ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal on-line of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion
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Vol. 1, No. 4 Winter 1997/98

Fictions: DAVID CASTLEMAN
Three Tales

Conversation: About Publishing
with CORNELIA and MICHAEL BESSIE

Poem: SHI ZHECUN
tr. ZUXIN DING

The Roundtable: In Key West with ANN BEATTIE;
VIRIDITAS DIGITALIS in the Garden

Endnotes: Kundera's Music Teacher

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Editor and Publisher Katherine McNamara editor@archipelago.org

Contributing Editors
K. Callaway
John Casey
Benjamin Cheever (benjimi200@aol.com)
Odile Hellier (yhellier@worldnet.fr)
Larry Woiwode

Editorial Assistants
Natalie Regensburg
Ann Weisensee

Web Production
Debra Weiss (debra@cstone.net) *Production design and formatting*
Cornerstone Networks *Internet Host*

Publicity Consultant
Katherine Burkett (kburkett@igicom.com)

Letters to the Editor are welcomed, by post or via the Internet.
ARCHIPELAGO
Box 2485
Charlottesville, Va. 22902-2485 USA
E-mail: editor@archipelago.org

All submissions must be typed and double-spaced and sent by post with SASE or envelope and International Reply Coupon. An e-mail address is appreciated. No electronic submissions will be accepted unless Editor is queried beforehand.

About Our Contributors

Ann Beattie is the author of 11 novels and collections of stories: DISTORTIONS, CHILLY SCENES OF WINTER, SECRETS AND SURPRISES, FALLING IN PLACE, THE BURNING HOUSE, LOVE ALWAYS, WHERE YOU'LL FIND ME, PICTURING WILL, WHAT WAS MINE, ANOTHER YOU, and MY LIFE, STARRING DARA FALCON. She is a member of the Academy of American Arts and Letters. With her husband, the painter Lincoln Perry, she lives in Maine and Key West.

David Castleman is a product of the turbulent '60s who has worked as a truck driver and laborer for the same small lumberyard since 1972, where, he writes, "We are paid poorly and treated wretchedly but the hours are long." With Leo Yankevich, he edits *Mandrake Review*, which is published in the United States and Poland. He has published poems, criticism, and stories since 1967. The stories in this issue will appear in his new collection, THE WOOD & THE WILDNESS (The Mandrake Press, ul. Wielkiej Niedzwiedzicy 35/8, 44-117 Gliwice, Poland; U.S. distrib. The Mandrake Press, P.O. Box 792, Larkspur, Ca. 94977-0792).

Shi Zhecun, writer and professor, was born in Hangzhou but was brought up in Shanghai (Songjiang). He studied in Zhijiang University (in Hongzhou), Shanghai University, and Zhendan University (in Shanghai). He began writing in the universities, influenced by Guo Moruo and Mao Dun. In 1929 he was editor of Shuimo Book Store and in 1932, became editor of *The Modern*, a monthly published by Modern Publishing House. From 1937 to 1952, he was

associate professor and full professor of Yunan University, Shamen University, Jinan University (in Shanghai), and Hujiang University (in Shanghai). Since 1952 he has taught in Eastern China Teachers University. As a writer he has written over fifty stories and a few poems and essays. His chief works include SHANGYUAN LANTERN (New China Publishing House, 1930), THE HEAD OF A GENERAL (New China Publishing House, 1932), ON THE EVE OF THE RAINY SEASON (New China Publishing House, 1933), and COLLECTED ESSAYS: UNDER THE LAMP (Kaimin Bookstore, 1937).

Viriditas Digitalis (bz2v@virginia.edu) is a book editor and reviewer who ought to have better things to write about than gardening, but apparently doesn't.

Zuxin Ding, translator, was educated in the Foreign Languages department of Guanghua University, Shanghai (1947-49), and the English Department, Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (1949-53). Self-taught, having been a worker, he was assigned briefly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but was dismissed. Since 1956, he has taught at Liaoning University. During the Cultural Revolution he was removed from his position; in 1979, he was reinstated and in 1983, made professor of English. Since 1982, he has been visiting professor at the University of Denver (US) and Kassel University (Germany), and, during three visits, has lectured at various colleges and universities in the US. He has written about Yeats, Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Auden, Lowell, Larkin, Hughes; has published four books (in addition, an anthology of Chinese poetry from 1000BC to 1995, in English, is forthcoming); and is at work on an autobiographical novel, PROGRESS IN DISTRESS. With Burton Raffel, he is the co-translator of GEMS OF CHINESE POETRY (Liaoning University Press, 1986). He is Professor of English at Liaoning University, Shenyang. His daughter lives in the United States.

Recommended Reading

> We cannot think if we have no time to read, nor feel if we are emotionally exhausted, nor out of cheap material create what is permanent. We cannot co-ordinate what is not there.
>
> *Palinurus (Cyril Connolly)*
> THE UNQUIET GRAVE

Joan Schenkar (Plays: SIGNS OF LIFE; CABIN FEVER; THE UNIVERSAL WOLF, and others; SIGNS OF LIFE / 6 COMEDIES OF MENACE, Wesleyan University Press, 1997): "A brilliant exploration of aspects of nothingness: psychological, philosophical, mathematical, and dramatic." **Brian Rotman, SIGNIFYING NOTHING: THE SEMIOLOGY OF ZERO (St. Martins Press, 1987)**

"An insouciant examination of the ways in which women and computers are made for each other." **Sadie Plant, ZEROS AND ONES (Doubleday, 1997)**

"The great, burning, maverick novel of the 20th century, published in 1937. I consider her the Emily Bronte of Modernism." **Djuna Barnes, NIGHTWOOD (New Directions)**

"Originally published in 1968, reissued by **Virago/Little, Brown**, is **A COMPASS ERROR**, by **Sybille Bedford**, a brilliant novel of such moral complexity that it makes you shudder.

"And then, I recommend my own dazzling book of plays, **SIGNS OF LIFE** -- so much fun to read; designed to be read and staged in the head."

Odile Hellier (Proprietor, Village Voice Bookshop, 6, rue Princesse, Paris 75006): "I highly recommend John Banville's beautiful novel. He ironizes about the tragedy of a man but is never tragic; he sees from a distance yet highlights the atmosphere of the elite, intellectuals,

homosexuals. Everything is closeted but also understood. For me it is the essence of mastery, a novel of maturity in which he is able to balance so many different elements that there is a nobility, almost, in that mastery." **John Banville, THE UNTOUCHABLE (Knopf, 1997)**

"I think THE UNQUIET GRAVE is *un petit livre de chevet*, a book that you should keep by your bedside. It's about beauty in a time of hardship -- the Blitz, when he is horrified by the dehumanization of mankind. The beauty of which he writes can be that of literature, of myth, of landscape in the south, of his house. He sees that if man needs the peace of the countryside, he also needs the city, the man-made world of civilization. He evokes life again -- conversation, cafes during the day, not the London Blitz at night." **Cyril Connolly (Palinurus), THE UNQUIET GRAVE (Persea, reprint 1982)**

"I felt that LeAnn Schreiber's portraits of life in the country were very good; not pretentious but good. In this narrative she has retired to the country because of the gravity of her life -- there has been much loss -- and there finds light. In the microcosmus of her life in this house in the country, she sees the cosmos." **LeAnn Schreiber, LIGHT YEARS (Lyons and Burford, 1996; Anchor, 1997)**

Sarah Gaddis (SWALLOW HARD, Atheneum): "In a flashback of an obsessive relationship, the novelist and translator Lydia Davis leads the reader in circles as she shifts beginnings and endings and perceptions in this tale of loneliness, bitterness, and wit. Each scene of the unraveling affair, which is recounted by an unnamed woman and takes place in a fictional California coastal town, is at times as visually stark and stunning as a Hopper painting, at times fractured, as if seen through a prism. As readers we are invited to take the responsibility of confidante seriously from the first, circular sentence to the last." **Lydia Davis, THE END OF THE STORY (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995; High Risk Books, 1995; Serpent's Tail, 1996)**

George Garrett (THE KING OF BABYLON SHALL NOT COME AGAINST YOU and WHISTLING IN THE DARK, Harcourt-Brace): "In a season of Civil War books, some of them highly praised and commercially successful, quietly came NASHVILLE 1864, by Madison Jones; his first book in some years, a lean, evocative look at the Battle of Nashville from a child's point of view. Of Jones' fiction Flannery O'Connor wrote: 'He's so much better than the ones all the shouting is about.' That condition is unchanged.' **Madison Jones, NASHVILLE 1864: THE DYING OF THE LIGHT (J.S. Saunders, 1997)**

"It has also been a season of Hollywood novels. Muriel Spark adds some new wrinkles to that genre; most of her story takes place in London and France and involves the gifted American film director Tom Richards, his complicated family life, and the dangers and daring of his craft." **Muriel Spark, REALITY AND DREAMS (Houghton-Mifflin, 1997)**

"The central figure of Anthony Burgess' latest and evidently last work is an artist also, a painter and a composer and a great seducer, and BYRNE is unlike any novel you have read or will read in a long time, being written entirely in fluent verse, four out of five parts in Byronic *ottava rima*, with one section of virtuosity in the Spencerian stanza, all of it, believe it or not, lively and accessible reading." **Anthony Burgess, BYRNE: A NOVEL (Carrol & Graf, 1997)**

In the Garden

If you're a gardener yourself -- and assuming you don't live in some tiresomely favorable climate -- you've probably noticed one significant advantage that winter has over all other seasons: you don't actually have to do anything much. Well, of course there are things you *could* be doing, like trimming up the unlovely hosta carcasses puddling so mucilaginously on the ground; or trundling around miserably with a wheelbarrow full of semi-frozen mulch with the objective of tucking everything in for the storied long winter's nap. Are you really going to do those things, though? I don't think so. I know *I'm* not.

What I will be doing is sketching out various additions and alterations to the garden that can be accomplished with only a modicum of effort -- say a couple hundred man-hours or so -- at some time safely in the future. I have any number of these optimistic little drawings on hand as I write this. In fact I rather wish I had saved all those I made during the previous twenty-odd winters so that I might treat myself to a nostalgic slide-show of my own idiocy.

Having reluctantly bid adieu to the idea of the miniature working volcano and the simple little plan to recreate "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" in crocuses in the front yard, I now content myself with envisioning how a bit of extra latticing might be nailed to either side of the front porch and a bush of the old red hybrid tea rose "Climbing Etoile de Hollande" planted next to each panel. I would really rather have the magnificent rambler "Ghislaine de Feligonde," yet I know, do I not? that it reaches a height less appropriate to doorway embellishment than to the launching stage for the next Mars probe. Take note, children: This is maturity.

Somewhat more ambitiously, I am thinking that my current lily pool -- which, as I have admitted before, is nothing but a sunken PVC stock tank handsomely framed by some nice river rocks -- has come to seem inadequate and maybe even puny. With time on my well-scrubbed hands I have sketched out a remedy: a second and much larger pool carved out slightly below the first on the slope running away from my terrace.

I envision creating a little spillway between the two and installing a pump to keep the water circulating at a moderate pace. Some years ago I was given a very handsome green marble frog discreetly rigged up to be a fountain and currently not up to much other than sitting in the middle of a birdbath. Implementation of the Revised Water Feature Plan would enable this underemployed creature at last to fulfill its manifest destiny. I would add several pots or tubs of papyrus and Japanese iris in the lower pool, and would not be surprised if a giant lotus were to find its way into this superior arrangement as well.

(My enthusiasm for the plan is only slightly dimmed by memories of the dark hours I spent hacking spasmodically away at the boulder-infested hillside in order to make a spot for the original pool. If I am ever assigned to the rock pile at San Quentin I will be prepared for the experience.)

Since most gardening plans formulated during the winter months are never going to see the light of day anyway, one might as well take advantage of the fact, pull out all the stops, and indulge in a little Versailles-think. Sometimes I have considered whether I might not just slip a few espaliered trees into the general landscape plan -- in fact, what the hell; why not just fence off the whole place in double-cordoned pears! I am not ashamed to admit that I have thought of topiary as well: topiary, always so appropriate in front of a 1940s bungalow approximately the size of a Quonset hut. I wouldn't waste my time on any yawn-inducing corkscrew and animal forms, either, but would go straight to the heart of the matter and find out for myself whether living boxwood might be clipped into the shape of a skull and crossbones, or perhaps just a simple series of question marks. It certainly looks good on paper.

