book can sympathize entirely with this character. The subjects of the trilogy "Our Ancestors" are all impossible. No one can spend his life in the trees, no one can be cut in two and go on living, and no one can be non-existent and exist, so you can't entertain the illusion that you're reading anything but a fiction.

JA: Ted Castle achieves a similar result by different means in "Anticipation" when he recycles material you've read earlier in the book but then alters it so you think, "I've read this before," and then you think, "No I haven't, this is something else."

HM: That's very musical and it happens a lot in "The Conversions" and "Tlooth," not in the same way, but in terms of color sequences, for instance, or names of people or horses, for that matter. At the beginning of "The Conversions," during the worm race, a sequence of colors is established that recurs throughout the book. It really isn't essential to the novel but there is an effect of variation and recapitulation.

JA: How would you say that your novels are related to music? Do you ever write "to" music? John Ashbery does that sometimes.

HM: No, I don't. I once wrote a poem in strict sonata form but I'm afraid I threw it out. It's very rare that I ever do anything consciously musical (except for one passage in "The Conversions" that is a crab canon). Most of the time it's just an addiction to music as the model for the temporal arts in the sense that, in music, something is obviously happening, but it's utterly impossible to say what it is because no two people will agree on the words to define it.

JA: That reminds me of John Ashbery remark that he envies music's ability to "say something and not say it." It can be meaningful without having specific meanings.

HM: And this is what you might hold against certain late Bartok works— the "Concerto for Orchestra," for example. He said that he could have written it on his typewriter. He meant that it was close to commenting directly on life. He meant that it was close to commenting directly on life. It was really losing what was most musical. It's the difficulty that afflicts followers of Beethoven.

JA: You mean the interpretation of Beethoven that went on throughout the nineteenth century? But that is presumably why the "Concerto for Orchestra" is Bartok's most popular work, because it can be read like a nineteenth-century novel, from ominous opening to triumphant conclusion. This may be why I find it his least interesting piece.

HM: Before Beethoven (and still in Schubert) the last movement was a conclusion, but simply a musical conclusion, not a statement about everything that had happened before. The effect of Beethoven has been such that composers feel that they have to make some very positive concluding statement about the universe.
JA: And this became a great problem in the late nineteenth century with Bruckner and Mahler desperately trying to reach their philosophical conclusions.

HM: Mahler does it better, especially in the Sixth Symphony when you think you've reached home and then, of course, he blows up home. I have the impression that every symphony Mahler wrote is a report back to Vienna on the state of his soul, the story of his life.

JA: I don't know about that. Wasn't he the first composer to go beyond nineteenth-century storytelling and philosophizing? Instead he structures his music according to a disposition of symbols. There are discrete musical symbols--the funeral march, the lied, the landler, the sound of cowbells.

HM: That's brilliant. It's exactly what Latremont did in that he used styles, not subject matter, to say what he meant, and he was using them both seriously and not seriously, just as Mahler was. In a way, it's not knowing music as Beethoven did; its knowing music as history.

JA: Isn't a passion for music one of the leading characteristics of the New York School?

HM: It's interesting that Frank O'Hara and John and I should be so extraordinarily devoted to music in a way that seems to exceed mere music loving. Our passion even exceeds melomania, in the sense that music matters more than reading, which is hard to imagine.

**Part II**

JA: It seems to me that what is fashionably termed "metafiction"--the self-reflexive fiction that always reminds you of its fictiveness--which you say readers often find irritating or difficult, is in some ways a more generous, less authoritarian kind of writing since it seeks to involve the reader and doesn't try to swamp him or her with a narrative that imitates life. Brigid Brophy said that narrative is a drug, and in the nineteenth century it was one of the few respectable drugs available to the middle classes, so there was a vast readership for long novels loaded with realistic lumber. This is a problem for contemporary novelists. The reader gets uncritically carried along because he simply wants to know what happens next. How do you distinguish literature from pulp fiction without frustrating the reader's expectations?

HM: For me the problem has been: how do you do without narrative in an extended work? Quite a number of people have tried to do without it--good writers writing interesting, witty sentences and giving up narrative as good modernists should, and my attention lapses after a mere five or ten sentences. Narrative is clearly a drug, but lets hope it can be used intelligently. I don't agree with Foster that plot is what matters, but I'll stick up for storytelling. Take Ford Madox Ford's "Parade's End." There's incredible narrative speed in that series of novels, and each section ends before the narrative goal has been reached. You find out how everything works fifty pages later in another
section by which time you're comparatively indifferent. So in a sense the
druggishness is taken away. The conclusiveness of a narrative is removed and
perhaps what makes narrative so compulsive is the fact that there "is" an
ending. There is no ending, no final form in nature. When I started writing I
felt my only talent was for narrative. It was something I didn't have to do too
much about since it would just come out anyway, and of course it's
thoroughly stymied in book after book. The main narrative is always very
simple—solving a riddle, seeking revenge, finding a treasure—and it gets utterly
obliterated by interruptions and digressions.

