

NH: [*Straw Dogs*] received a lot of acclaim. How much criticism did you get in academic journals, as opposed to the mass market? What was the response of your peers?

JG: I don't think it's been reviewed in the academic journals,—or if it has I haven't seen the reviews. But one of the key features of the book is that it's not meant as a contribution to academic philosophy so much as an attempt to present a particular view of the world to whoever wants to read the book. Of course, the view of the world I present is sufficiently different from most views that are around now, that the book was bound to be intensely controversial. Having said that, I think one of the features of the book is that I think I sort-of retrieved a view of things which was—in many different forms—widespread pretty well universally up to about the end of the eighteenth century. I suppose if there's one feature of the book which is the most controversial is that it denies the possibility of progress in ethics and politics. It accepts that there's progress in science,—I'm not a sceptic or relativist,—progress in science is just a fact in my opinion,—I think people who—sceptics or relativists or postmodernists—who say science is like literature or art—you just make it up,—I think that's just frivolous. I think the fact of scientific progress is shown in increasing human power over the world,—just a fact. What's controversial in the book I think is the denial that that undoubted progress in science can be replicated in ethics and politics. People find it very very hard to stomach that central tenet of humanism,—that humans can remake the world in such a way that future generations can be happier than humans have ever been,—giving up that hope seems to be intensely painful. And yet no one had it up until the end of the eighteenth century, and lots of people lived happy lives. So one of the things I'm interested in—and this is why in a sense I find the negative responses to the book as interesting as the many positive responses it's had—is the way in which this secular religion has become indispensable—a secular religion of progress—to balance of mind or inner tranquillity or to morality, in the way that Victorian Christians said that Christianity was in the nineteenth-century. In fact, some of the negative responses to the book remind me very much—, they're almost in the same words that were used in the nineteenth century in respect of agnostics,—and they would say 'Well, if we don't believe this, if we didn't believe that there was divine purpose, that our lives were providentially ordered, that meaning was guaranteed in the world by God, we would commit suicide, we'd get drunk, we'd go out and rape people—'

NH: Social order would collapse.

JG: And it didn't collapse.

NH: Of course it wouldn't, because social order is more habitual than conceptual, isn't it?

JG: That's a very important point, and a very important point of the book. I argue, in the book, exactly that,—social order rests on practices, more than it rests on beliefs and ideologies.

NH: It's true. For as long as humans have been humans we've done pretty much the same kinds of basic things. What's interesting is charting what is and isn't malleable, because obviously there are plenty of things that are very highly malleable about that. Suicide bombers,—that's a sign of malleability, isn't it?

JG: It is a sign of malleability, and I think—

NH: Not that I'm suggesting that it's abnormal and irrational to kill yourself—, well, it is. I suppose one of the fundamental premises of most world views is that most living things, their prime concern is going on living.

JG: Well, Hobbes—who I admire very much—based his whole critical philosophy on self-preservation. Now, Hobbes is normally thought of as a very realistic, sober, almost deeply pessimistic thinker. I think suicide bombers present a problem for Hobbes that Hobbes couldn't solve, because the suicide-bombers embody the truth that humans are less attached to individual self-preservation than they are to other things. Again, one of the things that I want to argue is that pretty well all European philosophers and thinkers, from the start up until now, have exaggerated the role of reason and self interest in human affairs. It's not like humans can't be self-interested in markets or in career competition,—we all know that they can,—but in the great movements of history, and even in crises in individual life, it's not a calculation of self-interest or of self-preservation that's decisive,—it's some passion or myth, or a feeling of impotence,—a need to vent one's feelings even at the cost of death,—which animates at least these suicide-bombers now. One of the things I think is not malleable in humans is their dependency on myth. In other words, the idea, which maybe goes back to Socrates,—although we don't really know what Socrates thought or believed,—the idea that—, which is certainly strong in Western thought, and was very strong in ideologies like Marxism and various forms of secular humanism,—that humans can advance to a stage in which they dispense with the need for myth. I think that's like the Victorian idea which John Stuart Mill held that humans can advance to the stage where they dispense with the need for sex. John Stuart Mill said he looked forward to a time when humans copulate out of a sense of duty only. What happens if you model society or policies or try to live that way is that these natural impulses, like the natural impulses to myth-making, come out in different ways,—sublimated or perverted,—come out in odd and strange ways. I think that the natural impulse to religion,—what we call religion,—or perhaps, to use a less shop-soiled word, myth-making,—come out in secular humanism. It came out in the twentieth-century in the western intelligentsia's generally favourable attitude to communism, which was a catastrophic experiment, which was based on a myth. There's an interesting anecdote in one of Arthur Koestler's autobiographies,—very interesting writer,—he says he was at some communist meeting and they were discussing transport under the new socialist regime of the future, and someone at the back of the room said 'Oh, this is wonderful, but there will be accidents, there will be cases where a child gets run over or something like that,' and he said there was a total silence fell on the room, and then someone said 'In a fully developed socialist transport system there will be no accidents.' Now that's a myth, in the sense of—, what is a myth? This is like what Freud called an illusion. Freud said illusions may contain some truth, often distorted. The key thing about an illusion, and of a myth, is that it's believed to confer meaning on life, not for any rational grounds there may be for it, or even for any truth it contains,—it's believed because it consoles, because it confers meaning. I think much of secular thought is myth-making. Particularly it uses many of the myths of Christianity.