It is often recommended by imperious gardening authorities that those planning new flower beds or other drastic reconfigurations of the local terrain first take a length or two of hose and mark out the the approximate size and shape of the target area. I might even do this myself if it were not for the fact that I neglected to lug my hoses down to the toolshed this past autumn and now they are frozen in reptilian-looking piles at each corner of the house. You could just as well do this marking-off business with some rope or string, though, if you had any: I have used end-to-end dog leashes a time or two myself.

In a way this is a perfect wintertime gardening activity. By the time you have plunged out into the back yard -- inappropriately clothed and possibly in the post-working-hours darkness -- and marked off the area to be excavated, it has dawned on you with some force that it's damned cold out there and nothing would be more agreeable than a hot bath. By a striking coincidence a comfortable house -- yours -- happens to be right there waiting for you, and if you don't soak too long you may be able to leap into bed just in time to catch Martha Stewart gardening on television, and laugh yourself sick.

V. DIGITALIS

§§§

Letter From Key West

For the last couple of years I've stopped saying that I vacation in Key West and admitted that, while my husband and I live in Maine during the summer, we've also started living in Key West during the winter. What this means is

that people who used to phone during the month we vacationed here to try to make us feel guilty have toned it down. Vacations make Americans uneasy. They feel the need to call their snowbird friends in temperate places and remind them that chill winds are blowing and one person's good fortune is not another's. (Did Benjamin Franklin ever cover vacation envy?) Sometimes, they to try to pump themselves up emotionally by talking about the cool snowman they've just made. They're back there popping echinacea, while Key Westers are smoothing on aloe products, though by next year the sources for both will no doubt be endangered, and that will be the end of that.

People who haven't visited Key West, or those who've only had a brief tourist's experience, usually remember that some writer is associated with Key West, but when the Key Wester says, "Elizabeth Bishop? James Merrill?" they'll say no, it was that guy that wrote that war book, or some book about a fish, a fish that went to war.... Right: Hemingway. His wife had the first in-ground pool in Key West constructed in their yard (you can tour the house: 907 Whitehead) while he was away. It was expensive, and although it was a "gift" to him, she did it because she was pissed off. Many things in Key West seem to have been the result of someone being pissed off, going back to the time when pirates changed around the navigational beacons so sailors would crash into the rocks, which made it easier for the pirates to rob them. These days, people build high fences around their houses and have home security systems, though the back-up system is often some time-warp hippie replacing burned out light bulbs regulated by timers. Key West is a place where there are plenty of mutts, and there's even a place called "dog beach" where they frolic. Some restaurants even let dogs in, which makes it very nice, like an English pub, except that I doubt any pub has ever been called "Turtle Kraals." Other restaurants very sensibly keep the dogs out, since they (the restaurants) have roosters, though sometimes the dogs and the roosters co-exist. At least they fight no worse than many couples on vacation. Try Blue Heaven (729 Thomas), not particularly for the quality of the fights, but for the good breakfasts. There's also a wine list, since the *New York Times* discovered it a few years ago. Where roosters walk, can the *Times* be far behind?

Let's say you just have a short time in Key West, often the case if you're not a writer and/or living at the Salvation Army. What to do that won't be only and utterly touristic? First, do at least a few of the obvious things to see what you're missing. Go to one of the big hotels and sit on the open deck upstairs or at the beach bar and listen to the nightly serenade, usually by a rhythm ace offering white-bread reggae as background music for the setting of the sun. Have a frozen drink. Wander down to Mallory Dock to catch the performers who now pretty much

graciously take turns (the better to each get a fair share of tips) doing things like lying down on a bed of nails. The sight of the very thin blonde man who walks down Duval Street, the main drag, carrying his bed of nails is indeed strange in the early afternoon. Or, catch the show by my favorite, Frank, attired in black lycra messenger pants with suspenders while going through The Stations of the Shopping Cart. This is an honest-to-god grocery cart he's filled with bowling balls, and tied his bike across the top of. He lifts it, holds it aloft like a surrealist torch too strange even to have been dreamed of by Salvador Dali, then lowers it just enough to clamp the handle with his mouth as he takes small steps: all this while balancing the whole contraption in the air for a very long ten seconds or so, his hands folded over his chest. He's just some overgrown kid who's thought up the most bizarre act imaginable, no doubt, someone whose mother didn't have an idea in hell what to do with him. You have to suspect that Ritalin might not have worked miracles in Frank's case.

About his lycra pants and suspenders: in Key West, the naked chest look is always very in, and is absolutely de rigeur if you're renovating a house, which so very many people seem to be doing, while chatting on cell phones.

Another thing you can do before sunset and its sometimes wonderfully silly ceremonies is tour any of a number of historic houses, such as the aforementioned Hemingway House, or the Audubon House. No wonder Hemingway doesn't describe furniture in his novels: ugh! In the Heritage House, it's easy to believe Henry James might be stopping by for dinner; the dining room table is nicely set. You can also have your picture taken at the Southernmost Point, where the oddest groups congregate to sing carols there around Christmas: some seem to have been brought not of their own accord. Or, you might be in town when one of the tours of private houses is going on, since many homeowners allow tours as step one toward putting the house on the market. There are guides to take you on "literary walks" past houses of famous writers who've lived in Key West. What you want to do -- preferably before you arrive -- is buy the best guidebook, which is now in its eighth edition: Joy Williams's THE FLORIDA KEYS, in which she describes obvious and not-so-obvious sights to see. There are now many imitators, but her book is the best, a real original: it's informed and extremely funny, has a social conscience, and because she's such a formidable fiction writer herself, is as curious as if Dr. Johnson had written a cookbook ("Of a lambchop that was cooked beyond medium rare, Dr. Johnson complained...."). The rooftop of La Concha hotel is a good place to get a panoramic view of Key West, though it's boring to wait for the two small elevators. If you decide to get married on the rooftop, make sure the justice of the peace knows

to get there early enough to ascend before the sky goes black.

But I digress. There you will be in Key West, staying somewhere nice, like the Marquesa (Fleming and Simonton), swimming in one of their pools (heated and unheated) or lolling about amid the orchids, reservation made for that night in their dining room; and boy, will you be lucky if you've picked a night when they have the Key Lime napoleon with fresh fruit for dessert. Well: that done, you can go down the alleyway on Simonton just behind the Marquesa and drop some money in the jar to tour the behind-the-white-gate and usually unmarked "Secret Garden," which looks like a fantasy rain forest that's grown Baby Huey-big in a strange enough place (Key West) to begin with: an amazing mixture of unusual trees, ferns, talking birds, and a garden-level room that can be rented by the night if you want to be more in nature than the Marquesa offers. Mrs. John Steinbeck prefers the Marquesa.

If you get to Key West in the morning, have a Cuban coffee at "Five Brothers" (930 Southard) and sit on a bench outside and watch the world go by; the world will include some dogs that hang around hoping for a hand-out. Wander over to the much-photographed and written-about graveyard a couple of blocks down from the Brothers and check out the odd things left at the graves. In Key West, you shouldn't necessarily expect flowers. Then, maybe walk out the side closest to White Street, go past some antique stores with high prices, and come to the new location of Lucky Street Gallery. The photographs by Carol Munder are pretty strange and wonderful, and the metal pieces by John Martini are also very inventive and colorful and energetic: the perfect thing to scare the hell out of somebody, spot-lit in your garden, assuming you have a garden; there are so many gardens in Key West it's easy to forget that not everyone has a place for koi. Next door is an open lot where car detailing is done. Oh, the struggle to keep anything clean. Usually, some interesting vehicle's getting all shined up: say, an old Ford painted to look like a shark. And if you feel like walking to the Atlantic, go all the way down White until it ends at the water, and overhear long conversations about the best places to sleep outdoors and not get lice.

But if this is a little déclassé, get back to the center of town and check out the authors' photographs hung high on the wall at Key West Island Books (513 Fleming): a good stock of local authors, who are as mixed a bag as you're likely to find anywhere -- in fact, you're not likely to find so many writers in so little square footage anywhere, period -- as well as first editions of Peter Taylor, Annie Dillard (with photos by the inimitable Rollie McKenna), Alison Lurie, Robert Stone. Forget the fifteen minutes of fame; at K. W. Island Books, writers get to play Last Duchess in perpetuity.

A couple of blocks down Fleming, on the same side as the

bookstore, is the relatively new antique store Duck and Dolphin, which carries some enormous, amazing chandeliers; surely you don't want to go home with only a joke T-shirt. Past a gate in Truman Annex there's a pretty beach called Ft. Zachary Taylor, a pay-to-see beach, alas, where you should be wary of going in the water -- Portuguese man'o'war or jellyfish or whatever they are -- but where you can have a nice picnic at a table in the shade, especially if you picked up lunch -- say, fresh raspberries, sandwiches made-to-order, a shot of wheatgrass from the juice bar-- earlier at the Waterfront Market. I'd say, make an appointment for a massage at the Pier House Spa: best water pressure on the island in the showers, which you'll probably want to use if you don't want to spend the day smelling like a scented candle. Skip the pursuit of real food (restaurants think conch fritters are real food?) and have homemade ice cream for lunch at Flamingo Crossing on Duval. Check out the large assortment of magazines at Valladares (also on Duval: 1200) for the latest issue of *Hola!* or *The Advocate* or even *Travel and Leisure*.

If you're gay, I highly recommend a seat on *Miss Sunshine* for the sunset sail and male strip show (phone reservations: 296-4608). Have drinks on the terrace at Louie's Backyard, overlooking the water: very romantic. Eat a late dinner there, if you aren't looking for bargain dining, or if you aren't already going to the Marquesa. Lament the fact that Uncle's Flix and Foam -- foreign movies and cappuccino -- still hasn't opened. Walk around Old Town and peek in the windows, or look through the wide-open doors: a party is often going on, even if it's only someone chatting up his parrot, or doing a foxtrot with her cat. Admire the spot-lit palms, the flowers, the cacti. There's always some late night jazz, or music at the piano bar of the Pier House (though Bobby Nesbitt left for San Francisco), or, maybe, a band at The Green Parrot (601 Whitehead), or, at the very least, some drunk singing loudly while peeing between cars.

If you have a good time, though, better to save your enthusiasm for the folks back home. People in Key West will tell you How It Used To Be, and it certainly is difficult to say that things have changed for the better. The corruption is ridiculous. The reef is dying, thanks to us; too many people in too many boats have ruined the seagrass, the coral. People wipe out on their rental scooters like figures in a video game exploding into dust. This is not where you want to come to be an ER nurse, particularly during the month of March. It's expensive to live in Key West, and home maintenance is endless: the termites are chewing, the jet skis are spewing. Then again, when has any place called Paradise -- slyly self-nicknamed or not -- ever failed to live down to the name?

Ann Beattie

THREE TALES

DAVID CASTLEMAN

An Evening with Salvador Dali and Dylan Thomas

In the tiny beatniky hamlet of Sausalito, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, in the very late forties and in the early fifties was a popular coffeehouse called The Indrawn Breath. Oftentimes, after a tedious day of labor as a truck driver for a local lumberyard, I'd cajole my wife and we'd go spend a gentle evening at the coffeehouse by listening to the poetry-ridden songs of some passing minstrel, or by listening to the fresh and vital apostasies of some local or wandering poet. Being young, these people wanted history to begin with themselves, and urged for everything to be changed.

My wife, Dulcinea, had been asked to accompany the famous painter Salvador Dali in his visit to the area, because she was an accomplished translator and because she was marvelously well informed concerning the histories of our local arts and our local artists. Mr. Dali's English was lousy and yet he was a curious fellow, and among his myriad requests was to be given a tour of recitals of underclass literatures. Being a generous man, he permitted me to tag along.

He laughed heartily to learn that everybody called my wife Dolly, and in his crippled English he joked that now there were two Dollies at our table. Drollery is an honorable, kind humor, and we laughed merrily along with him, knowing that a great man was performing his duty of putting lesser people at their ease.