JA: Not so utterly. By having that simple premise, you're very considerate of
your readers. You can do very complex things and the reader can still hang on
to that original idea. It doesn't dominate your perception of the book, but it
carries you through. So in "Tlooth," amid all the fantastic, picaresque
episodes, you can always reorientate yourself by thinking—"This is a novel
about a woman seeking revenge."

HM: A "person" seeking revenge . . .

JA: It's a woman surely . . .

HM: Shh . . . Don't give my secrets away. You don't know for a long time
what the sex of the central character is, and it's only at the end of "The
Conversions" that you discover that the narrator is a mulatto. My Italian
translator asked me, "Why? Why is he a mulatto?", and I said, "Because he's a
mulatto, and why not? You were assuming throughout the book that he was
like you." She was so upset by this that in her introduction to the book she
gave the secret away. She couldn't stand the idea of people being surprised by
this unprepared, simple revelation.

JA: This is a microcosm of the novel's whole structure and purpose, because
you have this fabulously intricate riddle that is not solved. It's there for its own
sake.

HM: It's obviously much more interesting to be curious about a riddle than to
find out the solution. Solutions are nearly always disappointing.

JA: I read "The Conversions" after "Tlooth" and I assumed because it was
earlier it would be a less interesting, immature work, but of course it isn't.
You seem to have sprung forth fully grown like the soldiers from the dragon's
teeth.

HM: That's more or less what happened. The thing that cleared my mind was
reading Raymond Roussel.

JA: Yes, It's obvious that "Locus Solus" was a big influence. In "The
Conversions" you have a series of enigmatic set figures in much the same way
that "Locus Solus" consists of tableaux or exhibits in a park.

HM: A closer model was his play "La Poussiere de soleils" which is about a
treasure hunt and is, in turn, inspired by a Jules Verne novel called "Le
Testament d'un excentrique." It's a marvelous book about a kind of board game using all of the states of the United States as squares. Reading Roussel cleared my mind of the idea that you had to write illusionistic representational fiction. If you're writing fiction, you can do anything. Roussel's rule was "Nothing that hasn't been made up," and this opened up a whole world of possibilities for me.

JA: "Tlooth" is less Rousselian than "The Conversions" but there is one superb passage which still shows his influence, and that's the passage about importing the illegal hair restorant into Europe. It's Rousselian because of the fiendish ingenuity and inspiration you devote to the solution of a seemingly absurd problem.

HM: That's one thing I learned from Roussel: that, in terms of storytelling, you can find masses of materials in solving absurd problems. Roussel had no qualms, and no plot. It's all storytelling. It's also highly poetic but the poetry is all there in absentia. It's not there in what the text says it is doing. What the text says it is doing is telling utterly unlikely stories which at the same time have nothing gratuitous about them. You can tell by reading his books, even if he hadn't written "How I Wrote Certain of My Books," that he's laboring under some kind of obligation, that he's set himself conundrums to solve.

JA: Isn't this what the Oulipo does? They invent rules which they observe strictly. What are the advantages of this?

HM: What I've always said—though I begin to doubt myself—is that it distracts the ego and the superego sufficiently to keep them busy on this arbitrary problem so that the unconscious is made available to the writer. Lieris said something like this about Roussel. He said that was why Roussel's techniques were superior to that of the surrealists, because techniques like automatic writing were much too naive. The interesting thing about Breton is that his ideas about bringing the subconscious into art are marvelous but never affected the form of a single sentence he wrote. He wrote beautiful classical French and his poems are always elegant. But the definition of a constrictive form in the Oulipian sense is a form that will oblige you to write in a way that you wouldn't possibly write in otherwise. That's what the Oulipo is essentially about. This was particularly interesting in Perec's case because he had such an extraordinary belief in writing. He really looked upon it as a kind of salvation.

JA: Salvation from what?