NH: But there are differences of degrees between the different myths. If we're talking about the western myth,—and the central polemic of your book is deconstructing that myth of the west based on progress,—but that's based on more demonstrable fact than obviously Christian myths would be where—. One thing that's fascinating, where you're talking about the historical transition between religiosity and secularism, the difficulty with secularism and myth-making, which proposes some kind of nirvana in worldly times,—that sets up a fantastic future which can be judged, which should be quantifiable.

JG: We already know, in a sense. The twentieth century is littered with vast experiments in secular utopianism. We know now.

NH: I agree. What I was going to say is that with religion in the past deferring redemption to the afterlife, it's the perfect myth.

JG: That's the advantage of traditional myths. Traditional myths seem to me to be deeper and wiser than the new secular myths,—they contain more truth, in the form of ciphers. But, also, as you say,

they refer to that realm of human experience, or that which is beyond human experience, of which we are necessarily ignorant, or which is mysterious, i.e. what happens after death.

NH: So in a circular fashion it refers to the fact that the idea of progress is the myth,—the idea of having this kind of perfectible end point is the myth.

JG: In history, which I believe to be a hollowed out version of the Christian idea of the last judgement or the end of time. Think of the difference between Christianity and religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, it's never been thought that history had any meaning. The point was to wake up from history. So, if you start with that myth, you won't have something like Marxism or anarchism,—anything teleological applied to history, you just won't have it. One of the main thrusts of the book is to say that secular humanism, of the sort which has shaped the prevailing view of the world, is a neo-Christian world-view,—that it couldn't have developed in China or India or Japan.

NH: Judaism is the historical root for teleology, isn't it, in history? But that teleological event is deferred to such an extent—?

JG: But also it wasn't universal. One of the things that I think is that, in Judaism,—the advantage, in a sense, over Christianity,—it's normally thought that Christianity marked an advance over Judaism by becoming more universal. I think it was a regression, because it then became associated with claims about the whole species, about the history of the whole species, whereas in Judaism, in some ways like other particularistic religions, it was about a particular way of life. I think another way that the book tries to deconstruct current ways of thinking is to say that, although it insists there is human nature and recurrent human needs including the need for myth, it actually argues that monotheism was the precondition for the forms of secular universalism we've had now. It's impossible to imagine a counterfactual history in which we were still polytheistic,—it would be so different. It might not have been completely impossible. It could have been the case, for example, that Mithraism prevailed instead of Christianity among the Romans.

NH: It creates this kind of utilitarian focus on systemic efficiency—

JG: Of the whole,—of some sort of whole,—

NH: Because there is a whole, whereas there is just less of a whole with a—

JG: —polytheistic view. If you have a polytheistic view, even within a given way of life or a given culture, people will worship different gods at different times of their lives, or even at the same time for different purposes.

NH: The problem is now—just from a practical point of view—what do you do about myth-making? What am I supposed to do then if I've basically held this position all my life. And there are plenty of people who now do. Self-consciousness surely destroys the possibility of—, do you think it destroys the possibility of functional myth-making?