Scheduled to recite his poetry that evening was a youngish though middle-aged man named Dylan Thomas, and, being mildly familiar with his florid exuberant work, I considered that witnessing Dylan Thomas while my wife and I sat with Dali was a double treat. Now I consider that it was a triple treat.

Scheduled to read at eight, Mr. Thomas arrived a bit late and, I thought, a bit inebriated, but almost immediately upon beginning his act in that deliciously masculine and utterly magnificent voice he seemed to sober remarkably. While performing he drank about two full pitchers of cold icy water, and I wondered just where he was putting it. Mr. Dali made the ancient and venerable joke about his having a hollow leg, but made it in a whisper.

I remember that he recited many poems I hadn't heard before, and I remember that he recited his October poem, which I so loved, and which was done so intensely and so stirringly my skin horripilated, goose bumps all over and hairs bristling and a cold shuddering in the nerves.

When he was finished reading he came over to our table, Mr. Dali's presence having made quite a stir among these glitterati. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Dali tried hard to communicate but were mostly unable, since Mr. Thomas knew no Spanish. I am embarrassed to admit it, but I was delighted that my wife and I were available to their incapacity, and I was delighted that our table was too small to accommodate more than four chairs.

Mostly these two great artists talked of women and of horses, and a little of boxing. Dali wanted to talk about women, and when Thomas asked him where his wife was, he said that he kept her in the hotel room, and then tried to talk about famous movie actresses. Thomas wanted to talk about horses, and Dali was often polite enough to listen, somewhat. Both men were fervent fans of the brawny bomber, Joe Louis, and both men dismissed Tunney's long count as being irrelevant.

I remember Thomas said he loved George Gascoigne, and Dali said he'd never heard of him. Dali said he loved Cervantes and Thomas said he loved Don Quixote also, but hadn't read anything else by Shakespeare's perfect contemporary. Thomas seemed to pretend to being more intellectual than was quite natural for him, and Dali seemed to enjoy being a showman, barking to his contemporaries. Thomas was embarrassed that he was more artist than intellectual, and Dali was proud of it. Thomas was imploding while Dali was exploding and gracefully. If Thomas was a saint a-bleeding, Dali was the holy pope of the surreal.

Mr. Thomas looked like an alcoholic cherub, and seemed to be suffering spasms of pain in his eccentric and central nervous system. Several times I noticed that his blubbery lips tightened across his mouth and I almost expected them to snap like a rubber band. His forehead glowed with oil and a sweat hovered upon his entire face. Disappointment and disgust were writ large upon his features, as in Rembrandt's old self-portrait. The coffee that we drank did him no good, and gave him no help, no relief. He drank apple juice, and mentioned that he was pretending it was the boozy cider from home.

I was mostly interested in Mr. Dali, since I knew more about him than I did about Mr. Thomas, and since he was the occasion of the evening. Dali was a remarkable specimen. He was a skinny guy and naturally, I thought, a solitary. He wore a black suit of typically Latin tailoring with very very wide padded shoulders and with wide lapels. He wore a black string tie neatly tied on a soiled white shirt which had a collar far too large for his scrawny little neck.

His hair was black as black could be, black as black shoe polish, and was drowned in grease. His mustache was a revelation and was exceptionally long and thin and tightly twisted at the ends into a flamboyant

tight circle. His eyebrows were thin and black and, and I was awed by this, they moved independently of each other, like weird black spiders, and skittered all over the upper third of his face as if they were the scarves of ballerinas, waving and floating and whipping. These active eyebrows would dart up to his hairline or skitter alongside an ear or zip down and plunge over an eyeball.

Toward the evening's end both men were wearied from a conversation that required intermediaries, and for a spell they dispensed with us, and in a mix of non-verbal language and pidgin each confessed quietly that he had peripheral moments of consciousness when he expected the whole world to recognize him for being the charlatan that he was, to denounce him with sneers of derision and then to consider him never again. I didn't understand how genius could appreciate itself so scantily, and yet I knew enough to pretend I missed the significance of their confessions completely, and I knew enough not to comment with feigned inaccuracy.

While we spoke and while we listened, Mr. Dali doodled on the house's paper napkins with a soft pencil. When we left, presumably the napkins were tossed out with our cigarette butts, into the general trash. My wife and I drove Mr. Dali to his hotel in San Francisco, to his wife and Pernod, said a smiling goodbye and returned home to Mill Valley, to a tumble-down shanty in a redwood grove and to three improbably conceited cats. I don't know where Mr. Thomas went, except that he retreated further into unhappiness.

This memorable evening was in 1949, 1950, or in 1951, I believe. I do remember that it was on the eleventh of July, since that was my birthday. It was cool and foggy for July, welcomely cool. My wife always liked the cool.

Brazil

It was toward the end of the rainy season of 1949 that my employers sent me to investigate some business in southern Brazil. I was commissioned by Hills Brothers, Folgers, and MJB to search out some new coffees that might suit their individual blends, and I was to arrange to have those coffees shipped to them. I was seeking many millions of dollars in beans.

A new coffee-producing area was coming into the world market from the Brazilian state of Paranà, and according to all of our sources these new beans were of inexplicably fine quality. Clearly the trees had been planted and tended properly, and the beans had been harvested in a manner superior to that which we had come to expect from the Portugese Brazilians.

I flew out of Saõ Paulo to Curitiba, in the state of Paranà, and ventured by horse and by jeep to the town of Londrina, and thence by horse and by

mule and, sometimes, by jeep, to a new and wild town called Arapongas. This town of Arapongas was far from civilization and from law. Arapongas was a town of men, and the men carried guns and knives, except for the blacks and the half-breeds, who carried machetes.

Arapongas had dirt streets lined with tents. One stone building housed the bank. Several shacks were constructed of small logs and canvas, and a few rooms were available in these shacks. Each room had a hole in a corner of the floor, and chickens and pigs fought for whatever dropped through that hole. A small board and a stone covered the hole most of the time.

Sometimes a mule train arrived from Londrina, bearing supplies. Some of the local farms sold food in an outdoor market. Near the town was what was billed as the biggest tree in the world, and I went there and it was big, very big, and the mules rode around it slowly.

Farther from the town, nazis had constructed a formidable coffee plantation with large houses of logs and canvas, with stables and outbuildings for the storage of beans and the quartering of servants. These nazis were they whom I had been seeking, they who had done such a fine job of the beans.

Their current project was the cutting and the piling and the burning of miles and miles of heavy forest. They had large crews of peasants in camps, guarded as slaves must be guarded. The peasant workers were, I noticed, very heavily fed, for the labor was indeed arduous.

From the big houses to the nearest unsullied woods was about 500 yards. In these immediately adjacent woods was a great canyon that made it impractical to cut and to burn those woods, and numerous were the Indians who lived beyond the verge of that wooded canyon.

Commanded by the Germans, servants during the day would deploy baubles along the verge of the woods, baubles such as beads and the links of broken chains, shards of pottery and glass, shell casings. And in the early dusk the nazis would toss back their schnapps as they sat on their huge porches and used the incoming Indians for target practice. The Indians didn't ever quite understand what was occurring, for they wandered childlike and enchantedly among the precious baubles in the clearing.

There were several such forward camps of Germans, and the same sport was enjoyed in each camp I attended.

Once when I returned to our office in Londrina I was informed that one of these outposts had been discovered with its inhabitants brutally murdered, and that small arrows had been found fledging the unclean bodies, and spears. Those Europeans who told me of this atrocity were in deep sorrow among themselves, mournfully pondering the subhuman savagery among which our honorable white races must serve.

As I gazed from face to face in our offices, and as I realized the bitter outrage which was struggling to the surface in each personality, I must confess that I very nearly giggled. I was very young.

Sammy

Sammy was about four hundred pounds of amiable blubber, tall as a windmill and clumsy as a colt, and Sammy always tried to do the right thing. When Paul and Marilyn were dating, and later when they were actually engaged to be married, and when their parents were so unsympathetic to the match because she was Catholic and he was Jewish and she was years older, Sammy tried in his feckless ineffectual manner so very hard to smooth everybody's feelings and to placate everybody. Unfortunately, Sammy's best attempts served only to anger everybody at his own expense, and to appease nobody.

Paul was my closest friend in high school and for a small while after, and though we were too young and too callow ever to explore our psyches together, yet we spent much thoughtless and innocent time together. We dated together many times, he with Marilyn and I with whomever happened to be my love interest at the moment. And sometimes just the three of us would go to the movies or to the beach, and we spent long evenings just watching the television together. After a while they had decided that it was pointless to subject themselves to their parents' constant bickerings and howlings of remonstrance, so they'd moved into an apartment together and we three spent much time there.

Once upon a time a day appeared when they decided that marriage was the thing. Of course the news was anathema to each of their parents and to each of their siblings, but Paul and Marilyn had grown accustomed to a relentless disapproval and heeded none of the outcry. Announcements were made and mailed concerning a civil ceremony and on the day appointed we all converged inside the old courthouse in San Rafael.

The presiding judge was a pleasant Jewish fellow, which may have pleased Paul's parents a bit, but which certainly did nothing to assuage the feelings of Marilyn's parents. Her proud father, watching his baby being ripped from her family by Christ's murderers and their accomplices, cried openly and inconsolably. Paul's mother was a proud and indomitable martinet with a Medusa's glare.

Paul's family and friends lined one wall of the courthouse chamber, and glared at Marilyn's family and friends who lined the opposing wall, exchanging glare for glare mercilessly. Of all of those sixty or so folks who were present, I noticed that only a few seemed to have been spared the disease of hatred, and only a few of those few noticed what the atmosphere meant, and portended.

I stood near the judge and the betrothed couple, and the ceremony was performed. Fortunately I hadn't misplaced the ring and I was conscious enough to surrender it at the proper moment. Everywhere was a great

gnashing of teeth and a wringing of hands, and everywhere tears and wailing. The ambience was excruciating, as if everybody were moving and speaking underwater or in flames.

Across town and across the street from that newish and New York Jewish delicatessen called so cleverly The Delicate Essence was a restaurant whose name has been changed so frequently that I cannot now recall what it was called then, and to this restaurant everybody repaired for the wedding reception and its early buffet. We carried our atmosphere with us and we were led into a set of large rooms with an open bar and buffet, and with a large set of tables in one unobtrusive comer.

Still the two tribes held themselves aloof and still they glared at each other, each remaining so intransigently in its allotted righteousness. Hatred was.

Sammy decided to be amiable, and Sammy discovered the cache of champagne and appropriated a bottle and a glass, and Sammy began his appointed rounds through the bitter groupings. To the closest person he strolled, and he stood immediately before that person until that person acknowledged him. Then he smiled at his target and he chatted calmly and he filled each of their glasses with champagne. He brought his glass up to his lips and he poured its contents into his throat, he smiled again, and he walked on to the next person. He repeated the performance continually, sometimes interrupting his progress to fetch another bottle, and then returning precisely to where he had left off.

Tensions held, despite Sammy's ministrations with the bubbly, and still Paul's mother held bitter court at the dining table, attended by her friends and by some very quiet husbands. She was attired like a matron-empress, in a low cut gown from which her voluminous bosom protruded with a cleavage as ample as that more famous Grand Canyon, and her back leaned forward from her chair so the chair wouldn't wrinkle her fine gown whose couturier's name was known to every woman in the room. Her hair was newly styled into a rising mass. Her jewels had small names.

Marilyn's father approached me as I stood apolitically on the rim of the crowd, and as he approached I could see that he was still crying, and I felt sorry for the man. Projecting myself into the future, I could imagine how I would feel had I an only daughter I had loved since birth, a daughter to whom I had said things I could never say to anybody else, and had she married whom I considered to be some Caliban who had been hatched of the earth's sewage.

When he arrived at me he stopped and he focused and I could see that in his mind the whole world had disappeared and only he and I remained. His eyes swam out of their tears while he focused. “You miscegenist animal,” he said, and he swung about and walked away without retreating. From across the room Paul's mother glared at me malignantly, both for consorting with an enemy and in utter agreement with her enemy.