HM: His parents were Jewish. His father had the good fortune to be killed in the Battle of France--his mother was deported to a concentration camp, where she died. He was orphaned when he was six. He survived because he was taken away to Vercors where he had relatives who took care of him. For him it remained a historical and linguistic trauma. For one thing, he never spoke his mother's native tongue, which was Yiddish. She only spoke to him in French, so he lost that inheritance. For him Jewishness was absence, emptiness, exile, and death, which was the place he lived until he died. Even before he discovered the Oulipo he gave himself very definite tasks to accomplish when he wrote. He became a poet, I'm proud to say, in part
because he translated some of my poems. He saw that poetry was the domain of constrictive form, so he began writing poems with this mind boggling system that he'd invented, restricting himself to the twelve most common letters of the alphabet, a la Schonberg. He got better and better as a poet, and then towards the end of his life he permitted himself to write two poems without any formal obstacle and he found it infinitely harder having this absolute freedom. The idea filled him with terror.

Part III

JA: You've mentioned that Perec translated some of your poems. Do you want to say something about your poetry?

HM: I write poetry for fun.

JA: So why do you write novels?

HM: To get a medal! I don't know why I write novels. The conception I adore and the final draft. In between it's pretty miserable. It's all doubt and confusion. There's no sense that I have something worthwhile in hand. I just don't know where I am, but I've learned from experience that this means I'm probably in a good place. I'm doing things I don't know how to do, so I must be learning something.

JA: But all your novels have such a great sense of certainty.

HM: If only that were so! I've only felt that about "The Conversions," which I wrote very quickly. It gets worse with each novel.

JA: You say you write poems for fun, and "Armenian Papers" has to be described as a poem, even though it's written in prose. "Fun" is hardly the word I'd choose for it.

HM: It was originally written as a sequence of poems in verse, then I rewrote it as prose poems. Both it and "Cigarettes," in their different ways, were a departure from what I'd done before. In the case of "Armenian Papers" I was inspired by something Browning did in middle career when he decided to write a poem a day and he wrote "Love Among the Ruins" and many of his best poems in a period of three weeks. I only lasted for twelve days, but all of the poems in "Armenian Papers" were written at the end of the day at great speed without knowing what was going to happen, and there was very little rewriting. But perhaps we shouldn't talk like this. Perhaps we should preserve the fiction that these are translations of translations.

JA: Given your past history, no one is going to believe that. When you first read "Armenian Papers" to me, I was astonished. These are tragic poems—poems about the movement of peoples and the relation of civilization to barbarity.

HM: That's true, and these are things I'd never approached before, at least not so directly. I would surmise that on the one hand having done all the work
made them possible, and also that I had probably been denying myself simpler ways of access to . . .

JA: A kind of passionate seriousness?

HM: Yes, but I think it underlies the other books.

JA: It rises to the surface in Twang's letter at the end of "The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium," which I've always found very moving.

HM: I'm so glad you said that. It's the point of the book. Everything else is directed towards that. I've never been so crestfallen as when a French friend said to me, "You can't write an entire book in the way you've done, and then just have this lyric outburst at the end. It just won't do." I was destroyed.

JA: Well "Armenian Papers" is a lyrical outburst of another kind. Do you feel that it's a work that came out of nowhere?

HM: It certainly felt like that, though, I suppose, after the first few poems I knew what was going to happen. It begins in genocide and what good can come of that?

JA: And yet, on another level, its a poem in which you exuberantly invent a world. It seems a very convincing portrayal of Armenia in remote times.

HM: I think it's convincing, too, but I thought I shouldn't know too much about the place or it's history. It was more the idea of a people who went back to a kingdom that was not only pre-Christian, but pre-Roman and pre Greek. I read a very short history when I was halfway through but it really only confirmed what I was doing. There was the idea of survival being something more than just keeping your life going.

JA: The Armenians were a people who were wiped out by everyone.

HM: They had their days of glory in the second century B.C., but after that it was like Poland.

JA: Trapped between Byzantines and Persians and then destroyed as a state by the Seljuk Turks. To refer to what we were saying earlier in relation to Marcuse and Perec, perhaps these prose poems are your way of addressing yourself to the horrors of modern history?

HM: Well, there's the twentieth-century genocide in Turkish Armenia. In another sense Armenia becomes an imaginary country, but one that's located in the past rather than somewhere else on the globe. The impulses that the idea of this place triggered or let loose, and which feel like memories, but which I want to call intuitions, amount to what my reality may be. What else have I got? What can I call my own but what is between, in a kind of gray zone? It's what I might have dreamed or what I wished I'd dreamed. It's a realm of exploration.
JA: Writing in a border zone?

HM: Exactly, and that's true of what "you" do, when you invent imaginary cities and realms in your poems. You said the other night before reading a prose poem that a British critic had complained that you didn't address yourself to the problems of contemporary British people, but it's obvious that the imaginary place you're writing about in that poem is also Mrs' Thatcher's England. And perhaps, in the same way, Armenia is Manhattan. Why not?

