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THE DISCIPLINE OF LIFE WRITING: TWO ARCH-BIOGRAPHERS REFLECT ON THEIR CAREERS

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When I decided to propose a special edition of *Ilha do Desterro* with Life Writing as a theme, I knew straight away I would have to try to interview Roy Foster and Hermione Lee to end the volume at the same place where it all started for me as a reader of life writing. It was also through Professor Foster, who had kindly accepted to advise me in during my year in Oxford, that I learnt about the Oxford Centre for Life Writing (OCLW) at Wolfson College, whose President in 2013 was still Dame Hermione Lee. Roy encouraged me to apply to Wolfson as a visiting doctoral student, and when I got the notice of my election by email, I grabbed my *Body Parts: Essays in Life Writing* (2005) from the shelf and screeched that "she" had written me, to which my nonplussed partner replied "not Woolf herself, surely."

Few biographers can realistically hope that their lives become *the* lives of their subjects, in the same manner we think of Boswell's *Johnson*, but both R. F. Foster's *W. B. Yeats: a Life* (1998 and 2003) and Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (1996) fit the bill of the "definitive biography" – for at least another generation, considering that *Woolf* has just turned its first quarter-of-a-century with the first *Yeats* soon to follow. In a fashion closer to Richard Ellmann than James Boswell, however, Foster and Lee have covered multiple subjects and delved in plenty of other genres besides life writing, each in their respective fields of history and literary criticism. In a recent event recorded for the OCLW, Lee spoke from a lectern piled with her biographies, a venerable tower that includes, in addition to *Woolf*, the volumes *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (1981), *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (1989), *Edith Wharton* (2007), *Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life* (2013) and the latest, *Tom Stoppard: A Life* (2020). Foster's list is just as impressive. As one can glance from my questions and from some of his considerations below, he seems to

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have taken a biographising approach even when he was not writing a straight-up biography. His *Charles Stewart Parnell: The Man and His Family* (1976) opened the way to *Lord Randolph Churchill: A Political Life* (1981), the two-volume *Yeats, Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (2015) and led to the recent *On Seamus Heaney* (2020), of whose status as an incisive biography, however condensed, I have no doubt.

Biographies are still regarded with suspicion in the academy in Brazil; life writing is not a concept many Brazilian literary scholars recognise easily. By talking to two of the people who have most helped shape what we understand as life writing (with or without the hyphen!) in the English-speaking world, I intended to shed a light on the possibilities this practice has opened in each of their contexts and hopefully draw some parallels to ours, considering this journal's audiences in Brazil. I was able to interview Roy and Hermione via Zoom in March 2021 and proposed the following structure: two questions to each of them, one question to both, followed by questions they would ask one another. As long-time friends and collaborators, I knew they would have special insights into the other's careers and how they developed to become, in my opinion, the best biographers of their generation. The interview has been edited for clarity but I have chosen to maintain some of the markers of informal register and orality.

MRDV: This is something I'm going to ask both of you, to compare your latest biographies with the ones you've published before. The Stoppard biography is a first for you, Hermione, in many ways. The most obvious is that it's the biography of a man when up until now you've only written about women. And another important way in which this Stoppard biography differs is the fact that he is a playwright while the other subjects had been many things but were primarily known for their prose, fictional or otherwise. And, finally, it's the first time that the subject is still alive by the end of the biography, so it's a different way for you to plan how to end it all or to find that "sense of an ending".

HL: I should say first that this wasn't something I was planning to do. He asked me to do it in a rather casual way and I said "yes" immediately, without stopping to think, and then two seconds later I thought "oh my God, what have I done?" But it's not something you would say "no" to. And it came at a fortunate time for me because the book on Penelope Fitzgerald was just coming out and I didn't have another project in the works, so it was a lucky throw of the coin – which is how he described it to me after that meeting. He said: "I throw the coin and see where it lands". So we both had a sense that it was a lucky chance.
It sounds bizarre, but I didn't really even think about the fact that he was a man. Although this may seem evasive, writing the biography of a male subject has never felt like a particular challenge or difficulty. I simply felt I was entering into another subject as closely as I could, and with as much knowledge and information as I could get. That he's a playwright was enormously important – that's the first, most challenging thing to me. I had never written about a playwright and I wasn't a fully