JG: It's certainly true that we can't concoct vital myths the way people like Nietzsche thought,—like mixing a new cocktail,—'Christianity hasn't worked, so we'll concoct something else.' The result of that is that you come up with something completely absurd and to my taste repulsive, like the 'superman.' I'm not just thinking about its debasement in Nazism where it was certainly used, but it's inherently ridiculous, actually. I think what happens in practice is myths become more personal,—they become personal mythology. The myth could be anything from the kind of personal myths which JG Ballard has explored, which are myths of flight, myths of social breakdown, all kinds of personal myths deriving from people's different life histories. Because I believe humans to

be myth-making animals, I don't at all rule out the emergence of new collective myths. I don't think there is anything to be done to prevent this if it is going to happen, but one of the things I am afraid of is that the repression of the mythic impulse could lead—and even to some extent is leading already—to savage and cruel and primitive myths gaining power, and even having political effects. The notion that you can conjure democracy—western democracy—out of a part of the world where it has never existed—Iraq—is a myth, and a very very dangerous myth. The key thing about myths, I think, is really not to try and think without them, especially in politics but even I think in everyday life you'll fail to do that, but really to be alert to the dangers of repressing them, and to their embodying needs which really should be met by religion. One of the things I dislike about Christianity, which I in other respects have a quite a lot of reverence for, but I dislike the missionary aspect. So *Straw Dogs* is not a missionary book. It's not a book that says 'believe this.' Absolutely not. Whatever people can take from it,—five, ten, zero percent of it,—and use it as they like. In fact it's almost a book against belief. But one message which is in it is that if you need myth, as I think humans do, you're better off, it's safer for you, it will be more fulfilling, there'll be more truth in the myth, if you adopt, participate or partake in one of the myths of the traditional religions rather than the secular myths that are now very strong. Not only the myth of politics, but a myth of technology, a myth of drugs, a myth of sex. These are all notions that human life can be transformed from what it actually is into something different, and they always lead to tremendous disillusionment, whereas the older myths, that have been around an awful long time, they reflect—, they're ciphers for deeper and more enduring truth about the human condition. Now if you say which people should adopt, I think it depends on their circumstances. There's a marvellous story, by the way, by Graham Greene, which I like very much,—and he was interviewed once about why he converted to Catholicism, and he said: 'Well, the key thing in the process of conversion was the Jesuit I was being instructed by gave me an absolute knockdown argument for the existence of God,' and they said 'What was it?' and he said 'Oh, I can't remember!' [Laughs] But that was the key. Pascal said 'The heart has its reasons,' and so on.

NH: The problem is, Pascal and you and anyone who's going to adopt the same position as you or is in the same position anyway, if you're consciously choosing those myths that's very different to believing those myths. You had a line about 'Self-deception is often best practised by those deceiving themselves.' Do you think there is a qualitative difference between believing in a myth *au naturel*—as it were—as opposed to consciously believing?

JG: It might sound very odd and paradoxical to say this, but myths are not a matter of belief at all,—or it's something that's almost discovered. A living myth somehow secretes itself from experience, by itself, either individual experience or collective experience. So my approach to this is to say—, well, starting with my admiration for polytheism, there wouldn't be one myth that suits everybody, there'll be many, and therefore the approach is one of openness and humility,—wait for the myth which suits your circumstances, your needs, your life, to appear, and participate in that myth. People might say 'Well, that's a very disillusioned, sort-of urban-type approach,' but historically, certainly before Christianity and even for most of Christianity, religion wasn't about belief, it was about practice.

NH: Yeah, it's like an old pagan approach, or the Roman. Also, for example, with the Greeks it's always very unclear the level and the quality of the belief, isn't it? Plato and Socrates,—I mean, Socrates talked about the gods as well, but at the same time as talking about rationality. Do you see them basically as kind of metaphysical mascots, the gods?

JG: Well, Epicurus, and later on in Ancient Europe, they thought there definitely were gods, but they either didn't intervene in human life, or just on a whim. That's true in Homer,—most of it is playful. I don't think belief is as important as it's—, it's important in the law, it's important in science that you get accurate theories,—it's important if I can establish correct beliefs about how I