I could see that Sammy had finally achieved his way to her and that he was humbly, patiently, and smilingly waiting for her to acknowledge his presence, as he held his liquid gift toward her. She felt his presence beside her and she glared up into his half-lidded eyes. His knees sagged for just a moment and he slammed them up into a locking position, and he smiled down on her.

She said something cruel and sharp and he reacted as if he'd been soundly slapped, and again he smiled benignly. He leaned forward over her and his mouth opened and instantly he vomited magnificently onto her. Instantly she was drenched as if by a burning acidic lava and it rolled cascading down her back and it gushed and bubbled from the depths of her intimidating cleavage and along her lap and down her legs and onto her shoes. Her proud hair hung in rags or swung in ropes drippingly, and she was wiping at her eyes and her foamy mouth was sputtering as she lurched to her feet like an enraged and wounded mastodon.

Paul and I raced to Sammy and we carried, pushed, and urged him outside the restaurant to where my car was parked, where we tucked him snoring. When we returned his mother was gone and the emergency seemed almost forgotten. Tension was gone and animosities were gone and everybody was mingling nicely. I did not see Marilyn's father.

THE ARCHED BRIDGE

A small black covered boat
In a thin autumn-morning fog
Is about to sail beneath an ancient arched bridge.

It's a mysterious opening.
Who knows what will be revealed
Through the passage under the stone arch?

A broad turbulent river
Or an unadorned quiet town?
A pretty but bleak plain?

We've seen tallow trees: red berries,
White reeds,
Emerald kingfishers.
Thank Heaven, our voyage
Proceeds on course.

But while we're smiling,
In the thin autumn-morning fog
A new arch emerges, mystery
Looming.
Another dread
Clutches at our chest

Shi Zhecun
tr. Zuxin Ding

A Note about This Poem and Its Maker

A note on Shi Zhecun (1905-) from THE COLUMBIA ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE says: "Shi Zhicun's fictional work departs in large measure from the main current of modern Chinese fiction in that his material has little to do with the harsh realities of his time. He is not a typical writer who, in the famous phrase of C.T. Hsia, is 'obsessed with China.' In 'One Evening in the Rainy Season' he is obsessed, to be sure, but with the nervous manifestations of the individual psyche suffering from repressed sexuality or thwarted desire. For this he is often identified as a 'decadent' writer. He studied French literature in college and edited the monthly *Les Contemporains*. He gave up creative writing for a university career after 1937."

Dr. Zuxin Ding, his translator, writes of "The Arched Bridge": "According to Mr. Shi, 'The Arched Bridge' was written in 1936 and was published in *Xiandai Zashi* (*Journal of Modernism*). Mr. Shi is one of the earliest Modernists in China."

About "The Arched Bridge" the poet himself wrote: "My stories and poems were written in the years from 1928 to 1938. Written almost sixty years ago, they were outmoded. My poetry was much influenced by Imagism, which was fashionable at the time."

"'The Arched Bridge' was written in 1936. I wrote it after I had had been rowing on the West Brook, which is three miles long, nestling behind the hills of the West Lake." (personal letters to his translator)

About spelling and order-of-name: Dr. Ding suggests that the COLUMBIA ANTHOLOGY "apparently uses the mainland China system" of spelling. In English, he himself prefers that his own name appear in the western order.

KC
KM

A CONVERSATION WITH CORNELIA AND MICHAEL BESSIE (1)

KATHERINE McNAMARA

"If you can say to yourself, when that manuscript goes to the printer's, 'This is the best book that this person can write at this time,' then you've done your job." *Cornelia Bessie*

"The important question about the publishing industry is: how well does it serve literature?" *Michael Bessie*

In this second of my conversations with distinguished literary publishers, the question of good books recurred as a counterpoint in the discussion of institutional changes that have taken place in trade publishing. It recurred, I think, because of an assumption that once could have been made and now, especially at the trade-book conglomerates, cannot be: that bringing literature into print is the purpose of the responsible publisher. It has been remarked that "publishing," in the old sense, perhaps, of the gentleman's occupation, began to change about the time the phrase "publishing industry" came into use, probably in the mid- or late-1970s. If true, it marks nicely the changes I've been interested in tracing.

Substantially, however, what has been changed? Are there more bad, fewer good, books than ever? What has become of the editor's art? Indeed, what sort of people became editors and publishers; why? Do the same sort run the business now? I've been inquiring of some notable editors and publishers of an older generation what they thought.

Generously, they've told how they entered the profession; spoken about writers they published and declined to publish; described the class structure of their domain; talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism. Without exception they are serious readers, usually of more than one language. They recognize that times have changed but do not agree, necessarily, on why and how.

Excerpts of these conversations will continue to appear regularly in ARCHIPELAGO and may serve as an opening onto an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current establishment, reflecting on its glories, revealing what remains constant amid the present flux. Despite their surround of gentility, these publishers are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.

KM

Cornelia and Michael Bessie, of Bessie Books

Michael Bessie began his career in publishing in 1946, when Cass Canfield, then head of the house, invited him to join Harper and Bros. as an editor. Cornelia Shaeffer, as she was then, joined the firm several years later, as foreign reader; she became an editor, subsequently, for *The Reader's Digest*, Dutten, and, once more, Harper's. In the meantime they had married. In 1960, Michael Bessie left Harper and, with Pat Knopf and Hiram Hayden, founded Atheneum, a successful literary imprint. Cornelia joined the firm a year afterward. They remained with Atheneum until 1976, when they returned to what had become Harper & Row; and where, five years later, they housed their own imprint, Bessie Books. After Harper & Row was sold to Rupert Murdoch and transformed into HarperCollins, Bessie Books migrated, first to Pantheon, then to Counterpoint, of Washington, D. C., where it is presently housed.

(Counterpoint is an imprint backed by Perseus, a corporation whose owner, Frank Pearl, has recently acquired, as well, the respected imprints Basic Books and Addison-Wesley and, with the former editor-in-chief of Times Books, has opened Public Affairs. It looks as if a new conglomerate is in the making, this one devoted, so far, to literary publishing. We will keep an interested eye on this development.)

Among the hundreds of authors whom the Bessies, together and separately, have edited and published are (a nearly random selection): Edward Albee, Luigi Barzini, Justice William Brennan, John Cheever, Cyril Connolly, Jan de Hartog, Len Deighton, Janet Flanner, Ruth Gordon, Richard Howard, Guiseppe de Lampedusa, Harper Lee, Nadezda Mandelstam, John McGahern, Nigel Nicholson, André Schwartz-Bart, Jean Renoir, Peter Shaffer, Saul Steinberg, Joanna Trollope, Peter Weiss. Among Nobel laureates, they have published Miguel Angel Asturias, the Dalai Lama, Mikhail Gorbachov, Sir Peter Medawar, Anwar Sadat, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, James Watson, and Elie Wiesel.

Two years ago I approached Michael Bessie because of his founder's connection to Atheneum. A respected literary imprint, Atheneum had been closed in 1994 by its new owner, Simon & Schuster, itself owned by Paramount, which in turn had been bought by Viacom, an entertainment holding-company. Atheneum's last editor and publisher had been the late Lee Goerner, who was my husband. The reasons given for the shut-down were appalling. Atheneum did not, it seemed, turn enough profit; another literary imprint was not needed by the corporation. Viacom, or Paramount, or Simon & Schuster also owned what used to be Charles Scribner's Sons, also considered literary, which survived the corporate in-fights and is now called "Scribner." What had such reasoning to do with literature? Yet, in opportune circumstances a writer can observe the operations of those who hold power,

in this case, power over the disposition of works of the imagination. Observe, closely, is what I proposed to do.

Lee Goerner was praised by his colleagues for publishing good books, books that appealed to his inclusive, American taste, without considering the so-called market. From the advantage of obscurity I had supposed this was any editor's responsibility and, though deferring to no one in my high regard for him, thought he had been praised for doing what should have been expected. Gently, Michael Bessie put me right. Lee, it seemed, had acted as the owner of a house might act, when in fact he had not owned it. Although he had begun to put Atheneum in the black, his margins of profit had been narrow: to be expected, but not what the conglomerate desired. Owning your own firm, said Michael Bessie, keeping it to a reasonable size: here was the best possible situation of the good publisher. Smaller was better, because more responsible. "Responsible publishing" was a phrase he used more than once.

For the conversation published here I visited the Bessies twice, in August and October 1997, at their wooded retreat in rural Connecticut and in their handsome, art-filled apartment on Washington Square, in New York. Against the fate of Atheneum Cornelia and Michael Bessie placed the breadth and uninterrupted length of their involvement with books. Their discussions and disputations were conducted in the courteous style of long-time partners who believe in the necessity of good books and intelligent publishing, yet each of whom holds, nonetheless, a particular point of view formed by experience, intuition, and educated taste. For this first of two parts, I have excerpted, chiefly, their remarks about the complex relationship between character, background, class, and institution as it appeared in publishing; their own entry into the field; editors and the books they take or let go; the founding and early growth of Atheneum. Part 2, a conversation about reading, the literary life, the (further) education of an editor, and structual changes in Harper's, will appear in our next issue.

How They Entered Publishing

McNAMARA: We've all observed huge structural changes in publishing -- in the institution, we might call it, of publishing books -- in the last decade or two. And yet, the relationship between an institution and its people, their relative influences upon one another, is complex. I think it just as important to know *who* the people involved were, and have been, as the nature of the institution itself. Amid change, I'm interested in learning also: What continues?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Are you asking, What are the relative influences of institutions and individuals? Individuals are more apparent, more interesting, more dramatic, more concrete than institutions; and so the great question that presents itself to me is, How important is it when Doubleday is headed by Nelson Doubleday, with Ken[neth] McCormick [1906-97] as chief

editor, as it was when I first came into publishing, as against today, when it's become an enormous institution headed by an ambassador, basically, from Germany, because it's owned by Bertelsmann. So, in the long run, it has to satisfy German business requirements, although it is theoretically rooted in the American scene. That's an extreme example.

How much difference does it make to Harper's between the long run of publishing people who ran it *[as Harper and Brothers, then as Harper & Row]* and when it gets to be owned by Mr. Murdoch *[as HarperCollins]*?

McNAMARA: Would you talk, both of you, please, about how you came into publishing?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I once had a conversation with a bunch of women friends, and we discovered, because we happened to be all of us female in that group, that all of us came in by accident. And, because we had had one salable skill which the gents were willing to pay for -- though not very well. In my case, it was languages. *[Wry chuckle.]* It was funny, because we discovered that all of us got into publishing quite differently from the men, who were generally recruited; and we came to the conclusion, over a good bottle of wine over a long evening, that we had all sort of fallen in backwards.

MICHAEL BESSIE: May I rudely tell Cornelia's story slightly differently? As I tell it? When Cornelia was finishing up at Barnard, she learned something from one of her teachers that she couldn't believe: namely, that there were places downtown in New York that paid you to read! The notion of being paid to read seemed to her a voluptuous impossibility.

So, she checked into a few places, with the result that, one day, the then head of reading at Harper, a very New York spinster, who was never seen without hat and gloves, came into my office and said, "You know, there's that German manuscript that you were trying to find readers for?" -- because I don't read German -- "There's this young girl from Barnard and she says she reads German. She seems very intelligent. Should I give it to her?" And I said, "Yes, of course, Amy, why not?" She said, "Well, Michael, she's very young." I said, "Yes? What?" "Well, it's a biography of Casanova." And I said, "Amy, you know, these girls nowadays, they read almost everything. Let's try it." *[CB: throaty laugh]*

Net result: a week later I got what I still think is about the best reader's report I've ever gotten, because it was fresh and thoughtful. I said, "Is she there? I'd like to meet her." Result: a career in publishing, and a marriage! *[CB: hearty laugh]* Now: isn't that old-fashioned publishing at its best?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I have to tell you, because that was the old-fashioned, 33rd Street Harper's *[Harper and Brothers, as it had been since 1817]*, this was in a modest building where there was no natural light for anybody who spent their days reading, to say nothing of air or air-conditioning. I discovered, several months later, that I was the foreign reader, which nobody had bothered to tell me, which I gathered was par for the course for that Harper's. I did not know that this had been a competitive thing; that a number of people had been given the same manuscript. It wasn't till a long time later, when

they kept sending me checks for $10 whenever I brought a book back, that I thought, "Well, really!" That's my recollection.