paid-up theatre person. And I have a feeling that that may have been one of the reasons he asked me to do it, in that I wasn't a theatre critic, or someone you would expect to write a biography of a playwright: I'm a literary critic turned biographer, and I think that's partly what appealed to him. His being a playwright does present an enormous challenge for the biographer. If you're a novelist, on the whole, you write a novel and you finish that novel and then you write another novel. You don't tend to spend your time while writing the next novel working on or revising or going back to the last one. With Stoppard, you have someone who has several things going on in his life at once, all the time; so he'll be doing screenwriting, he'll be doing public work of various kinds, he'll be putting a new play into production after he's written it, he'll be thinking about the next play, he might well be, as he puts it, "looking after one of his plays", going back into rehearsal, where he loves to be, with a revival. You would have maybe six or seven things going on at once, always, at every point of this life story. I found that exciting, but difficult. I often wished I could write it like a stave of music, so that I could write six things at once rather than have it be linear. And the fact that he's living is, of course, deeply interesting and it set the terms for the whole thing. I reminded him at one point what Beckett had said to his first biographer, which was: "I will neither help nor hinder". Stoppard was not like that: he did help and he didn't hinder.

MRDV: I'm particularly interested in the nature of the living archive and the role that played in your writing of *Stoppard* because, in addition to the usual tools of diaries, letters, contemporary accounts, appointment books, etc., whose volume and availability of course varies, this time you could and did interview your subject. I don't know what the deal was, if you could, if any detail was nagging, just call him to ask, but regardless, how did the access to him as a person affect your writing process?

HL: He helped in the sense that he made himself available to me and over six years we had a dozen long conversations which would consist of me going to visit him and staying there for a night or a couple of nights and spending the day talking to him… I must say, our clocks were on slightly different times; I would be there with my notebook after breakfast at half past nine, waiting to start, and he would start gearing up to a conversation about midday, and then by about 11 o'clock at night I would be completely dazed and he would be full of energy. He's a theatre person! And he smokes all the time, so that was another of the challenges as a non-smoker. Every so often he would absentmindedly wander outside and say "I suppose I ought to open a window or something."
In these conversations I used to have a grid, and I prepared each of these sessions to be roughly chronological. But I had some very good early advice from Michael Ignatieff, who did a lot of TV interviews with Isaiah Berlin and wrote his biography. He said to me: "you'll go in prepared, but leave your preparation behind where necessary, just go with the flow, see what happens."

There were clearly things that bored Stoppard intensely because he'd been asked them a hundred times before. And then there would be odd things where he would suddenly get excited and interested. I remember I asked him what he was wearing in the 1970s, and I suddenly had this fabulous riff on Mr. Fish shoes and floral shirts, which I hadn't expected. I did not do what you suggested, which was to ring him up day and night and say "by the way, I've got another question, could I double check this with you?" That would have been appalling. This is someone the world comes at, and I think he and Seamus Heaney both had their strategies for avoidance and for self-defence. I didn't want to prey on his time, so I would save things up for the next conversation.

In terms of the archive, this was deeply interesting, partly because Stoppard is poised between being a paper person and an online person. He doesn't do his own emails; he does, however, text. But he's also someone who, throughout his life, has written enormous numbers of letters to people: very careful, copious, handwritten letters, many of which I didn't see because, of course, they're in other hands. If somebody writes another biography of Stoppard in 100 years' time, which I hope they will, or even 25 years' time (I rather hope it won't be sooner than that) then they might get to see some of these letters because some of those recipients might be dead and they might have handed their letters to an archive. There are lots of people now who are in the middle of living their lives who have letters from Tom Stoppard which I didn't get to see, quite understandably. What I did get to see were remarkable materials like a couple of journals he'd kept for his youngest son Ed Stoppard, the actor, when Ed was a baby. These are very revealing. Unfortunately, they only cover a few years, but they were a really important source. The other thing that he handed me, when I was quite well into the writing, were the weekly letters that he'd written to his mother every week from 1948, roughly, to when she died in 1996, in which he told her what he was doing. Clearly, he didn't want to come adrift from her; he wanted her to be in touch with his life. He wasn't telling her everything because she's his mother, but it's an astonishing source. They're mostly undated, so I spent about three months dating them from internal evidence and then putting them back into what I'd already written. That was an astonishing source which would probably not have been available to me if he'd not been alive.

MRDV: I didn't mean you'd ring him up all the time, I was just wondering if you concentrated the interviews in the beginning or you spread them out.

HL: They were spread out. I was doing research while I was writing, and normally I wouldn't do that; I try to get all the research done and then write. But with this biography, people would be slow to get in touch or I would have trouble pursuing some of the people I wanted to talk to. It took me about four years to get a conversation with Steven Spielberg for instance, which I had with his lawyer on the line. Things like that took a while, and I wanted to keep on talking to family

members and to him. Also I was sitting in rehearsal periodically while he was working on a new play or a revival while I was doing the writing.