can get from A to B within London,—that’s quite useful and important. But in spiritual life, which is what the book obliquely or directly is about,—I don’t think that belief is that—, doubt is almost more important! For example, within Christianity, at least since Pascal, Christianity has thrived on doubt. One of the interesting contrasts between a rather old and subtle tradition, like Christianity is, and the more callow and brittle tradition of humanism, is that there is very little doubt in humanism. On the contrary, there’s a rather—, it’s almost shown by some of the response to *Straw Dogs*, there’s a kind of angry, indignant insistence that ‘Well, there is progress.’ I’m far from denying progress in science,—I insist upon it,—it’s real. What is unreal, and mythic, and I think a harmful myth, or a myth which is more harmful than it’s helpful, is the notion that the cumulative advance, that is an absolute reality in science, can be replicated in politics. Whatever’s gained in ethics and politics can be lost. Look at the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, what did people think the twentieth century would be like? They thought it would be an extrapolation of the best parts of the nineteenth century. Look what happened, from the First World War onwards. And yet, at the end of the twentieth century, Fukuyama, *The End of History*, et cetera, et cetera. The illusions of the end of the nineteenth century were repeated, as if nothing had happened in between. I think what that shows is that this capacity for historical, teleological myth-making is deeply ingrained in us, and keeps coming out, and can cause enormous harm and casualties, in a way in which—, after all, I know that the technological capacity to kill large numbers of people was greater in the twentieth century than earlier, but just in terms of numbers, the secular religions of the twentieth century killed more people even than the Inquisition. So one of the oddities I find among some of the humanists is they say ‘Well, religion has been very cruel, and involved in repression and there was the Inquisition.’ Sure, but the secular religions of the twentieth century were incomparably more destructive and harmful.

NH: The interesting thing is the difference between world-accepting and world-rejecting thought systems. But also they’re quite subtle differences, aren’t they? Because secular humanism has inherited the teleological aspects of Judeo-Christianity, yet at the same time it probably sees itself as a world-accepting thought system, in the sense that it thinks it’s based on—, well, it’s a mixture, because it sees itself as partly world-accepting because it’s based on a realism and rationalism, but it has an element of world-rejecting because it has the inherent belief that the world is more malleable than it actually is.

JG: Yes, and rejects human beings in the way that they are,—human beings as being incorrigibly myth-making, incorrigibly irrational,—at least from the standpoint of liberal rationalism or liberal humanism,—the kind-of-messy, accidental, sometimes tragic sometimes lyrical realities of human life are seen not as permanent, which I see them as being, and as all traditional religions see them as being, whatever their reaction to them, but as the prelude to something better, more hygienic, more rational. *The Shape of Things to Come* was a movie made in the 1930s, based on a book by HG Wells, in which he looked forward to a world in which not only are there no wars, but there is no illness, there’s no sadness, no repression. Well, *Brave New World* was like that. That seems to me to be, actually—, although I would very much like to see a world in which great wars were a thing of the past, I don’t think it’s going to happen. But to look to a world in which sadness and disappointment and grief have been removed,—in which there is only what? There’s only perpetual high? That kind of world seems to me to be one in which all the meaning has been completely hollowed out. So it’s actually a world-rejecting view. Now of course humanists would say ‘Well, we don’t look forward to such a world, that’s a complete hostile caricature.’ But, if you then say ‘you look to a world in which the religious impulse has gone,’ they say ‘Well, it’s caused enormous harm,’ to which I reply ‘So has love, so has friendship, so has art. Are all these supposed to be harmless?’ All great goods carry great evils as their shadow.

NH: Going back to what might disappear and might not disappear, what’s malleable and not malleable about human nature,—obviously, everyone accepts that things are malleable, because

humans haven't existed and one day they won't exist again, and we're only a passing phase in biological evolution—

JG: And even within the human world there are different cultures and different ways of living...

NH: So, obviously you also accept that technology changes some social behaviour, and possibly in some cases, at least historically, irrevocably. So, to some extent there is some feedback between technological development and technological change? But it's just much more subtle?

JG: Much more subtle. In the nineteenth century, and to some extent at the end of the eighteenth century, the belief was that, to the extent that human life becomes based on science,—in the way it always has actually,—there will be a convergence on a single world view and single set of values. What I'm saying is, on the contrary, what technology does,—and technology is just the by-product of accelerating scientific knowledge,—what technology does is simply facilitate humans to act upon needs and beliefs they already have. So what technology does is it facilitates or empowers humans to do what they wish to do anyway.

NH: But the development of tools in early man affected early man, right?

JG: It changed the way they lived. But did it change their basic propensities, their basic needs?

NH: We have everything in common with primates, don't we? Family groups, sex, power, status.