MICHAEL BESSIE: What Cornelia is suggesting is that I was invited. I had been a newspaper person and a magazine editor, and at the end of World War II I was at the Paris embassy. One of my colleagues, indeed my boss, was on temporary embassy service: Cass Canfield, who had suddenly during the war become the head of the house of Harper and also one of its principal owners. He asked me what I was going to do after the war. I told him I was planning to go back to Cowles's newspapers, whence I had come. He said, "Well, what about book publishing? What about coming to Harper?" I said, "Cass, two days after I graduated from Harvard, I went to Harper to try to get a job, and I was unceremoniously shown the door. The person whom I saw said, 'Why should we have a job for you? You can't know anything, you just graduated.'"

Anyhow, that's how I got into publishing: I was invited.

McNAMARA: And you were invited to do what?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, if I may rephrase your question: Why was I invited? I was invited because, at the age of 29, I had had ten years of journalism in various forms; I had also worked in the movies; I knew a hell of a lot of people; I talked a lot, had a lot of good connections among journalists and academics, etc.; and, in a word, because Cass Canfield said to me one day, "I think you would make a good publisher." And he was right: it was good for me.

Now: how important was the fact that I had a good degree from Harvard, that I knew some of the right people, that I even belonged to one of the right clubs? In those days that was not without significance. I do remember one delicious example. I had been at Atheneum for about a dozen years or so, when the leadership back at Harper was changing, and all of a sudden there was a new guy there, in succession to Canfield. His name was Winthrop Knowlton. I was having lunch with Cass one day and I said, "Cass, how did you find Knowlton?" Knowlton had worked for the Treasury in Washington, and on Wall Street. Cass said, "Well, it's a funny story, you know. We got a head-hunter, and he looked all over the place for people who might be the right person to head Harper, and we saw probably about 50 or 60 people; and then, along comes this guy Knowlton. We were very impressed with him. It was only after we hired him that I realized it could have been much simpler, because I learned that he was a fellow member of Porcellian at Harvard. We could have spared ourselves the whole search." Now, that's an exaggeration, of course, but not by far.

McNAMARA: For the time, no.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And what about most of the people I later hired? Well, most of them had a connection of some kind. We hired one person who just came in on the right day.

I think that two things have changed. One is this string of publishing courses, summer and graduate programs -- NYU, as you know, has a master's degree in publishing. But these summer courses [at Radcliffe, Stanford, NYU,

Columbia] produce a lot of people who get a smattering. And the faculty of these courses are all publishing people, so they--

CORNELIA BESSIE: They also have, in New York, a kind of trade market where the people who graduated come for cocktails or something, and the people who want to hire come and look. Apparently, a lot of jobs really are filled there.

McNAMARA: But those jobs are mostly for assistants.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes; good point. Because what I've been talking about is, by and large, people who were hired to do editorial duties. What's also happened increasingly in publishing, of course, is that marketing and finance, as firms have grown, have become more and more important, and those people tend to come with both different backgrounds and training, from business schools.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It's the marketers that end up being the publishers.

Becoming an Editor

McNAMARA: Would you tell, Cornelia, how you became an editor?

CORNELIA BESSIE: That's a nice story, actually. I went straight from college to Harper's, and Harper's was full of hot-shot young men -- youngish men -- like Michael Bessie and Evan Thomas and Jack Fisher, and so forth. I was the first reader, and knew nothing, and nobody spoke to me. What happened, I think, was that somebody left. I had been an outside foreign reader; I got offered this job; and, once I was offered the job, they showed me into a cubbyhole and showed me where the manuscript pile was, and that was it. Then no one spoke to me. But as time went by, I realized that there was a wonderful person there, whose name was Elizabeth Lawrence. Elizabeth never went to cocktail parties, or seldom did, and was not a glamorous hotshot: Elizabeth, basically, did the work. I realized that a wonderful way to learn my job was to look over Elizabeth's shoulder; and, happily, Elizabeth was a wonderful teacher and enjoyed having someone to teach. So, for about a year, that's what I did. I realize, in retrospect, that I learned from one of the great old editors.

MICHAEL BESSIE: She made books.

CORNELIA BESSIE: She made books. I've had this conversation with young people in various New York publishing houses: what Elizabeth gave me is no longer being given.

McNAMARA: And what was that?

CORNELIA BESSIE: What you do with a manuscript.

McNAMARA: What do you do? Can you speak of it? Because I think there is much about editing that *can't* be spoken of.

CORNELIA BESSIE: There is. A lot of it is that you develop instincts. One of the instincts you develop, for example, is for the book that will never be finished: how do you know this? Somehow, you feel it in your bones. What

you develop an instinct for is, what the writer really meant and what is *not* on the page. I leave aside the writing problems -- unclear thoughts, repeats, this kind of thing. But that sort of sixth sense which a good editor has: that's something you really pick up as you go along. But you pick it up much faster if you see somebody, as I saw Elizabeth, who did it superbly, and whose queries in the margins were just about publishable. They were a publishing course, Elizabeth's margins. She had a kind of generosity, she really, literally, sort of took me on.

MICHAEL BESSIE: She really taught us all, because she was also a senior editor when I came. She was not a sort of outside person; but several agents had come to realize her value. She *made* person after person. She was a specialist in taking on somebody who had had an interesting life or experience, somebody like Jade Snow Wong, for example, who wrote that marvelous book SIXTH CHINESE DAUGHTER; or Santha Rama Rau, whom Elizabeth edited. The only wonder about Elizabeth was that she didn't write: because she could.

I'd like to go back to the question that you asked Cornelia. What you're really asking is: "What's the job? What's required?"

I think two forms of either sensitivity or awareness are needed. One is, What's in this? And two is, What can I do, what can be done, to help the writer get it as good as that person can get it?

CORNELIA BESSIE: You see, the end result is, if you can say to yourself, when that manuscript goes to the printer's, "This is the best book that this person can write at this time," then you've done your job. It's as simple as that. Maybe in three years there'll be a better book; but this is the best, now. And not to stop until you've reached that. And, since one of the things we're discussing is the changes in publishing, to do that, you have to have the luxury of no time constraint. You have to be able to say, "No, that will not make this list; it will make the next list." All these things have become either more difficult or impossible.

McNAMARA: What kept you going in publishing, and in editing; and is there is a distinction?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Hmmm, not from my point of view. What kept me going was the same thing that kept me reading clockwise around my father's library when I was a kid: love of books!

McNAMARA: And they kept sending you those ten-dollar checks....

CORNELIA BESSIE: I kept getting these ten-dollar checks, and one day I was terribly rich and had about $200 and went to Europe *[laughs]*, and when I came back, I met this man in the street. And he said, "Well, we have a job to fill: how would you like to come and work?"

How Publishing Has Changed

MICHAEL BESSIE: Let me illustrate the change. My first round at Harper went from the end of 1946 until we started Atheneum, in 1959. During that period, and previous to it, the phrase "P&L" was unknown at Harper, and probably at any other place. There was no such thing as a P&L statement--

CORNELIA BESSIE: "Profit and loss."

MICHAEL BESSIE: It was not known. When you came upon a book manuscript you wanted to publish, what you did was this: you had to explain to the chief editor why you wanted to publish it. You had to give a notion of what you thought it could sell, and maybe how it could be sold. But that was likely to be conversational; or, maybe a memo was exchanged. Okay. Sixteen years pass between 1959, when I leave, and 1975, when I come back from Atheneum. The P&L is regnant; it runs things. You've got an idea for a book, or you've got a manuscript, you have to fill out a form which is full of numbers. What you have to do is, you have to consult with the marketing people, the sales people; you have to get their take on it, until you've gotten to the point where now, in many places, that judgment, the sales and marketing judgment, and/or the financial judgment, are the prime.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that when I was president of Atheneum during those years, and was responsible for what we took and didn't take, that I didn't *consider* sales or marketing. But I didn't pretend that it was an exact science, and that the numbers could predict anything. What I *did* pretend was that there was still a crystal ball, and that there were some things you had to see in the crystal ball; but you *couldn't* do it on an adding machine. That's one of the big changes in publishing.

McNAMARA: Between when you left Harper and when you returned, how had the ownership changed?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, the ownership hadn't changed very much; but the nature of the beast had changed enormously.

McNAMARA: Who owned it when you began?

MICHAEL BESSIE: When I began, and until 1975, Harper was owned in effect by itself. It had gone from the Harper family to a series of stockholders. When I joined Harper, in '46, there were about eight or ten principal stockholders; and that was the condition during the time that I was there -- we all had some stock. We bought it; or you were given an option. It didn't go very deep in the organization.

McNAMARA: You said, for example, that Cass Canfield had bought into Harper.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, yes. He had, Cass and his family had -- he was the largest single stockholder -- he had about 20% or 22% of the stock. There was a board of directors, which included the principal stockholders. It was very closely held during this time.

McNAMARA: Were they also an editorial board?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Not in any sense of the word! Cass presided over the trade department editorial board -- he didn't preside over the editorial board of college publishing, school publishing, medical and so forth -- because he was particularly interested in trade. Cass was, basically, a trade-editor. He ran the house, but he edited and published a good number of books. Indeed, he published the principal authors of the place, the E.B. Whites and the Thornton Wilders and so forth; they regarded Cass as their editor and publisher. He might get somebody like Elizabeth Lawrence, or me, or somebody, to read it and counsel with him about it. But in any event, the corporate change that took place, happened during the time that I was at Atheneum.

Harper discovered that it didn't have a school department. It had had, but had sold it. During this period, the 1960s, was an enormous increase in government investment in education, under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. A publishing house that didn't have school books -- that is, a big house; and Harper was one of the biggest -- knew it needed them. And so, Harper bought Row, Peterson [& Company], which was a large school-book publisher, in about 1962 or '63, and with that, went public: issued public stock, for the first time, and was listed on the NASDAQ, and, subsequently, on the Big Board. So the Harper that I returned to, in '75, was a *publicly owned* corporation with the stock listed on the Big Board.

What does that mean? That means you have to issue quarterly reports. That means, four times a year you've got to look good. *That* means that you've got to jimmy the numbers. Simplest example: the fiscal year of Harper then ended on the 30th of April, which meant that, during the month of April, we emptied the warehouse: we shipped out *everything*, so that the numbers for that year looked good. Now, mind you, many of those books came back in May, June, and July. Returns have been a problem for American trade publishing ever since, oh, somewhere in the early part of the 20th century, when it was decided that--

CORNELIA BESSIE: Only in book publishing is it "Gone today; here tomorrow."

MICHAEL BESSIE *[chuckles]*: That's right. *[Seriously]* Last year returns were averaging about 40 to 45%, which means almost one out of two books were sent back.

McNAMARA: Even with marketers in charge.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, it's really a function of the growth of the big chains. The point that I'm trying to make, Katherine, is that the Harper I returned to was dominated by numbers -- P&Ls, numbers -- and by marketing, in the sense that the firm I had left 16 years before was not.

What I'm not describing, of course, is what I see as an institutional change. By the 1970s, trade book publishing, and indeed, education publishing, was increasingly dominated by a small number of firms. There are two elements to this, institutionally. One is the five, six, seven large firms, which now account for, oh, about 25% of the trade books published; and then there

are somewhere around 1200 or 1500, maybe almost 2000, small firms publishing anywhere from two to 30 or 40 books a year. And they're regionally dispersed; there are 400 publishing firms on the West Coast. So you see, where the subject gets complicated is, the important question about the publishing industry is, *how well does it serve literature?* And you'll have to conclude that, while a small number of big firms has become increasingly dominant, this large number of small firms makes it possible for almost anything to be published.

Now, that brings you to the distribution problem: how well can the small firms market and distribute their books in a wholesale/retail area which is itself increasingly dominated by a small number of firms? Our present firm, Counterpoint, is distributed by PGW, Publishers Group West, which distributes independent publishers. Jack Shoemaker *[the publisher, formerly head of North Point, which now is owned by Farrar Straus & Giroux]* goes through the books with PGW *before* he finalizes the list; but he doesn't change that list. The big houses have pre-publication conferences with the big wholesalers *before* they make up the list! They have what they *think* the list should be; they go through that stuff for two or three days, with three or four of the big chains; and if the big chains don't react properly to the list, if it doesn't look as though the chains are going to take thousands of copies of that book, they [the publishers] may not put the book on the list.