MRDV: It must have been exciting to be there in rehearsal, seeing him in action. Much nicer than watching a writer write prose. Now onto the second question. Both Stoppard and Woolf, more than any of the other subjects, are constantly preoccupied with how to write lives – fictional or otherwise. The line, originally by Guildenstern, that closes the loop in the Stoppard biography, "what's the first thing you remember?", inevitably brings to my mind *Sketch of the Past* and that juxtaposition of noting exactly when Vanessa told Woolf to write her memoirs before she started forgetting things. In that piece, Woolf begins with this very first memory, tinged as it was with the artistic convenience of mismatching the time of day and the destination to where she's going. Whenever I teach life writing I teach your first chapter of the Woolf biography, but I find that now I could also add the last chapter of the Stoppard biography. How do you compare the manner in which you approached the writing of these two lives, Woolf's and Stoppard's, in relation to their own life writing?

HL: It's a very good and complex question, and I'll try and keep my answer brief. I think I have taken my cues, or my prompts, from the people that I've written about and one of the reasons I wrote Woolf's life in the way that I did – which was somewhat thematised and not entirely cradle-to-grave – because I was intensely aware of her own critical, quizzical attitude towards what she would think of as traditional, or conventional, 19th century biography – though she's somewhat caricaturing that, I think. I was moved by what she said about writing *Mrs Dalloway*, in which you keep pausing linear time and going into memory and reflection. She talks about digging out deep caves or pools behind her characters, and I did want to do something like that. I wanted the reader in that book to be very aware of the limitations of the biographical form; that's why I started with that wonderful sentence from when she's trying to write Roger Fry's biography: "My God, how does one write a Biography?" I thought that was a good start.
You can't write a life of Stoppard without being intensely aware of the appalling characters in his plays who are biographers or literary editors. One of the great pleasures of *Arcadia* is seeing the terrible Bernard getting everything wrong and being punished for that: all the items, the books, the pieces of paper, the bits of evidence, you can see them being picked up and misinterpreted. Stoppard is funny about the appallingness of biographers and literary editors, especially when he has Oscar Wilde talk in a Wildean manner on this subject in *The Invention of Love*. He often quotes an example of this where Goethe is writing his letters in old age and he says "and then at the age of 17 I fell in love for the first time" and the editor's footnote reads "Here, Goethe was mistaken." There's a great moment in *Indian Ink* where the awful editor, Mr. Pike, the would-be biographer, is always barking up the wrong tree and there actually is a dog barking up a

tree at one point, so I was aware that I didn't want to be the dog barking up the wrong tree. I gave space in the book to all his reservations and qualms about the writing of biography. When I came to the end I wanted to make it obvious that I was there the whole time – because you *are* there, you're writing from your own class, education, gender, race, generation, and you can't pretend that you're writing something that's completely objective. I wanted at the very end of the book to say, in effect, writing about a living person is a wonderful example of how inconclusive biography is bound to be, and how deeply mysterious the life of another person is, ultimately: off they go into the dark.

MRDV: That last chapter was really fantastic, so thank you for giving me more material to teach with. I'll move on to Roy now and then we'll come back to the both of you together. The first question regards *On Seamus Heaney*, your latest, in comparison with all the others. In that regard, I noticed a few main differences. In the preface and acknowledgements to your *On Seamus Heaney* you address the matter of genre, shape, and strictures when writing a biography that is part of a series such as the Princeton *Writers on Writers*. First of all, indirectly, but in a somewhat Boswellian manner, you do inscribe yourself in the biography. You relate your first reading of *North* in 1975 and the various encounters with Heaney's work are mapped onto your life as touchstones. You also mention that you wish you had known him better, having written about him. Secondly you comment on the series convention of doing without the extensive footnoting on which you, as a historian-biographer, had until then relied heavily. I have to say I missed your mischievous footnoting. This is also a short biography, unlike the two-volume door stoppers that make up the Yeats *Life*. Finally, unlike Hermione's subject, Heaney wasn't alive anymore, unfortunately having passed away recently. Also, you knew him and shared many friends in common. How did this move towards a more contemporary life, inside the *Writers on Writers* series, compare to your other work in previous biographies?