JG: Yeah. The forms change somewhat. If you and I accept this, you may ask why don't most people accept it? And I think there is a legitimate reason, which is if you accept it, then you won't expect this century to be better than the last one,—and the last one was pretty bad. Indeed it could be worse, because human power will be greater. Weapon technology, yeah,—bio-weapons and suchlike. So it is a sobering prospect. Some of the people who've got in touch with me since the book appeared have been psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, and they've found it's kind-of liberating in some senses, because what it says to people is 'Get rid of the burden of false hopes. Live your life! You're not responsible for the whole cosmos!' You can try and be sensitive to your friends, your own life, you can try and be more responsive,—be kind, not cruel.

NH: that's an interesting point, because one would do so out of custom, rather than any kind of absolute morality, right?

JG: You would only do so if it had gotten into the texture of your life,—that's true.

NH: And absolute morality is out of the window, basically, isn't it?

JG: Well, morality is based on—, well, I think the idea of morality is other than—as you said before—that it's conceptual and not mainly habitual is a mistake. When we behave ethically it's not because we have a certain set of beliefs or a certain set of propositions,—usually it's because we have a settled habit or sometimes because we have a strong feeling of empathy or of sympathy,—or, as I put it in *Straw Dogs*, because we know how to cope,—if something happens we know how to cope with it when it happens. If somebody needs sympathy we cope with that by showing sympathy. But it is true that, while I meant the book to be—, I think it has been to some of its readers—, liberating and disembodying a lot of these false hopes, it does involve clear-sighted recognition of the rooted and ineradicable ambivalence of knowledge and technology,—and that's not going to go away. At the margin, maybe we can be a little wiser than we've been, if we expect less of it at the margin. But given the basic analysis that humans will use their increased power given to them by increased knowledge in typically incorrigibly human ways, to promote their

beliefs, their particular projects, their views of the world, to deal with scarce resources, in all the ways they've always done,—then it is, and is meant to be, a rather sobering book. I think if we didn't have the kind of wild mythic view of the radiant future open to us we could actually have a somewhat more humane present,—more admittedly imperfect,—more flawed.

NH: Would that be the practical philosophy of politics implication?

JG: The practical implication is that politics is a matter of juggling necessary evils.

NH: And it's clouded because people don't see what those necessary evils are.

JG: Yeah, they don't see what they are, and they imagine that some of these evils can be eradicated forever. Well, maybe there are some evils that, like smallpox, can be eradicated. But then typically a different version of them recurs.

NH: In practical terms, the regimes that are in power in India and China,—are they showing any propensity to be more humane as a result of being from cultures shaped by universalising religions? Obviously in China it's come from Maoism, which is kind-of Western. What about India?

JG: One of the things I insist upon in the book is that even if polytheism had prevailed, and even if we didn't have universal religions and secular religions, there'd still be violence. One of the things that appears to be ingrained in humans is a deep propensity to violence against other humans. We're not the most violent animal, but we are very violent as primates go. So I'm not saying that everything would be cured. But the key thing is I think we should stop looking at religion or spirituality as an ingredient in the political mix, as a functional thing. I think without thinking that politics could be secularised, what we could learn to do is not to have deep religious hopes from politics, which is a different thing. In other words, we could learn to hope in politics only for skilful ways of dealing with recurring evils, whether the evils be war or—, worse yet, which we're now back with in a way—, wars of religion. The response to terrorism, which is a real threat,—but one of the evils that threatens is a murky, opaque, uncomprehending war of religion between on the one hand a form of radical Islam,—which is at least partly modern and partly wester,—and on the other hand a form of liberal humanism which doesn't see that it is itself a mutation of western religion. That's one of the recurring evils, certainly of European history. The most we can do with those is temper them,—we can't get rid of them. If the book had a practical purpose,—either *Straw Dogs* or the book on Al-Qaeda,—it was really to encourage at least some people who read the books to think about these things in a different way, a way in which would not be expecting any great transformation in the human condition from politics. That's not going to happen, whatever else happens. Even these great evils, which I address in the book, like wars of religion,—they're pretty deeply rooted and intractable. The most we can do is see them for what they are.

NH: In terms of the genealogy of western Neoliberal Capitalism/Humanism, it's got quite a specific one, which is not just Judeo-Christian, but Protestant isn't it? Because Catholicism is basically kind-of polytheistic anyway, isn't it? With the saints, and the catacombs of Palermo,—that's almost ancestor worship.