Turning down LOLITA *and Franz Fanon*

McNAMARA: When you read a book while trying to decide whether to publish it, are you affected by other things than the quality of the book itself?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Let me tell you my LOLITA story.

McNAMARA: Please tell me your LOLITA story.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Scene: I'm in Paris. [Maurice] Girodias *[founder of the Olympia Press]*, who was a pornographer *extraordinaire* but also a real publisher, gives me a manuscript by Vladimir Nabokov. Harper had published several of Nabokov's previous books, which was why he gave it to me: because I was the young fellow from Harper. And I started reading it. I went to bed that night thinking to myself, "This is wonderful." I had read maybe 75 or 100 pages. Then I got up in the morning and went back to it. As I went on, I thought, "It's getting repetitious. I can see what's coming. This is really a short story or a novella, reconstructed as a novel. And Nabokov is too good a writer for this." None of the so-called pornographic aspects of it disturbed me, but I thought it inferior Nabokov. So I let it go. Six months later, I picked it up, because it's been taken now by Putnam's, and I *can't believe* that I had let that book go out of our hands. *It's a great book.*

Now: what does that illustrate? It illustrates the point I think we're trying to make: One is not always the same person. One reads under different circumstances. I have now re-read LOLITA several times since, and I cannot

reconstruct the S. M. Bessie who sat there in a hotel in Paris and turned that book down! But I did.

Cornelia and I had an argument once about [Franz] Fanon, whom she wanted us to publish, and I was against. We were reading him in French, and she wanted us to publish it, and she was absolutely right.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was a great book: LES DAMNÉS DE LA TERRE [THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH]. I also heard from friends that Fanon was dying, and it was important that at least the book be taken. But mainly, I thought it was a good book.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I can't believe that I turned it down.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh, I remember your arguments. "There isn't a decent bookstore in Harlem" -- which probably was true at that time -- and--

Some embarrassment follows, as changes in time and mores are considered.

McNAMARA: I'm not making a personal point here. What I'm inquiring about is ways of thinking.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Memory is fallible, Katherine, as I have increasing reasons to understand. I've searched my mind on this one, and I haven't said this to Cornelia because it's a confession of stupidity which I'm loathe to make, but I'll make it now. As I reconstruct my response to that book: I disliked it. I disliked it because I'm against violence, and it's a book that preaches violence. It says, in effect, "We have to liberate ourselves -- violence has been practiced on us, we can't liberate ourselves without it." And I really think in retrospect, painful as it is, that I was against doing that book not for that reason which Cornelia says I gave, which I'm sure I did, but because I *didn't like it*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I know you didn't like it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And I didn't *want it to be true*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Also, you didn't like Sartre's preface.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, I think I was right about that.

McNAMARA: Why? Because he praised it in the usual--

MICHAEL BESSIE: Because I thought it was a parlor pink saying "You go kill 'em."

CORNELIA BESSIE: Which, incidentally, is not what Fanon was about.

MICHAEL BESSIE: No, it was what Sartre was saying.

McNAMARA: He was still a Stalinist then, surely.

MICHAEL BESSIE: But in any event, I was wrong. Because Cornelia was right about the merits of the book, the importance of the book -- and the timing!

McNAMARA: Would you speak to that -- what you thought the merits were?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes. I had just come back from the Sorbonne, where I had a number of North African friends. I wasn't, as the French so nicely say, *dans le vent*. But I was plugged into that mind-set; and also, it's a very strong

book. And a beautiful one. I thought it was an important book. Now it's a classic.

MICHAEL BESSIE: The circumstances are interesting in this case. Cornelia had never been in Africa; I had lived in North Africa before the war; I was there for a year and a half during the war; I was *very* interested in North Africa in particular, but Africa in general. Cornelia had had a different form of African experience. Although I had been there and seen it, she knew more about it than I did. She was more aware of what was going on. And I was wrong.

But: Is what I said reasonable? Should you publish what you like, or, more importantly, should you not publish what you don't like? Well, there are a lot of books out there, and I'm kind of opposed to publishing a book I don't like. I used to do a session at Stanford: I'd give 'em a list of books, saying, "Would you publish?" One of the books on the list was MEIN KAMPF: would you publish it? When I got into publishing, at the end of the war, this is the thing that young editors like me would sit around arguing about. And my own feeling, about myself, anyhow, as a publisher is: I don't want to publish things I don't like. I don't want to publish things which add--

McNAMARA: You mean this *morally* and--

MICHAEL BESSIE: *Authentically*. You think it will affect--

CORNELIA BESSIE: Also, you live with a book for months and months: you don't want to live with a book you don't like any more than you want to live with a man you don't like.

Collegiality and Paul Flamand

MICHAEL BESSIE: We mentioned his name, Paul Flamand, and that Editions du Seuil was an example of, what shall I say, of almost everything about publishing and the difference between small and large publishing firms.

McNAMARA: We were talking about competition and collegiality. I remarked that competition, as you describe it in publishing, sounds very much like what they always did at, say, Harvard: they'd hire five young assistant professors for three possible tenure-track positions.

MICHAEL BESSIE: "On, man; on, bear!" In other words, let's see who kills whom first.

McNAMARA: Exactly. And it seems to me that that was part of a certain kind of education, wasn't it: to learn to compete?

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was. Remember, this was the early 60s, and the women's movement was really not yet born; and so, this was a very masculine point of view. *[To MB:]* Do you remember Papa Knopf's phrase, which was printed somewhere, which was: "Women should pay to be in publishing, they shouldn't expect to be paid." He said this in the 50s, on record. Nobody else would have dared say it; but they would have acted on it.

At that time, *Papa* Knopf could say that, cheerfully, and the women in publishing were quite aware of it. Certainly, that was true of my time at Harper. But that kind of competitiveness was bred into the situation; it was unspoken, but felt.

McNAMARA: Would you speak about Paul Flamand and his spirit of collegiality?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Shortly after I joined Atheneum, I had this vision of the perfect publishing house, which would of course be small enough to be manageable, and which would have the kind of atmosphere which I had seen in France at Les Editions du Seuil.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And uniquely there.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Uniquely there. I remember various times at Atheneum when I talked about this, saying that we had a vision of a publishing house where part of the pleasure was intellectual stimulation. After all, you don't go into publishing to make money; you go into publishing to do what you love--

MICHAEL BESSIE: And to make a living.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes; and, you hope, for the pleasure of the kind I once saw in France. I guess we tried at Atheneum to recreate that. But it's very difficult in America.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes. But remember the origin: Paul Flamand and his wife and his partner, before World War II, were members of the group centered around Emmanuel Mounier, called the *Esprit* group. They were liberal Catholic intellectuals. And the house, Le Seuil, was formed with a deep spiritual agreement of purpose, which animated it. *[Turning to CB:]* Is that fair?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes.

McNAMARA: Were they part of Catholic Action?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Not really. They were too independent. Later on, Paul had actual arguments with Rome; he was liberal to that extent. But the original Seuil, that group, was more interested in the process than the result. What they wanted was a certain kind of group, with certain moral imperatives and certain goals. In fact -- but this was way back, in the beginning--

MICHAEL BESSIE: And they weren't all Catholic.

CORNELIA BESSIE: The house was known to be Catholic. Yet, his successor was a Muslim, and the current head of the house is a Jew. *Le Seuil* means "the threshold."

MICHAEL BESSIE: And that expresses it very well.

McNAMARA: You said that it's difficult to have an intellectual, collegial atmosphere in American publishing; and you said also that Paul Flamand was paternal. Are these things related, do you think?

CORNELIA BESSIE: He *was* paternal; he *is* a very strong person. He had something which is so missing in today's American publishing world: he was never in competition with his editors. He edited books, secretly, really; but

how he conceived of his job was to encourage all those people to go out and do *their* jobs.

MICHAEL BESSIE: He cherished his relationship with authors!

CORNELIA BESSIE: He had wonderful relationships with authors, and still does; but there was no competitiveness. The place was, intellectually, enormously stimulating, and, sure, there were disagreements, but they were family fights. That sort of organization takes a strong, sensitive hand at the helm.

Now, as we've discussed, you often have the feeling in the big houses that the editor-in-chief resents any "big" authors going to other editors. Paul was non-competitive. He was extraordinarily supportive in that paternal way of his. But he was no patsy; and when he thought something was getting out of hand.... He would not tolerate certain kinds of behavior. The rules were clear. He would tolerate any kind of intellectual discussion, and relish it. But he wouldn't tolerate in-fighting. No office politics.

MICHAEL BESSIE: He also had a wonderful, subtle sense of organization in the real sense, so that senior editors had clear-cut domains. Didn't mean they were restricted to them, but everybody had an area of responsibility.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes. Also, everyone had a stake in the company, in real financial terms.

MICHAEL BESSIE: That's right.

CORNELIA BESSIE: When he proposed his heir apparent, and the troops said "No, we don't want this guy," he said: "It's your house."

McNAMARA: Why do you think it is so -- different, let us say, intellectually, between the publishing environments in France and America?

CORNELIA BESSIE: As you know, having lived in France, it's getting more similar everywhere.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I don't think it's different today at all.

McNAMARA: But it was.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was, in certain places. As Michael has said, Le Seuil was not typical for France; it still isn't.

McNAMARA: But Atheneum was meant to be a literary house.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes.

McNAMARA: And you wanted a certain kind of environment there, that you knew in Europe and didn't see so often in America; is this right?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I think that is true, although I think that the publishing world that I entered, at the end of '46, had a number of places that operated with a *measure* of collegiality. You see, I'm obsessed with numbers, and I think that the much larger number of people around the table is not likely to be collegial any more. That's a change, institutionally, in American publishing. Also, the kind of people who run publishing operations -- this is beginning to be true in France, also --

CORNELIA BESSIE: --and in Germany, and in Italy--

MICHAEL BESSIE: --are not, essentially, literary people: which, whether we were right or not, we considered ourselves to be.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Also, it has to be said, again, that at that time, at Atheneum, there was no such thing as a P&L. There were very few of us. We all knew each other well. We didn't always agree. But we could work together....

McNAMARA: You had a protocol for disagreement, I'd presume?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes; an understood one. And to take or not take a book, which is, after all, the prime publishing decision, was done very casually, was done by persuasion. If Michael and I disagreed, I would attempt to persuade him of why he was wrong.

MICHAEL BESSIE: We gave each other room, which was important; we didn't crowd each other. I'm not saying we were angelic, but Cornelia has a story which illustrates this very well.

CORNELIA BESSIE: What suddenly comes to mind is this: I had read a play in German, which I thought was very interesting and which I wanted to do. And, because, occasionally, the devil gets into me, when we were for once having a sort of formal editorial session, for the fun of it I told the plot of this play to Hiram Hayden. After I finished, there was dead silence, until Hiram said, "You're *seriously* considering this?" I said, "Hiram, I just bought it." And that was a play called *Marat/Sade* [by Peter Weiss] *[general laughter]*. But you tell the plot of *Marat/Sade*, and people will say: "Are you *serious*?"! *[More laughter]* That's an example of how casual it was at the time; you couldn't do that today.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Maybe at a few places; but it's not to be expected. The point that could be made is that you could induce an atmosphere, as Cornelia described how Flamand did, and which I think was done in a few places in this country *for a while*. For example, the young house of Simon and Schuster was a mad place in many ways. For one thing, the two principal partners, Dick Simon and Max Schuster, were bright people themselves, and they acquired a lot of very bright people; the place was a maelstrom of activity. They published almost everything, but also a lot of good books. But there was an atmosphere of -- it was febrile, the place was astir.

CORNELIA BESSIE *[to KM]*: You've brought Paul Flamand up. I think you realize that, of all the publishers I've known, he's the man I've most admired. He ran for many years a largish publishing house and, so far as I know, never compromised his principles. Paul has two gifts: one is literary, the other is with people. He took a very disparate, gifted, contentious group of people and really made a family of them, and made a family of them during those famous Fridays. Michael mentioned them, I think; I was invited to them several times. It was a great experience, and when Atheneum was founded, I kept saying to Michael, "If we can have anything like Seuil, we'll be doing well."