RFF: I'm sorry there aren't bitchy little footnotes, but there are bitchy comments in the Heaney book, and in one of them I refer to the epidemic of posthumous best-befriending that happened after he died. There were articles in the *Irish Times* where people actually said "I think I was his best friend" and I thought *this is like a schoolyard in some way*. And I wanted to make my position clear that I wasn't claiming to be a best friend, which I wasn't. But this is true: working on his life along with the poems, which had been absolute touchstones in my life, I wished I had known him better, and I thought it was worth saying that. The question of the recently deceased subject raises some of the same problems that writing about someone who's actually still living does, because you have family to consider. That's why I'm very glad it wasn't an authorized or a full biography. I'm flattered you treat it as a biography Rita, but in a sense, it didn't begin like that, nor did my very first book written before you were born in 1976, *Charles*

Stewart Parnell: The Man and his Family, which I want to talk a little about later. Looking at it for this conversation sparked some thoughts about how I became a biographer. The Heaney book was in *Writers on Writers* but the more I thought about what his writing meant to me the more I thought this should be a book about his relationship with his readers: why people trusted him, why he had this rare contract with his readers… And to understand and discuss this I felt the life was important and so was the progression of the books because he, like Yeats, wrote *books*; he didn't write poems and then collect them into books. This is one of the Heaney-Yeats connections which I tried to discipline myself not to spend too much time on, but which were one of the reasons why I'd wanted to write the book which, rather like Hermione's *Stoppard*, came to me. Somebody at Princeton rang up and said "we have this series, would you do one on Heaney?" and I thought about it and thought yes, that I would like to do, very much indeed. I hope something that Hermione and I might talk about in the latter part of this conversation is the snottiness of some academics towards the discipline of biography, which is a discipline worth paying attention to, and worth analysing, and worth thinking about. I came to it in a rather roundabout way. I came to it as a historian who lurched into biography. I was, I suppose, the kind of vulgar-Marxist PhD student who believed that people are created by their social circumstances, and I wanted to try and explain Charles Stewart Parnell, this very unusual Anglo-Irish protestant politician who became an icon of 19th century nationalism. I wanted to explain him by, first of all, analysing the 19th century gentry world he came from in the very peculiar place that County Wicklow is and was in Ireland, and then, out of the extraordinary family full of eccentrics, early feminists, a completely fabulising mother whose lies have been taken as gospel truth by many hagiographers. And out of this spinning context, at the very end, I wanted to place this little doll-like figure, who would be created by his background. People aren't created by their backgrounds in that way, but I still think I was partly onto something, and when I look at that book now I think it has the component parts of a very interesting biography but it's arranged into too schematic a way. But from that I achieved an interest in biography, and my next book was a very strictly organized biography of Lord Randolph Churchill, though again I tried to read his life as a character in a Trollopian political novel because I had to give myself some fun and I was already moving towards the idea that literature and people who practise literature might be a more interesting subject than politics and people who practise politics. So I was at that stage of my development when Yeats came my way and I was absolutely ready for it.

MRDV: I wasn't aware of the subtitle of the Parnell biography, that really interests me. This has something to do with the next question, about *Vivid Faces* and how the first time I read it, I couldn't appreciate its structure and overall shape and these struck me as I reread it for today. In the foreword you describe its approach as an essay in contextual biography, and in the introduction you employ the

metaphor of a net in which the lives of various people are threaded. You contrast that approach to the Olympian tones found in much historiography, and you align *Vivid Faces* with a younger generation of historians and biographers. Interestingly, you also describe the approach as thematic rather than chronological, and I found that was a sharp contrast with the aims you put in the *Apprentice Mage,* the first volume of the Yeats biography. In that other introduction your foil is Ellmann's *The Man and the Masks* and its dazzling structure of thematic strands of occultism, drama and love. How do these two other books compare in their approach to biography and history?