JG: That's a very good question. If you think back to when the Wall went down and when communism collapsed, one of the absurdities of people who thought that western capitalism would spring up in much the same way in Russia was that they'd forgotten what Weber and all these other writers had written about European Capitalism, and British and American Capitalism,—which is that it is to a large extent the modification of a particular religious tradition. Now, if you have a tradition like—, not even outside Christianity—, but Eastern Orthodoxy, which has never been terribly friendly to capitalism,—if you have, in addition to the destructive aberration of the

communist period, it was certain that in Russia capitalism or economic life couldn't be of the type that had arisen in England or America or Holland, or even for that matter in Italy or France, because of the exact reason you suggested, which is that these forms of capitalist economic life sprang from a particular strand within western Christianity,—Protestantism,—which couldn't be more different from these traditions of Eastern Orthodox spirituality.

NH: Could you say, if you were to take a broadly environmental view of things, that all of this mess is just because the north is cold?

JG: [Laughs] Well Camus says somewhere: 'There is one form of inequality that no revolution will remedy, and that is the inequality of the weather.'

NH: It kind of is, in a way, though? That stern Protestantism, which does focus on efficiency,—I really mean this genuinely,—because it's not warm, you can't lounge about—. I mean, I know that kind of slides into imperialist notions of Black people hanging around Jamaica and just relaxing all the time, but—

JG: And it doesn't work completely either because—after all—Russia's very cold, especially in the winter, and there hasn't really been a cult of efficiency there.

NH: The other thing was,—what is special about Protestantism, and creating the more individual relationship with God,—it's actually to do with stripping away myth. In the stripping down of the entire myth, and the dismantling of Catholicism,—it's almost like if you use your idea of sublimation, you become sublimated into mercantile activity.

JG: And it produced its own forms of perverse—, I mean, Protestantism on the whole wasn't generally more tolerant than Catholicism. If you think about things like Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, about American New England Puritan communities, they were incredibly repressive,—and also the witchcraft craze in Europe, which went on for a long time, was post-Reformation, I think. Demythologisation is always a prelude to re-mythologisation, always. A certain degree of distance can be achieved from myths, and is almost forced upon us by the fact that there are so many now. But the notion that you can excise them from our thought, that we can move from mythic thinking to a form of entirely scientific or empirical post-mythic thinking,—that's the key myth of certain Enlightenment thinkers. Not all of them held to that actually. Hume, for example, was sceptical, and even Voltaire oscillated. I wrote a little book about Voltaire, and it's interesting,—he oscillated between the mainstream Enlightenment view which is that the human future could be radically better than anything in the past, and a different view which is more like Machiavelli's or a Renaissance view, or that of the ancient historians,—cyclical,—there'll be periods which are very good, periods of real improvement, periods of civilisation and peace, and periods in which that will decay. I'll tell you what the difference is between our circumstance and then,—I don't think there's any plausible scenario which is realistic in which science won't continue to accelerate. That's the difference,—yeah,—because it's global. It could die out then. It would spring up, spread a bit, and then die out for a while. The difference between their circumstance and ours, which is what makes it so hard to think clearly without these ideas of progress, is that a type of progress is continuing inexorably and even accelerating whatever else we do,—whereas in those days, as I said, they thought there'd be times when the arts *and* the sciences will flourish, then they'll decline. For us, I think the waxing and waning of ethics and politics and art will go on, but the inexorable advance of science won't be significantly altered or changed because it's so global. Nothing now will be lost, I don't think.

NH: A possible conclusion of that is that—, obviously one of the key beliefs we're talking about is that science and technology will eradicate environmental limits to growth. So things like food

production,—in the desert they're growing lettuce in seed containers. These are churned out. So you could have urban farms. The problem there becomes the human problem of the ownership of the technology. Do you think it's inconceivable that there will be political systems where that technology is used to reduce the environmental limits?

JG: It's practically inconceivable, because as we've already seen in the first Gulf War, and now in the Iraq War, resource scarcity, chiefly in respect of oil, but increasingly fresh water, is a potent factor in human conflict. It's interesting you should mention food production, because I actually don't think that the scarcities of environmental limits we're coming up against will be about food. It will be energy. An interesting question to put to greens—what I call green-humanists—is: 'If the whole world switched from fossil fuels and hydrocarbons over to wind power, can we imagine a population of eight billion sustaining itself indefinitely on that?' I don't think so. That being the case, I think an essential part of a genuine attempt to moderate the human impact on the earth, in such a way as to make human life more sustainable, would involve a much reduced human population. In a sense, that brings out how utopian it is. It's not that populations are not falling,—they are falling dramatically. Interestingly, I was reading the other day that population growth will peak in China in about twenty years.