You know, we were starting from scratch, we were small, and I saw no reason why we couldn't do something like that; but we never really managed. I think part of it is that the culture of the business and the times were agin' us.

THE LAST OF THE JUST

MICHAEL BESSIE: When we started Atheneum, in the spring of 1959, we decided we would publish nothing for a year. We needed a year to collect a list. I went off to Europe, and circulated in France and Germany and England and Italy, buoyed by the wave of enthusiasm for the new publishing house. We were really the first literary publishing house to start up since Farrar, Straus, and that was 15 years before; and I had published a lot of stuff from Europe; and so there was a great deal of good will for us.

When I got to France, the last stop, I met with my old friend Paul Flamand and begged of him something for the new house. He said, "Well, we've got one thing here. It's not finished yet and it's very strange, and I don't know what your reaction to it will be; but when we get it in finished, which we should in a month or two, I'll send it to you." And along in August came this manuscript, in French, which was a novel, a Holocaust novel. It began with a pogrom in England in the 12th century and ended with the gas chambers at Auschwitz. I read it all night and went into the office the next day, and said to my colleagues, "I'm going to describe the book briefly. I've already called Paul Flamand and said that we want it, and I've committed us to pay" -- I think it was -- "a $2500 advance for it, which is what he asked for." I described it to them, and they said, "Are you sure?" I said: "Yes."

Because by this time, in 1959, *anybody* would have told you that we were fed up to the gills with the Holocaust! You know, starting in 1945, '46, there was a great flood of books, some of them wonderful books, about the Holocaust, the Jews, etc.; understandably, my partners were very suspicious. All I said was, "This book moved me deeply," and I was in a position to say we wanted to publish it. *[The book was the beautiful THE LAST OF THE JUST, by André Schwartz-Bart.]*

That goes back to your question a while ago about the Fanon--

McNAMARA: My question was this: You said that, *à propos* publishing Fanon, or not publishing him, you might have made a different decision at Atheneum than you did at Harper's. Why is that?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Quite simply because at Atheneum I would have had nobody to answer to for that decision except myself. You know, the real reason that I wanted to start Atheneum -- aside from the adventure of starting your own publishing house -- was that, after 13 years at Harper, there was a question in my mind: "Could I do it if the buck stopped here?" Every book I published at Harper had Cass Canfield or somebody else as the ultimate authority. I had to get his agreement, his approval. It wasn't difficult. There were a certain number of things under those circumstances that he would just say yes to, because I put it to him strongly. When he was dubious about it, he would say, "Would you be really miserable if we don't publish this?" Talk about collegiality: that was his way of running the place.

Anyhow, THE LAST OF THE JUST: I had no hesitation in saying to Pat and Hiram, "We must publish this book. I don't think," said I, genius that I am,

"that we're going to sell very many copies; but I've only had to pay 2500 bucks for it, and I've got an idea for the translator, if he will do it." They couldn't say no. Three weeks later, the book was published in France, created a sensation, became the number-one best-seller in France, got the Prix Goncourt; so, who looks good?

Next miracle: we get a really good translation. It's a book written by somebody whose first language is Yiddish. Schwartz-Bart's first language was Yiddish; French was his third. He was an Auschwitz child who ended up in France, and it's hard to describe the French in which that book was written; so the problem that it presented to the translator! The good Lord presented me with Steven Becker, then just emerging from an iron lung. At the age of 29, after publishing two or three books and starting a family, Steve got Landry's paralysis, which is rarer but more fatal than polio. Steve had a Jewish background, had religious parents. He was a miraculous linguist. He was still on his back! I sent him the book, and he said, "I will love to do it." And he did a miracle in translation, partly because he was just back from the dead himself. You know, those things sometimes combine; and in this case, they did.

Go back to your question about the Fanon book [WRETCHED OF THE EARTH]: if Cornelia had brought in the Fanon at Atheneum, for two reasons I think I would have said yes. One is because I would have been in a position to say yes without contradiction from somebody else; I wouldn't have had to justify that decision.

McNAMARA: But did you have to justify the "no"? Well, to Cornelia you did.

MICHAEL BESSIE: No: to myself. Yes, to Cornelia, and to myself. And that's the difference. Look, when we started Atheneum, I found myself saying to myself, "You can't call yourself a publisher until your decision is the last one." Nobody else to lean on. Pat [Knopf -- Alfred A. Knopf, Jr.] always had his parents, and I always had Cass Canfield or somebody else. Now, I'd got a whole series of people on whom I placed responsibility or shared judgment with. And the great trick in publishing -- which is why, by and large, small publishing is, what shall I say, the more *responsible* act -- is doing it to one's satisfaction. And I've done it, for the most part, to my own satisfaction.

Atheneum

MICHAEL BESSIE: I became friends with Alfred Knopf Jr. -- Pat Knopf -- who was essentially the sales and marketing manager of his father and mother's house; and in the course of a lunch one day, Pat said to me, out of the blue: "I don't suppose anything would ever persuade you to leave Harper." And I, without forethought, said, "I'm happy at Harper; good job, decent pay. But there are two things that would cause me to leave. One is an opportunity to join you at the house of Knopf, where somebody is now badly

needed. Your father and mother are getting old. They don't admit editorial authority to anyone else." The chief editor was a fellow named Harold Strauss. The Knopfs were merciless in their way of dealing with other people, including their son. And I said, "You will need a chief editorial person." He said, "Do you really mean it?" I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "What's the other thing that would cause you to leave Harper?"

I said, "Sounds crazy, but the opportunity to start a house of my, or our, own."

About a week or ten days after, he came back to me and said, "I've talked to my parents, and they entertain the idea; let's talk about it." In a series of discussions, we outlined an arrangement under which I would come to Knopf. I would be, at the moment, the editor-in-chief; and I would become Pat's partner on the retirement of his parents, by the acquisition of a sufficient number of shares to bring that about. I wasn't going to despoil him of his inheritance. And it was all agreed. Then one day, I get a note from Pat that says, "This is most difficult note I've ever had to write. My mother's just come back from Europe, and she won't have it. She has told my father, 'You mustn't do this.'" He said, "I am miserable; I don't want to talk."

Several weeks later, came a call from Pat saying, "Were you serious when you said that you might be interested in starting your own publishing house with somebody, specifically me?" I said I didn't think it was a possibility but, yes.

"Come to lunch today," he said.

Third person at lunch was a fellow named Richard Ernst, who was a classmate of mine at Harvard, who was a cousin of my then-wife, and who had had the good sense to marry a woman whose maiden name was Bloomingdale; and who was trained as a lawyer, and who was investing good Bloomingdale money in enterprises that his friends started. He was a benign investor. The year was 1959.

McNAMARA: He wanted return, but not a hand in it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: He wanted to smile upon it. He didn't want to play a role in it, not at all. So, we had lunch, and Ernst said, "You guys serious about this?" We said yes, we were. He said, "Okay, give me a plan. I'll put some money in it, and we'll find some other investors." So we did a plan; and what it came down to was finding four people, each of whom would put in 250,000 bucks. They had to be rich, and not care what happened to that sum of money, Ernst being the first. Among us, we found three more. That's how Atheneum started.

McNAMARA: That was real money then.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, we checked around, and people said, "What you need to get started on a small scale, you need about seven or eight hundred thousand dollars." So we said okay, and got a million. In actual point of fact, we had to make a second call.

Two extraordinary things about Atheneum: the people who put up the money -- Pat and I didn't put up a cent -- the people who put up the money

gave us 51% of the vote. We could do anything with the firm except sell it; and that, you may be sure, is very unusual. 1959 was a glorious time in many ways; it became so. That's how Atheneum started. I suppose I could say I owe it to Blanche Knopf, who couldn't stand me.

McNAMARA: And you and Cornelia were both at Harper. Did you go to Atheneum, Cornelia, as well?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I went when they were ready for me. I had a job that was really an interim job *[at* The Reader's Digest*; see Part 2, next issue]*, and a funny job, which in its peculiar way taught me a great deal; but I really was biding my time to join Atheneum, which I did.

McNAMARA: What did you do at Atheneum? And what did you intend to do at Atheneum?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Edit.

Atheneum, 2

McNAMARA: Atheneum had what you called "luck."

MICHAEL BESSIE: Sure did. How many publishing houses that pretend to be literary have a number-one best-seller on each of their first three lists?

McNAMARA: And those were?

MICHAEL BESSIE: The first was the Schwartz-Bart. Second, the first THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1960, by Theodore White. And the third was THE ROTHSCHILDS, by Frederick Morton, which sold very well. The timing was right, as we said before, and, to a certain extent, as Mr. Dooley said, "The victor belongs to the spoils." Cornelia will tell you about what young Roger Straus told us when he went back [to Farrar, Straus & Giroux] -- for the second time, I guess -- after they'd had that terrific success with that novel by the lawyer, what was his name, Scott Turow. Roger said, "You know, everybody's now got to have an assistant."

CORNELIA BESSIE: Young Roger, whom I'm very fond of, has a marvelously clear and keen view of publishing. He once said to me, "The most dangerous moment in a publisher's life is after the first big success." It's a very smart observation.

McNAMARA: But you didn't bobble it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: In a sense, we did.

CORNELIA BESSIE: All of a sudden, there were 60 people on the payroll.

McNAMARA: When was this?

MICHAEL BESSIE: In the course of two or three years after our start. We had to make a second call on our investors; we collected another almost a million, because we needed it.

Look, we were determined, Pat and I, at the start, that we would publish children's books and we tried to get Margaret MacElderry to come with us, but she was tied to Harcourt [-Brace, Jovanovich], she thought, and so she couldn't. I said, "Margaret," -- she's one of my oldest friends -- "you've got

to find somebody for us." And she did: she found an absolute genius in Jean Karl, who was then working for the [United] Methodist Publishing House [/ Abingdon Press]. Jean came; and we had set aside 250,000 bucks out of our kitty to start children's books. With that 250,000 bucks, and a little bit more, Jean within a couple of years was profitable. She was beginning to get Newberrys *[awards given for children's literature]*. We subsequently got Margaret because the idiots at Harcourt fired her. They told her that her books weren't adequately "course-adjusted" for the children's market.

Atheneum, 3

McNAMARA: You were not there for the whole life of Atheneum?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I was there the first 16 years.

McNAMARA: You were an owner and a director, and your backers would not allow you to sell Atheneum.

MICHAEL BESSIE: That was the only restriction. Pat and I divided the majority shares when Hiram left; they were originally divided three ways, then two ways.

McNAMARA: When he left, his shares reverted?

MICHAEL BESSIE: We bought them back. In any event, we started publishing in 1960, and everything was glorious, for just about ten years. We prospered; we were profitable. We weren't profitable the first year or two, but we became so by the third year. And we grew -- too much, I think -- but anyhow, we grew, we were a presence. As a symbol of it, I was the only person, to this day, from a small publishing house who became chairman of the Publishers Association. There's never been another: there wasn't before, and there hasn't been since. As a general rule, the chairman of the Publishers Association is the head of one of the five or six big houses, for obvious reasons: pays the most dues; swings the most weight.

Why did they make me the head of it? Maybe because I'm a stand-up Jewish comic, and they needed one.

In any event, those ten years were glorious. But by 1970, Pat, in particular, and I began to get the wind up. We were both now well into our 50s. We had 60 employees. Our backlist had not grown sufficiently to be a real cushion. And also, the publishing business turned down in 1970. And we, particularly Pat -- Pat got scared. The responsibility of it weighed on him very heavily. And so, he decided, and I agreed, that we had to do what everybody else was doing. By "everybody else" I mean Knopf, Viking, Little, Brown, you name it: they were all getting under the umbrellas, they were all selling to Random House or Simon & Schuster or Time, Inc.

McNAMARA: Is there a "why" behind that?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes: capital needs. Business was becoming more expensive. Authors were getting larger advances. You had to compete in marketing. Advertising became more expensive.

MCNAMARA: The large companies were publicly owned? Random House, for example?

