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PROGETTO

“PASSIONS: INTERVISTE A PERSONALITA' DI RILIEVO INTERNAZIONALE”



Referente del progetto
Prof. F. Mitrano

Studentessa
Marta Perissinotto 875071

Introduction

Because of the project "Passions" I had the pleasure to meet and interview Professor Gregory Dowling. He is Associate Professor of American Literature at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice but he also is a writer and a novelist. While preparing the questions for the interview I was able to learn something about his personal and academic life. Gregory Dowling grew up in Bristol, UK but moved to Italy after graduating from Oxford University. He taught in language schools in Naples, Siena, Verona and Venice, where he has lived since 1981. Italy has played an important role in his writing life, since most of his stories take place in the most famous Italian cities.

Professor Dowling is a very cultured man: he has a great passion for literature and culture which has no limits. His knowledge is extensive and when he starts speaking about art or history it is not so easy to stop him. He is an expert on Byron but is able to speak not only about English writers but also Italian or Russian literature. While listening to him everyone can enjoy and admire what he has to say and the pure and simple way he speaks about what makes him proud to work in this field. He has always wished to become a storyteller and his passion for this job made him believe in his dream and start writing his own novels.

Even if this interview took place online owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to feel and appreciate all Dowling's empathy, enthusiasm and love for his projects and job. He is an open book and has a great deal of experiences to share and many things to say. In his works he often shares his feelings and sensations and puts aspects of his own character into his heroes: however, he sometimes uses his characters to show attitudes he would have liked to have.

His novel *Ascension* can be considered the perfect representation of what and who Professor Dowling is. The author was able to build a bridge between his motherland, England, and Italy, the country which welcomed him almost forty years ago. In the book the reader can find not only prose but also references to Venetian culture, art, and history. Here it is possible to find Gregory Dowling as a novelist but also as an author of Venice's tourist guidebooks. While writing them he was able to learn many things about La Serenissima and this has helped him to re-create the most appropriate and attractive atmosphere of the Venetian XVIII century.

Interview with Professor Gregory Dowling

The first question I would like to ask you is: what inspired you to start writing novels?

I have always wanted to write stories from early childhood, probably at the age of six or seven.

I wanted to be a storyteller and so I started doing that; I cannot say what it was exactly because it has always been there.

So, this is something that you have always wanted to do...

I mean, I enjoy listening to stories and reading stories and I just wanted to join the team of storytellers.

I saw that most of your novels take place in Italy or were written when you were living in cities, such as Verona and Naples. What role has Italy played during your writing process?

Italy had played a huge role. My first novel, "Double Take" (which I wrote when I was living in Verona and then in Venice) is set only in England because although I was living in Italy when I started it, I did not yet feel confident that I knew the country well enough and maybe I was feeling nostalgic for my home country. But after that all my other five novels are set mainly or entirely in Italy.

Italy is a land of fascination because of its history, its art, its culture and its people. I think I have always been interested in giving an outside perspective.

I can obviously never write about Italy the way an Italian would and that is why I have not yet created a narrator who is entirely Italian. I have just had narrators who are half English or half Venetian and this gave me the best of both worlds.

Has writing about Italy given you the possibility to know the country better?

I would like to think so. I have lived nearly two thirds of my life in this country so I do feel like that I know the country pretty well. I believe that the country you grow up in is what makes you who you are in so many ways, so I do not have a child memory of Italy.

I came here for the first time when I was nineteen - I never came to Italy as a child because my family used to go on holiday to France - and I think that that made a difference in the way you see and feel an experience to country.

I appreciated very much what you said, in particular the sentence 'the country you grow up in is what makes you who you are' and I believe that every person could agree with that.

Well, you obviously change over the time but your childhood years are fundamental in creating your character and your mentality in so many ways, even though there is always the possibility of change.

You are not only a writer of novels, but also of articles and studies of literature: do you prefer writing articles, essays or novels?

As I said I have always wanted to be a storyteller, my ideal life would be to be a full-time novelist even though this is a very difficult ambition to achieve. You know, the job that supports me is obviously being an academic and I am very lucky to have this job which I do enjoy.

No article I have written has given me the same satisfaction as the novels I have written. I am happy with most of my academic articles but they have never gave me the same feeling of real achievement which you have when you finish a novel.

I think that writing novels gives you full freedom to express yourself and your feelings. We can consider it something more personal and closer to the person who writes.

I think that is true. When I write my critical articles I think I say exactly what I think and feel about the work but obviously I do not have the imaginative freedom I have while creating my characters and stories because I just have to explain a poem, a novel because my work depends on the work of somebody else.

Mostly my criticism is writing about authors I really enjoy and trying to communicate my enjoyment in order to help other people to appreciate them as well. That is the aim of my critical works.