RFF: Hermione and I used to talk endlessly about Yeats and chronology. As she says, I was constructing my biography against one of the most commented upon writers imaginable – the bibliography on Yeats is so enormous and of course Ellmann dominated. Ellmann I revere, his *James Joyce* is the template of literary biography. I love his books about Yeats, but he wrote them very thematically. He writes that at a certain point in the 1890s, Yeats is like a man lost in a hotel late at night where the lighting has failed and he's running around opening various doors trying to find which room is his. And Ellmann approaches this by doing each room separately, the room of occultism, the room of love, the room of politics, and so forth. When Hermione said that Stoppard lived this incredibly complex life doing all these different things at the same time, I thought that's exactly what Yeats is like; in the same day he'll write a political article, he'll draft a poem, he'll go out to dinner, he'll have an assignation with some peculiar figure from a psychic or occultist society, and then at the end of the day he'll write a number of brilliant letters to different people giving a totally different spin on what he's been doing. And the only way you can keep any kind of organization with that is to be mercilessly chronological and to remember all the time that you're writing before hindsight. Because unlike Stoppard, Yeats had ruthlessly put a pattern on his life in his wonderful *Autobiographies*, which are so marvellous, so readable, so devious, so inaccurate, so determined to spin himself and his generation into the creators of the Irish revolution. That, if you like, is one link forward to *Vivid Faces* because while I did think that the Irish revolution was made by a generation, it wasn't really Yeats's generation and it wasn't Yeats. And I wanted to uncover a different kind of world there. *Vivid Faces* was written when I was very much older, and the theme is age and disillusionment. When I was writing it, I wanted very much to deal with that generation as I thought of them, people born around 1880 who kicked off the traces of their parents' beliefs and made a revolution culturally, socially, eventually politically. I wanted to follow them through so I could get a character, either a totally forgotten character like Liam de Róiste who fortunately kept a wonderful diary during his revolutionary life in Cork, or a rather better known person, like the feminist Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, and I wanted to drop into their lives at certain points as you go through this amazing twenty-five, thirty years of revolution and change and total *bouleversement* of everything that

their parents had expected, and then, at the very end, I wanted to be looking at their disillusioned responses to what Ireland became.

MRDV: I really liked the "Learning" chapter because I hadn't really thought about what the setting and the mixed company for learning Irish did for the women in that generation, and I think that's also where a lot of disillusionment comes from – when you compare that climate to that of the 1937 constitution, it breaks my heart.

RFF: Well, that's another thing. I was making amends because in my big book on Irish history, *Modern Ireland*, which I published in 1988, I do make the point that the women's revolution had been not written enough about and there was hardly anything to read about it, but I didn't write it at the time. So when I came back to writing a synoptic account of a period of Irish history, I wanted to make up for having given women short shrift the first time around. Actually, another thing that parallels those two books, *Modern Ireland* and *Vivid Faces*, is that what I really wanted to find when I was writing *Modern Ireland* was a family who had kept records from around 1600 when I began, through to 1972 when I ended, and to drop in on this family's history from time to time as their fortunes changed. I still wish I'd been able to do that, but there just was no source that would have enabled me to do that, but it would have been a way of biographising Irish history.

MRDV: Now, the question for both. I am not alone in considering you as two of the most important biographers of your generation, and if we think about how life writing and more specifically biography itself has developed, the concept of generation Roy employs in *Vivid Faces* can be used in this meta capacity. Woolf did it, when she spoke of the "New Biography" as much as when she contrasted the prose written by Edwardians to her Georgians, and this is also visible in Strachey's title of *Eminent Victorians*. Yeats too uses generational markers in his writings – most obviously in the "Tragic Generation" section of *Autobiographies*, but also in the earlier "If I Were Four and Twenty." Ellmann would be to me the most important biographer of the generation prior to yours, and for the generation after you a good example would be, for me, Heather Clark who openly declared in recent interviews that she "wanted to give Plath the Hermione Lee treatment." Do you find that thinking in terms of generations of biographers is illuminating at all for you when you think about your careers and how you're related to biographers before and after you?

HL: In terms of cultural history, it's interesting to think of generation as a marker rather than, say, class, and there are obvious examples of that with the Bloomsbury Group, for instance, or the Angry Young Men of the 1950s, where you can see a generational moment. I don't know whether for a historian every single historical

grouping would lend itself so dramatically to that concept of generations. In terms of whether I think of myself as representative of a generation of biographers I think the answer is probably "no". I don't have any acute self-conscious sense of myself doing something differently as against the previous generation. What I do think about biography is that it's always reactive. Even if you're writing about someone for the first time as I was with Penelope Fitzgerald, you are writing your book in the light of how she has been treated as a writer in her lifetime. I was very conscious with the Woolf biography, especially looking back on it, that I was writing out of a resistance or a reaction against the way I felt she had been infantilised by a particular kind of psychoanalytical treatment in the 1980s and 90s, when she was presented above all as a victim of child abuse; that's a real story, but it didn't seem to me the only story. And I was very consciously trying to re-professionalize her. I wanted people to think about her as though as you might think about Carlyle or Henry James.

RFF: The other thing I think you were doing was rescuing her from her incredibly entitled and territorial family. I mean, it just drove me mad, "this is my aunt"…

HL: My dotty aunt, yes, exactly.