NH: As a result of their one baby policy?

JG: Partly, but also female emancipation. So that will begin to tail off. But the problem is, it will rise to a very high level globally, if nothing happens,—another two billion people before that happens. Also, it will be very uneven. So there will be parts of the world, including much of the gulf, which will have a doubling of population over the next fifteen-to-thirty years, depending on which country you look at, but which is dependent exactly on one human resource. So, looking at human history as the best guide to the future, which—as a disciple of the ancient historians, and later on of Machiavelli and Hume and all these writers—I do, the best guide to how humans will behave is how they have behaved. Not basing one's view of the future on—so to speak—groundless hopes, one must expect a lot of conflict over this. People will say that's chastening and depressing, and I say, 'Well, it's not necessarily depressing. It's what every generation before the last two-hundred years took for granted. The difference we have now is many of these processes of scientific invention and technological development, and resource exhaustion, are happening more quickly.'

NH: Also it erodes a confidence and a respect for the past as well.

JG: Which I think is a very very bad thing. One of the things which I think is something that can be done is to try and reconnect more with the past, which is to overcome the cult of forgetting. Nearly all of modern politics involves—, I mean, what do people say now about the Iraq War? 'Let's move on,' i.e. forget it. Well, if you forget it, then you might repeat it! If the people who pressed for the Iraq War had seriously studied the difficulties the British had in the Twenties,—how extraordinarily difficult that was,—I think they would have been chastened and they might at least have thought twice. I think one of the key things is that no study of society or human behaviour can be other than basically historical, and so the notion that you can come up with a science of sociology,—invented by one of the characters in my book, Comte,—is completely insane. You just end up studying the prejudices of the last fifteen years. You end up studying the prejudices of a timespan dictated by academic CV construction, rather than by real-life history in the world, which is longer and deeper and more complicated. So one of the slightly polemical features of both of these books—especially the Al-Qaeda book—is to say we can't understand where we are now, how we got here, unless we understand the history of ideas and a larger span of history. We can't rely on the economic models of the last fifteen or twenty years or sociological theories,—if we do we'll end in a dreadful mess. By the way,—back to Iraq,—when the war was launched earlier this year, there were commercial

firms in America who were called in to ‘design democracy’ in Iraq,—design it. Called in to design institutions.

NH: Probably Haliburton.

JG: I don’t know if it was Haliburton or a wholly owned subsidiary. But they would design these institutions. Now, how can you—, in other words, what they would work with are some dessicated models, ripped out of their historical context, probably based mainly on American or maybe British experience, and then try to apply them in these completely different, or very substantially different environments. You just can’t do it like that. The reason people don’t study history is it’s essentially disillusioning,—and that’s good. Politicians should be disillusioned before they even start.

NH: I don’t understand how any historian can be a Christian, even though it’s an inherently historical religion—

JG: That’s why they can’t.

NH: The penultimate question is about the essential need for humanity to have myths. Is that essentially because we’re beings in time and we die?

JG: And we know we die. Yeah, I think so. I think it’s part of the shock of death, which other animals—, there have been some experiments of the sort I don’t think should have been performed, that you can teach the concept of death to some of the chimpanzees.

NH: What—, by killing some chimpanzees in front of them?

JG: No, no, you can teach them the words, and then you can somehow—, I don’t know how they do it, but they can. I don’t know if they can cope with it or not,—we haven’t coped with it! I’m against all those experiments,—I think they’re completely wrong. Humans,—as one can see because one of the distinctive human characteristics is to take care of their dead, and to try and have some story about what happens when they die,—I think the myth-making feature is connected with the conscious awareness of death,—the inability to project any realistic conception of what happens after it, and the need to cope with that,—and that’s absolutely deeply-rooted in humans. Freud’s book *The future of an Illusion* argued that there would always be a religion. All religions exist to reconcile humans to the inalterable fact of their situation, which a short life ending with death, possibility of bereavement et cetera,—and it has other functions maybe too such as a sense of gratitude for the good things in life,—but that’s the root of it, and that will always be the case. Now, of course, if you’re talking to humanists and so on, they will say ‘Well, I don’t need that,’ or ‘We can get over that,’ but if you actually look into why they think that, it’s because they think that human life can be set on a steady trajectory of improvement, so that although there will be setbacks, none-the-less human life can get steadily better. That’s a myth. It’s a myth because it’s based on the fact of scientific knowledge, and a very a-historical view of how it’s used. It’s always used, always has been used, simply for the existing diversity of conflicting human purposes,—it’s always used to alleviate poverty, and to reduce pain and disability, and to prosecute wars, to improve repression,—and always will be. In this respect, I think the biblical myth of Genesis is wiser,—and it’s also among the Greeks,—which is that the growth of knowledge —, you can’t get rid of it once you’ve acquired it,—you can’t go back to the prelapsarian state,—but the growth of knowledge is always bad as well as good. What it essentially does is it simply confers greater power. Whatever human beings want to do they can do more effectively. If what they want to do is produce more crops from a given area of land, then at least for a period of time they can do it. If they want to kill more people they can do it. There have always been pogroms in European history, but you couldn’t have had the Holocaust without railway trains, telephones and poison gas. So it simply facilitates human action