So you always choose authors or poets you like and you find interesting.

Yes, exactly. I would never take on a review of a book thinking that I was not going to like it. When I do not like the book then I have to be honest but that happens very rarely. In general I know what I like and I try to choose authors that I admire.

Talking about the authors you like: you are an expert on Byron and you also wrote essays about writers of the Romantic period, such as Shelley and Keats. Why do these authors stand up for you?

That is an interesting question. These authors lived very interesting lives, full of excitement and adventure. They lived a very exciting time in history and they were very interesting people: that is part of their fascination.

Their works are also very personal: when you read Byron's poetry you cannot separate the narrator from the poet himself.

I just think that Byron is a contradictory figure, he is often seen as the Romantic poet '*per eccellenza*' but in many ways he felt himself much more tied to the Classical poetry of the previous century. Byron has this kind of curious contradiction in his character and in his works which make him different from his contemporaries.

The friendship between Byron and Shelley is probably one of the most important literary friendship in all literary history even though they were such different people in temperament, in thoughts, in approach to life. That is a friendship which greatly influenced their writing.

So, do you feel close to these authors also in your style, in your writing process or in the message you want to communicate?

Well, when you read Byron's poems you feel you know the writer: there is this sort of direct contact with the author which makes you hear his voice. I find it very fascinating.

There are of course other writers who may not have led very interesting lives but who nonetheless wrote great works. Thomas Hardy, for example, as great a novelist as he was a poet. I am not really answering your question, perhaps. (*he laughs*)

Now I would like to talk about your book. *Ascension* is an historical novel set in Venice. Why the XVIII century? What is so special about this historical period?

That is a very good question. The XVIII century Venice was, of course, a period when Venice no longer counted on the political or the military stage: it was not important in the way it had been in Middle Ages. However, it was still a city which had a great power of attraction and in this period the city became the great tourist city that still is.

You know, I am not an historian and I just tried to feel close to what was going on but I would be nervous to try to write a novel set in the Middle Ages or in the XVI century because I do not feel I could get close enough to the mindset of the people, I do not think to have the ability to do that even if many writers do it very successfully.

The XVIII century is the century of the Enlightenment and it is an age where I can identify with the way people thought, acted and behaved and also that is the first century in Venetian history where we can get a sense of contact with people. There are enough voices of that period.

As I said before, when you read Byron's poetry, letters or journals you feel you are hearing contemporary voices. Concerning periods before the XVIII century in Venetian history, I do not think it was possible: one of the reasons is that Venice actively suppressed the ideals of personality as the Doges were basically anonymous figures. Even if in Venice there were many famous names of families, it is quite difficult to find specific people.

That is the main reason why I chose the XVIII century.

You know, while you were speaking I thought of another author which I am studying this year: Sir Walter Scott. In particular, I thought about the concept of 'historical novel', the process of collecting information and the fact of telling a story of a distant era with the purpose of keeping its memory alive in the present. In this specific case, can this be your purpose too?

Yes, I do want to take people into the XVIII century and to let them know Venice of that period. I am very glad you are reading Walter Scott because he is a novelist that has gone completely out of fashion in the English speaking world. Yet, I believe he is a great novelist: Walter Scott was incredibly influential on the way people viewed the mythology, he also gave the new angle on the story of Robin Hood. I think he was a very influential author even on people who have not read him.

Let us go on talking about this historical context. While reading your novel, I happened to find many references not only to Venice and its squares or main buildings, but to its history, culture and art. How long did it take you to collect all this information? Can you talk more about weaving your research into your writing?

That is not an easy question to answer. I have been living in Venice for thirty-nine years and during this time I have been studying the city and learning about it. In my past, I wrote the 'tours' section (the churches, the museums) of the Time-Out guide to Venice for tourists which was one of the best-selling guide-books, even if now is no longer in print. Preparing to write that obviously took a lot of time so I cannot say how much time it took me to write my novel because I already had a good knowledge about the city.

You know, I do not want to overwhelm the reader with history, facts and dates and I hope I managed to put in a way that is interesting and does not get boring.

Concerning the cover of your book, I find it quite interesting. Has this a specific meaning?

No, the cover was chosen by the publisher and I did not really have a say in it. I think in some ways I prefer the cover of the American edition but I am quite happy with that and, if you see, actually there is nothing specific Venetian. All in all I think that this is a reasonably effective cover, which can catch the attention.

So you do not even know who is the person dressed in red who is running away?

I think they wanted to depict the same mysterious figure dressed in red of the movie 'Don't Look Now' (1973), a ghost story set in Venice. It just gives you the idea of something mysterious, intriguing and I am happy with that.

Your main character, Alvise Marangon, is a 'cicerone', as he is called in the book. Can the reader consider him as your alter-ego?