RFF: That's one thing you were very definitely doing. You may also have an author, a person, a writer or whoever you're writing about, who has been far too much seen in the light of how one other rather more famous person whom they knew reflected them. Were you rescuing Wharton from James? Because what I mainly knew about Wharton's life as a person was that she terrified Henry James into exhausted submission…

HL: That's right. He called her, not entirely affectionately, "The Angel of Devastation".

RFF: But you showed that she was infinitely more than that, and more vulnerable than that, and more complex than that, more than just a particular moment of her life.

HL: I also wanted to rescue her from the R. W. B. Lewis Pulitzer Prize-winning treatment of her as simply the Gilded Age New York chronicler. That's why I started that book in Paris and not in New York; her parents were in Paris at the time of the 1848 revolution, just as it happened. And I really wanted to begin and end in Paris and to re-think her as a kind of European.

RFF: Which I think was a very intentional thing you did, I mean she's a much bigger and more colourful and angrier figure when you've read more novels like *Custom of the Country*.

HL: Exactly. So we agree I think that biography is a kind of reactive process, and that's clearly the case with what you were doing with Yeats. You've talked about that already today, that sense of needing to take him back from that Ellmann mythologizing.

RFF: Yes, I think I was also trying to take him back from critics like Cleanth Brooks, who say the life has absolutely nothing to do with the work – because you cannot read a line of Yeats or of his letters without knowing that the life and the work are completely interwoven with each other.

HL: Absolutely. My question to you, Roy, is a question about autobiography in Heaney. I know your book is not a full-scale biography and I completely understand that – I half-wish it were, but I relish the book that it is. But you often use the word *autobiographical* when you're talking about Heaney's work. There seems to be a really interesting tension between, for instance, when you're talking about Heaney's biographical reading of Yeats in an essay which you describe as having a strong autobiographical thumbprint, or when you quote him, a propos of *Field Work* wanting to use "I" in the poems and, as he puts it, "to make it closer to the 'I' of my own life". There are many times where you talk about that "I" figure in the poems. But at the same time, especially when you're dealing with *Station Island*, you talk about a process of concealment as well as self-revelation, and you warn us against the dangers of assuming that a poet writing in the first person is necessarily writing about himself. Was that a balancing act you were having to do in writing this book? On the one hand you can see how autobiographical he often is, and on the other hand he's evading or deflecting biographical readings.

RFF: I was crossing myself against the inevitable critique that "oh, this crude historian thinks every time he writes a poem with 'I' that he's the person he's writing about". But at the same time, when you read what he's saying in *Stepping Stones* in a conversation with Dennis O'Driscoll, he is making himself the person who he is writing about in those poems, especially when he writes about *Station Island*, he's giving it away himself. And it's interesting to think of the structure of *Stepping Stones*, which you read as a wonderful, leisurely but deeply probing, and needling, and penetrating conversation between two people, when in fact it was mostly done by email. Email and famous people is a very interesting subject. Unlike Tom Stoppard, Seamus did use email, but it was a secret email. For most purposes he emailed his secretary, who signed for him and more or less said "Seamus doesn't use email, but he says to tell you". In fact he did use email, his daughter has told me this. But he had to guard himself in that way. It means that the answers to Dennis O'Driscoll's questions were far more carefully structured, and probably follow-up emails would have put them right and changed what he was saying and, you know, it's a much less free-wheeling process than the beautifully edited version that comes out makes it appear, and I think that's well worth thinking about. Seamus and his methods of communication: he wrote

letters and some of them are wonderful and I quote, or paraphrase, some of them. But he really liked, rather like Evelyn Waugh of all people, to correspond by postcard, and when he corresponded by postcard with Brian Friel the postcards were very often signed "Sadie". They were written in a roguish, flirtatious, slightly obscene, sort of Northern Irish *patois*, and Brian Friel apparently wrote back to him as Sadie as well. Luckily I realised early on who Sadie was but, referring back to the theme of the idiot biographer that Stoppard is so keen on, I like to think of some biographer thinking that there was this woman Sadie.

HL: That's wonderful.

MRDV: This mysterious Sadie, whom they apparently shared? That's even worse. And, of course, with Seamus Heaney there's the famous text as well, the famous last text…

RFF: Oh, *Noli timere*. That gave me an *envoi* at the end which was almost as perfect as what Stoppard gave Hermione, which was this fabulous arc of life and work coming to rest in *Leopoldstadt* at the end, which I have to ask you, Hermione, that was such a *donn*ée, when did you realise that was going to happen?