JA: Well, as I look across the East River to the ruins that seems quite plausible! But "Armenian Papers" is also the culmination of your tendency to write about real places you've never visited, much in the way that Firbank writes about a New York he has never visited in "The New Rhythum."

HM: That's been a rule for me. Apart from New York, Paris, and Venice, most of the places I write about--Scotland, Miami, or Sfax--I had either never been to or forgotten.

JA: "Cigarettes" is set partly in Saratoga Springs, a place you hadn't visited when you began work on the novel.

HM: "Cigarettes" is another change. It's very different from the works we've been talking about. It doesn't have the digressions, it doesn't have the erudition or the wordplay and language games. It's not like "Armenian Papers," either. It started as an attempt to solve a specific problem: the point of departure was much less inchoate than that of "Armenian Papers." I started off with the question of how to tell a story about a group of people belonging to the New York art and business world in a way that would allow the reader to make it up. That's not completely honest, but I don't think I can be honest about it because I don't really remember what happened.

JA: What seems so remarkable about "Cigarettes" is that, although it begins quite playfully, it very soon plunges into the depths. There are chapters that are excoriating--things are laid bare as with a scalpel.

HM: I had the desire to deal with what are called relationships, and as we all know relationships are often the opposite of that. People will go to any lengths to deny the true nature of the relationship. For example, the assumption is that parents cannot choose the children, and to the same extent children cannot choose their parents, so that parents and children find themselves in a relationship over which they have no control, and which they cannot escape. A great deal of energy is expended by all of us in demonstrating that we "can" choose the relationships we want, even though it's clear that this is not the case. It's not all that different with lovers and friends. You can only become friends with someone if you meet them and your meeting them is accidental and arbitrary. With lovers, even more so. The reason attraction takes place is because, for example, you saw a purple curtain when you were three months old, or you knew someone who spoke the same way--little things like that lead to years of complications and pleasures. But all through this the human being seems to want to proclaim his right to make his or her own choice, and clearly this hasn't happened. For me this was a new ground.
for exploration, a new place to ask questions, and by asking questions to invent a narrative.

JA: On one level "Cigarettes" is as formal as a dance--changing partners from chapter to chapter like a novelistic ballet--but there's also an undertow which I can only describe as heartbreak. Then at the end you come up with this dreamlike resolution where many of the characters gather together in the same house.

HM: Yes, Elizabeth and Maud, and Pauline and Walter, and finally, at the last second, Allan, the errant husband, comes home. It's hardly dreamlike in the sense of a wonderful dream come true.

JA: No, because the characters are brought together by a calamity. Elizabeth, who throughout the novel is an inspiration to the other characters, either directly or by means of Walter's portrait of her, is suddenly struck down by a terrible illness.

HM: I have to say that I find it very difficult to talk about the novel because I've just finished it. I've been working on it much too long and to me those people are so real I can't think of them as being in any way dependent on me.

JA: I agree. While I was reading "Cigarettes" I found it very hard to remember that I was not reading about "real life." So perhaps, in a sense, you've done what we said earlier it was impossible to do.

HM: Except that there are regular reminders that this is not the case. The novel is being written by one of the characters, for example, and there is actually no suggestion of depth in the writing itself. It's all very two dimensional and readers, including myself, must fill in the rest. . . . I do feel dismayed by the story.

JA: Dismayed?

HM: I'm dismayed partly because I've finished the book. I feel about the characters the way I do about the people I know who get sick and die--who are dying. The book had a prophetic function in my life. A number of people quite close to me died within the last six years, and two more are dying right now. I feel that someone is trying to teach me a lesson which is not entirely one of disaster, depression, sadness, grief, and loss--that the point of all this is not just that life ends and death wipes everything out, but I have no idea what the answer, the lesson might be. The book is part of this experience. I hope it's not read as a melodramatic wail. I don't see it like that, but I don't know what it signifies.

JA: Perhaps it's very simple. When people close to you begin to die, then you have to think very deeply about your feelings for them, and assess them and think how much they've meant in your life, how much they've given you and you've given them. Much of this has come out in the novel.

HM: What you say is true, and in the last few months the hours I've spent with people I'm on the point of losing have been transfiguring in terms of my
knowledge of them. At the same time I know that as far as Georges Perec, who died four years ago, is concerned, there's really not much else to do but mourn.

JA: There's not much else to do but mourn, but one can mourn well or mourn badly.

HM: Perhaps the best thing I can say is what I wrote at the end of "Cigarettes": "The dead become us."

--From the "Review of Contemporary Fiction," Fall 1987, Volume 7.3

Return to interviews
Return to Harry Mathews page

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