I strongly suspect there are many elements of my character in Alvise. Yes, I probably put aspects of my own character into him. I chose a 'cicerone' because I wanted to have somebody who could

explain things about the city in a convincing way and who has a reason to tell the reader about elements such as history and art, which are necessary to the plot.

You know, as soon as I got in touch with the character of Alvisè, I thought he was quite like you or that there were, at least, some references to your attitude or your personal life.

I think that this is undeniably true. I do not think I am quite as brave as Alvisè but I'd like to hope I would be.

As we said, in the book there are references about Italy as well as about England. Have you ever thought of translating your book into other languages, such as Italian?

I would love this book to be translated into Italian but I could not do it. I can translate from Italian into English but I cannot do the other: very few people can. Translation has to be done by somebody who is mother tongue.

There were moments when it seemed that there might be a translation: one of my novels has been translated into Italian - the one set in Naples - and that was published by a Neapolitan publisher.

You know, translating is a process very expensive for the publisher and they have to be sure that they could make enough money to offset the payment.

As I mentioned before, I am very keen on writing, especially in my free time. I am very curious to know what does writing mean for you and what do you want to communicate to your readers through your books?

I think I answered this at the beginning when I said I wanted to tell stories. I am not trying to communicate a vision of philosophy of life or to convince somebody to vote this party or another party. I would like to promote a vision of tolerance which is a very important value to me and the idea of being interested in cultures which are different from yours, which I think is also very important: that is partly what I am doing as an academic but I hope that also comes across in my novels as well.

I think a writer should be trying to make people interested in lives that are not yours, that should be the aim of novelists. I just want to tell a good story and I want people to want to know what is going to happen next, I want the readers to keep turning the pages because they are interested in finding out what is going to happen.

And why did you choose thrillers?

I am fond of thrillers and detective stories. If you want to make the reader interested in what is going to happen next, a thriller is perhaps one of the best ways to keep their attention.

Sometimes I feel that if I do not have very exciting things happening I am not going to be able to hold the reader's attention. I enjoy reading exciting stories.

Do you take inspiration from the contemporary novels?

Yes, most of my reading of thrillers goes back to when I was young and they are books I grew up with: Agatha Christie or John Dickson Carr who deeply influenced my idea of my approach to plot. There are some contemporary thriller writers that I follow but I probably do not know their work as well as I know these sort of classics.

I have a very good friend in Venice who also writes thrillers, Philip Gwynne Jones, and I read his books with great pleasure. We both try to write thrillers in Venice but from very different angles: he writes about contemporary Venice and I am writing about Venice in the XVIII century.

I think that our basic aim is the same: we both want to keep the reader interested and tell a good story.

We are getting close to the end of our interview and there are some other questions I would like to ask you. As we know, you are an academic teacher and a writer: what do these two figures have in common and what messages can they share and give to other people?

This is not an easy one (*he laughs*). Partly I am repeating what I said about making people interested in other cultures and in other people's lives, which also is the aim of a novelist. I suppose a novelist is always also interested in words and in the way words are used, therefore my approach to poetry.

In terms of my academic criticism I tend to go for close reading, when I focus on poem I look very closely at the words, the images, the lines, the rhyme scheme, the meter.

In a similar way with my novels, I am interested in the technical aspects: for example the plot, the balance between the dialogue and the action.

And which advice would you give to students or people who would like to enter the world of writing, publishing?

I think that the important thing is to read widely to look upon what the best people are doing, not in order to imitate them but in order to try to acquire some of the same skills.

Unfortunately, in the world of publishing you need to look at the market as well: you need to have something original and new to say and the skills to say it in a convincing and arresting way.

I always think that the first page of a novel is very important as well as the second page, the third page and so on: this means that people want to go on reading and discovering.

It is important to find a publisher who is interested in this, too.

In general, in the terms of the British and American market it is almost impossible to get anywhere without an agent.

If you are interested in becoming a creative writer, you need to study the agent's market as well as the publishing market. That is one of the most important things from a practical point of view.

There also are some possibilities of self-publishing, many authors publish their own novels on Amazon and sell them for very little expense but then the problem is promoting it and getting it to people.

That was the last question of our interview. I just have another little curiosity. I am also studying Russian at university and I was wondering if you have ever read something concerning Russian literature.

Well, I have read Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Pushkin in translation obviously but I am obviously no expert.

I love Pushkin in translation and I am very fond of his work 'Eugenie Onegin', because there is a magnificent translation of it and according to the critics, the translator was able to convey the genuine voice of Pushkin, even maintaining the same rhyme scheme of the original version which is an extraordinary achievement. And Pushkin, of course, was very strongly influenced by Byron so that is perhaps another reason why I am interested in Pushkin.