HL: I knew from fairly early on that I was going to end the book with his account of an outdoor production of *The Tempest* in which Ariel runs across the water into the darkness and then the fireworks go up at the end when Ariel has disappeared – and if you look at the stage directions it just says "Exit Ariel". I always knew I was going to save that till the end. I didn't know until about 2018 that he was starting to think about a play which had a lot to do with his childhood and his past life and his Jewish history. I became aware in the spring of 2018 from a phone call I had from him that he was reading a lot of books about the Holocaust and the Viennese Jews and their whole culture in that period. And he told me that he was having terrible nightmares about the Holocaust. That play took him about a year-and-a-half to write, and he was sending me early versions. I was in the home stretch of my writing in 2018 and I had thought that I was going to finish with his 80th birthday party in 2017. I thought that would be a nice place to stop. But it became rapidly apparent to me through 2018 that there was going to be another play to write about and so I started to talk to him about it as he came to the end of writing.
He had said to me right at the beginning of my work: "I see this as if we're going to be on parallel lines: you'll be writing about my life and I'll be leading my life, and every so often these lines will intersect". I thought that was a very nice Stoppardian image - and that's exactly how it fell out. And so these lines intersected when I was finishing my book and I crossed paths with him at that moment. I sent the text to Faber before the first reviews of *Leopoldstadt* had taken place; I had been able to describe the play, and talk about the production taking shape in rehearsal,

but I hadn't been able to talk about its reception by the time the deadline came for my book to be handed in, so I had to assess how much space on the page I was going to need in order to deal with the first reviews of *Leopoldstadt*. And, of course, I didn't know at that point that I would also be writing the sentence that on the 14th of March the play went dark because of COVID-19.

I've got another question for Roy about *Vivid Faces*, the chapter called "Remembering", which is my favourite chapter in the book. It's about what you call the mechanisms of public memory and amnesia and what the historian/biographer does with these reconstituted versions of the past: all these hagiographies, commemorations, official histories, and indeed score settlings and revenge narratives. How much did you approach writing that book thinking "I really need to get these people out from under some of these retrospective narratives"?

RFF: Oh that was always there because Irish history – and Irish historiography – is so implicated in territorialism and competing claims and competing narratives, but when I began thinking about this book in about 2006 and then was asked to give the Ford lectures and that was the germ of it. I hadn't realised then that it would come out during what in Ireland we call grandly the "Decade of Commemorations": we think of the Irish revolution as beginning about 1912 and ending in 1923, instead of it just being 1916 and then the Anglo-Irish war. So, on the back of that, an awful lot of discussion of commemoration, memory, and suppression began to take place in Ireland and that was just when I was writing this book, which came out in 2014, two years after the "Decade of Commemorations" began. So I was thinking in commemorative terms and thinking about the absolute unreliability of official memory. I wasn't alone in this, but it worked very well for my purposes, and I read a lot of interesting stuff that was coming out at the time from fellow historians who were dealing with it in a more psychological or anthropological way, but it was all grist to the mill of what I still think of as a kind of group biography.

MRDV: What's interesting about the "decade of commemorations" is also how it's compared to the 50 years, so there seems to be a commemoration of the commemoration of the 50 years in the 100 years, or a retrospective look at other commemorations of the same things…

RFF: Well, this is another thing. I got into trouble – bad trouble, as my friend Colm Tóibín would say, bad trouble – in 1998 because I had given a lecture in Cambridge about the commemoration of the 1798 rebellion and it ended up as an essay in *The Irish Story* called "Remembering 1798." It poured a lot of cold water on the efforts of the government to make 1798 into a feel-good, ecumenical, sort of EU *avant la lettre* enterprise between the Irish and the noble French and all the Catholics and Protestants coming together, which was a fantasy that was

being employed for purposes of the peace process which was underway at that time. So I was much relieved and I think you were just indicating, Rita, that the commemorative impulse when it came around for 2012 to 2022 is far more questioning, far more pluralist, far more attuned to listening to the narratives of people who didn't win in the end, and the Irish government has been in many ways exemplary in encouraging this much more open-ended approach to official remembrance than they had done before. I think they may have learned from their mistakes back in 1998.

Moving back to life writing, I'd like to raise with Hermione the question of the disreputability of biography in academic circles. Biography has its enemies and one of them is a mutual friend of ours, the wonderful novelist Julian Barnes who has a lot of fun with biographers, notably in *Flaubert's Parrot*, but in other books as well. Would you agree that his latest essay on biography though, *The Man in the Red Coat*, actually puts Julian Barnes in more of a biographer's role than he would have allowed himself to occupy previously?