on a larger scale by enhancing human power,—that’s what knowledge does. The old deep myths, of the biblical myth of Genesis, the Greek myth of Prometheus chained on his rock,—the myth of Icarus is a slightly different myth,—but all of these myths have the effect of moderating what the Greeks called hubris and the Christians called pride, which is the human conceit that humans can not only have power over the world, but they can even control the world and themselves, which they definitely can’t. They can only learn how flawed and imperfect they are. One of the things that pleased me very much about the book is that it seems—from the reception of the book—that there are many people who are receptive to and even have a taste for and a need for this very unfashionable, very unpopular truth. There’s nothing, at the moment, that goes more violently against prevailing opinion than the truth that humans are radically flawed,—in other words, to try and bring us back to a truly realistic picture of ourselves. And yet the reception of the book proves that that’s not true,—there is a taste, a need, for a less self-aggrandizing form of thought about the human predicament,—one less based on vanity, and more based on the attempt to really just see ourselves humbly as we are.

NH: In a sense that’s historically predictable, because as we said for large swathes of human history that has been the dominant view.

JG: Shakespeare’s interesting, because Shakespeare has no beliefs. What did Shakespeare believe?

NH: He wasn’t a slave to Christian ideology.

JG: He just stood outside of it. He just stood outside of it. He wasn’t—in other words—a humanist. What a humanist would do is take the moral hopes and the category of thought, and the view of the world, and take god out of it, and leave the rest of it more or less untouched. Shakespeare just stepped outside of it,—by some kind of genius, he was able to just put it to one side. One of the reasons I think Shakespeare endures so profoundly now,—doesn’t seem to have dated at all now,—is this fact, whereas Milton,—it’s Christian mythology. Even Blake, to some extent for me.

NH: He’s more of a nutter, anyway. Idiosyncratic, anyway.

JG: A visionary, yeah. [Laughs] It’s a personal mythology. It’s already personal back in nineteenth-century London.

NH: He’s doing what you’re—, well, maybe you’re not necessarily advising people—

JG: It brought him happiness, talking to angels, and dandelions. It didn’t do any harm!

NH: You have a slight anthropocentrism, but on the other hand isn’t that what we’re left with,—with a kind-of more realistic anthropocentrism, because obviously we are still human and egotistical and driven by vanity. Are you asking for basically a more humble anthropocentrism?

JG: Well, we can’t stop being human, and we can’t prevent most of our views and emotions being human-centred. But we can, I think, moderate this tendency, and de-centre our views away from wholly human concerns to some extent. After all, all the religions, even Christianity which in some ways involved a projection of human concerns onto the cosmos,—another way of looking at it was that they said that humans weren’t everything, and of course the animist religions and Buddhism—and all these others—see humans as being not especially special in the cosmos as a whole, and some aspects of the green-movement and Gaia theory and so on are like that. I don’t think it’s impossible to do what earlier generations of humans did. Earlier generations of humans were less anthropocentric, at least in their view of the world, even though their actual behaviour was often pretty rapacious. I don’t see why we can’t. The real difficulty comes in combining a less

anthropocentric view, de-centring our picture of the world to some extent away from ourselves, with the reality of increasing power,—not human control, as I mentioned, but power. That's the real difficulty, and I don't think that's possible. But all the same, individuals who read the book can de-centre their view of the world in their own lives. What the book isn't,—I'm definitely not proposing a new political project,—even an ultra-green one, even a post-anthropocentric one or a post-humanist or inhumanist one. I'm just saying, for those who find it liberating or congenial, if you think about the world in this other way, you'll find some doors opened.