HL: I think he's rather like Henry James, in that he has a lot of critical things to say about biography, particularly in *Flaubert's Parrot,* but is himself completely fascinated by biography and reads a lot of it, especially about French authors. He also loves writing biographical pieces, particularly about French artists: wonderful, long pieces about, say, Degas' letters, which are like mini-biographies themselves. I think there's a thin membrane dividing him from us actually. I also think that the disreputability of biography in the academy, at least in the field of literature, has shifted quite a lot and I would love to know whether the same thing has happened amongst historians. I'm very struck by the number of literary scholars, for instance in Oxford, who have started to write memoirs and personal narratives on the side, as it were, not as part of their scholarly work but alongside it, without feeling shame or guilt about this. When I first started work there in 1998 I had a little bit of a struggle introducing life writing onto the Oxford literary syllabus. Now I'm very glad to see that life writing continues as an integrated part of the course. I had something to do with bringing life writing into academia, with the Life Writing Centre that I set up at Wolfson College in 2011, when I was President there. But of course it's not only that – many other people are doing, and teaching, life writing now within universities. I think it's become less of a mongrel slouching outside the back door of the academic palace. That's a good thing, but maybe it's also a slightly dangerous thing; I wouldn't want it to get terribly over-theorized.

RFF: No, I think it's a good thing when it produces a book like Shapiro's Shakespeare in *1599*, which is a totally biographical approach and terribly illuminating and marvellously done.

HL: But what about you? What about historians?

RFF: I think historians are kinder to biography now. It's a parallel thing, it's the way that theory has bankrupted itself and the sociology of the sort of the *Annales* school, which was a wonderful thing when it happened in historical historiography back in the 1960s, was running into a dehumanized version of anthropological history I think, for many of us – much though we had learned from it back in the day. And I think this turning of the searchlight onto the individual, onto the examined life, was something that was liberating. 1989 and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, I think, can't be underrated either.

HL: And if you have major historians like you and Margaret MacMillan putting the individual life story or the individual life as part of the group or the generation, putting it right at the front of the historical narrative, then there's no returning from that.

RFF: No, the book that did that for me was published ages ago, in 1978 by the Cambridge historian Peter Clarke, called *Liberals and Social Democrats*. It was about the kind of post-Fabian generation, Barbara and J. L. Hammond, and their friends, and it was about time and disillusionment. There's a very moving last chapter where they've been through the war, they've seen the Beveridge Report do all that they wanted (they thought), and then they lived through the 50s and into the 60s and they think nothing has changed that much. It had a huge effect on me and it was *Liberals and Social Democrats* I was thinking of in many ways, actually, when I came to write *Vivid Faces*. But Clarke's book didn't make a huge impact at the time, although Clarke was a brilliant historian, because it was – and more or less said it was – a group biography. It was just the wrong moment, I think, for that particular approach.

MRDV: The genre indication on the front or back cover creates problems as we know from Woolf as well.

RFF: Hermione has mentioned the Oxford Centre of Life Writing and that has developed on so many levels, employing so many people, doing so many different things. I applaud it and when I remember the difficulty you had to get that going and just trying to raise pennies to get support for it and now it's applying for million-pound things and doing wonderfully. And employing an entire generation – we're back to generation – of biographers. The only thing is, and you've raised this very gently, I do feel the word biography is becoming too much a loose baggy monster. I was irritated when Peter Ackroyd called his book *London: The Biography*, because when I saw that title I thought "oh, it's going to be a biography or a profile of the kind of people who lived in London, this would be rather difficult to do but what an interesting approach" and then I opened the bloody book and it was a history. It was a good popular history, but it wasn't a biography. From that point on I began thinking we may have to reclaim this word.

HL: All through the 2000's, I was the literature Delegate for Oxford University Press (all the OUP editors' proposed books have to be passed through a committee of academics, or "Delegates") and I began to notice books in different disciplines popping up with titles like *Cancer: a Biography*, or *The River Ob: a Biography*. And I thought "come on, there has to be a limit, this has to be about people, please". Though there are plenty of conferences and essays and books now on "The Lives of Objects" or "The Lives of Houses"!

MRDV: *Lives of Houses* was a great book…

HL: I know, but it's the people in the houses that makes them matter, isn't it?

RFF: And how houses are extensions of people. I love the *Lives of Houses*, I think it's terrific.

HL: Well, you are a very shining part of it. And on that mutually congratulatory note, perhaps we should start to make our *adieux*…

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