MICHAEL BESSIE: They were either publicly owned -- Random was owned by RCA, for a while, though now it's privately owned, by the Newhouses -- or private. And Pat and I got worried, vis-à-vis our employees. If either Pat or I had died at that point, our estates couldn't have coped with the tax burden on our Atheneum shares, which had appreciated sufficiently in value, and yet there was no market for them. Successful small business in America -- you see it happening now in the computer field: as soon as a small computer firm is successful, Bill Gates or somebody buys it. And the reason for this is because they can't compete in the big market, unless they grow the way Microsoft did.

Anyhow, we got scared, because all of a sudden, we were nearly alone. Farrar, Straus was holding on, but then Roger Straus and his wife both are wealthy people. Pat and I were not. And so, Pat gave me the assignment, as the sort of outside person, to find somebody to buy us. And the first person who showed up and was interested was from, of all places, Raytheon. Raytheon then owned [D. C.] Heath, the academic publishers.

CORNELIA BESSIE: We ought also to speak of the time. Of a time when big, really very business-oriented companies, felt rich. You remember, in the 19th century when a rich man was really rich, he kept a *danseuse* in a *garçonnière*. The big companies wanted their *"danseuses,"* which were these small, stylish imprints.

MICHAEL BESSIE: We did sell part to Raytheon; Raytheon bought 10% of our stock. We needed some cash at that point, and that's how we devised it. Those of us who sold our stock put our money back into Atheneum.

In any event, I spent four years, from 1971 to 1975, trying to sell Atheneum, and I had the same response almost everywhere.

MCNAMARA: How could you sell by then? Your original backers had made it a condition that you couldn't.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, we had gone to them and said, "We've got to get under the umbrella." They were delighted at the idea because they would have made a lot of money out of it. Two of them had put in $250,000 and two of them had put in $500,000. They had gotten a fair part of their money back, because we were a Subchapter S corporation, which meant our first two years' losses came off their tax returns; so their actual out-of-pocket investment in Atheneum was less than what they had put in.

MCNAMARA: Inflation was growing then.

MICHAEL BESSIE: A problem -- also, the Vietnam War, the atmosphere of the country.... I really covered the waterfront, and everybody said the same thing. Kay Graham *[owner of the* Washington Post *and* Newsweek] said, "Oh, absolutely, we'd love to own it!" And then, their accountants would take a look at our books and say, "Wellll, a very distinguished imprint, but...."

So, after several years of trying to do it, we found two possible buyers. One was the Los Angeles *Times-Mirror*, which was quite big in book publishing then; still is. They made us an offer, actually: a little bit more than

book value. The other, in a sense more serious, purchaser was my old firm of Harper, then being run by Win[throp] Knowlton, who was beguiled partly by me -- let's see, 1975 was the year that I was elected chairman of the Publishers Association, so that I was, in the publishing world, a fairly public figure. Knowlton offered to buy us, for a little bit more than that. I was for it, and Pat was against it. Pat was against it for very good reasons: he couldn't see himself working for anybody else, anyhow; but he really couldn't see himself working for Harper, or for me. The deal with Harper was that Harper would buy Atheneum and I would be made publisher of the house.

In the end, Knowlton bought me and not Atheneum. In one of those marvelous board meetings, our board of directors voted not to accept the Harper offer. I had told them I didn't want to put a gun to their heads, but that if they didn't accept the Harper offer, I was going to leave. As I put it openly to them, "Atheneum has a problem that I can no longer solve." This is partly a function of my own inability, for example, to attract and publish commercial fiction. By this time, Atheneum needed blockbusters, needed a couple a year -- everybody does, but Atheneum *really* did. I didn't feel I could do that. And I had gotten Herman Golub as chief editor, and he was good -- he had brought [James] Clavell *[author of TAIPAN]* and several other blockbusters -- but more was needed. And also, I had been there 16 years, and I was no longer interested in being president of a publishing company. My principal interest was books and writers, and I wanted to stop pretending to be a corporate officer, which I didn't succeed in doing, but which I tried to do.

Knowlton offered me a good deal: go back to Harper; specifically, to be senior vice-president until I became 65, and then Harper would finance Cornelia and me in Bessie Books: which was the deal, and which I wanted. I don't think either of us foresaw the problems that we would have at Harper.

CORNELIA BESSIE: We didn't foresee the problems. The atmosphere in publishing had so changed in the years between when we signed the agreement and when we wanted to start Bessie Books -- the agreement was that we could have Bessie Books on demand -- that when we demanded, we thought, "Are they going to honor their agreement?" Because, by then, the atmosphere in publishing had greatly changed. But to our pleasure, they did.

McNAMARA: This was between 1975 and--

MICHAEL BESSIE: 1975 and -- I became 65 in 1981.

McNAMARA: What had changed?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, these had been boom years, and it was during those boom years, really, that the agreement was made. Money then disappeared on the education side. All kinds of financial things happened.

McNAMARA: The economy started to change about 1972.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, it was an entirely different publishing atmosphere; so it was honorable of them to keep to their agreement.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Book-publishing is counter-cyclical, it reacts slowly and late to changes in the economy, and therefore is in recession after the recession is over, and doesn't get into it until it's been on for a while.

And so, the board of Atheneum bought back my stock at a calculated value, which didn't make me a rich man but gave me some money, and I went to Harper, to be joined subsequently by Cornelia. Pat, within two years, merged with Scribner's. It wasn't a buy, either way; they merged the two firms. Scribner's was private, I think, owned by the family.

McNAMARA: This must have been about 1978?

MICHAEL BESSIE: It was '77 or '78; I think it was consummated in '78. With the Scribner-Atheneum merger completed, it was less than two years before Macmillan bought the combo. That was a very successful operation, because Macmillan paid quite a lot for it. *[Macmillan was then publicly owned; afterward it was bought by Robert Maxwell, the late English media baron who thus acquired Scribner's, Atheneum, the Free Press, and Collier Books and formed a conglomerate he called Maxwell-Macmillan.]*

So, that's how Atheneum came to its ante-penultimate situation. Have I explained why that happened? I think so. I think it happened partly because of the changes in circumstances, partly because small publishing firms were having an increasingly difficult time surviving as independent entities, because they couldn't have the capital to compete, (a) for authors, and (b) for a place in the market. And also, I'll admit that I, too, got the wind up a bit. A bad year would have been bad for us; two bad years would perhaps not have been fatal, but would have been pretty close to it. There is a very low ceiling on profitability of quality publishing. If the firm makes more than 4% or 5%, it's because of blockbusters; otherwise, the cushion is not there.

And the same thing was operating everywhere. Why did Random House sell to RCA? Just a little before that, Random House was a prosperous firm. Bennet Cerf was no longer head. He had brought Bob Bernstein from Simon & Schuster: and then Bob subsequently brought [Robert] Gottlieb *[later head of Knopf; afterward, editor of* The New Yorker], Tony Schulte, and Nina Borne: a trio. By the time of the sale to RCA, Bob Bernstein was head of the house. I don't know what the price was; and of course, subsequently, RCA sold it. Why? Because RCA discovered that you can't make as much money in book publishing as you can in TVs and radios.

Jews and Publishing

McNAMARA: We talked a bit earlier about about Jews and publishing. Would you say more about this?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, yes; it's a subject of interest to me, and I'll tell you why. Harold Guinzburg was the founder and financier of The Viking Press, and he inherited a sizable fortune from the dress-goods business. In fact, it was said that the important publishing houses, American publishing houses, founded in the 1920s, were almost uniformly products of the dry-goods business. Knopf was started by Knopf money: Alfred's father made his money

in textiles. Simon and Schuster were two guys both of whose parents were in the dry-goods business; and so on, and so on.

When I came back from the war, I had in effect been invited to join a couple of places, Harper being one of them. Harold Guinzburg had become a good friend, and suggested that I might want to join Viking. I was attracted to Harper for a variety of reasons, one of which was *Harper's Magazine*. It had interested me a lot and was then an integral part of the house. I called Harold to tell him I was thinking about going to Harper, and what did he think? He and Cass were very close friends. He said, "I think it's a great idea. It's time that Harper had a Jewish editor. It's time that Harper had a Jewish person in the hierarchy." I was surprised by that. And, indeed, it was accurate, because when I came to Harper I was the only Jew at that level. But I wasn't ever made to feel that.

Shortly after I came to Harper I began to get to know the agents. One of the most important of them was a woman named Helen Strauss, who was the literary department of William Morris, and she and I became friends. She said to me one day, "You know, you're really very bright, and you're going to be a real success, but you'll never be president of the company." I said, "Why not?" She said, "You're Jewish."

I cite that because that's the way the world was. And had been. Now, I think it's no longer true. I think a somewhat similar thing has happened as far as women in publishing are concerned, though I think the Jews are doing better than women, by and large.

McNAMARA: Was Atheneum considered a "Jewish house"?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, Hiram Hayden proudly informed us one day that he gathered he was known as our "golden goy," which he was--

CORNELIA BESSIE: No, he wasn't!

MICHAEL BESSIE: I don't think-- But by that time, namely 1960, things had changed.

McNAMARA: And so, that was, in a sense, a left-over joke.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes. What I described as true in 1946-47 really ceased to be, in the 1950s. In the course of the 50 years I've been at it [publishing], I really think there has been a very considerable change. I don't think that what was essentially a segregated publishing world in America, and also in England, still exists.

(End of Part 1)

In Part 2, (Vol. 2, No. 1) Cornelia Bessie talks about editing, reading, and how she discovered THE LEOPARD; Michael Bessie talks about Atheneum's failures, and the evolution of Harper and Bros. into HarperCollins.

Cornelia and Michael Bessie can be reached at
Bessie Books
296 Joshuatown Road, Lyme, Ct. 06371
(860) 526-2486

Some Books Published by Michael and Cornelia Bessie:

Edward Albee, WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, and others
Robert Ardrey, AFRICAN GENESIS; THE TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE, and others
*Miguel Angel Asturias, EL SEÑOR PRESIDENTE
Marcel Aymé, URANUS, and others
Luigi Barzini, THE ITALIANS, and others
Georgio Bassani, THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI CONTINIS, and others
Daniel Boorstin, THE IMAGE, and others
Peter Brook, THE EMPTY SPACE, and others
John Cheever, THE WAPSHOT CHRONICLE, and others
Richard Crossman , et al., THE GOD THAT FAILED
*The Dalai Lama, FREEDOM IN EXILE
Jan de Hartog, THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM, and others
Freeman Dyson, DISTURBING THE UNIVERSE, and others
John K. Fairbank, THE GREAT CHINESE REVOLUTION, and others
Janet Flanner, PARIS JOURNAL, and others
*Mikhail Gorbachev, PERESTROIKA
Yoram Kaniuk, ADAM RESURRECTED, and others
*Peter Medawar, THE LIVING SCIENCE, and others
Nadezhda Mandelstam, HOPE AGAINST HOPE and HOPE ABANDONED
Alan Moorhead, GALLIPOLI, and others
Frederick Morton, THE ROTHSCHILDS
Grandma Moses, MY LIFE'S HISTORY
Nigel Nicolson, PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE, and others
Harold Nicolson, DIARIES
*Anwar el-Sadat, IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY
André Schwartz-Bart, THE LAST OF THE JUST
Peter Shaffer, AMADEUS
Ignazio Silone, FONTAMARA, and others
*Alexander Solzhenitsyn, THE OAK AND THE CALF, and others
Saul Steinberg, THE ART OF LIVING, and others
Alice B. Toklas, THE COOKBOOK
Kenneth Tynan, CURTAINS, and others
*James Watson, THE DOUBLE HELIX
Theodore H. White, THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1960, and others
Peter Weiss, THE PERSECUTION AND ASSASSINATION OF JEAN-PAUL MARAT AS PERFORMED BY THE INMATES OF THE ASYLUM OF CHARENTON UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE, and others
*Elie Wiesel, THE CITY BEYOND THE WALLS

*Nobel Prize

Kundera's Music Teacher: Variation on a Theme, with Two Short Texts

Several editors and publishers left us recently, among them Catharine Carver, editor of such good and varied writers as Hannah Arendt, Saul Bellow, John Berryman, Richard Ellmann, William Gaddis, Flannery O'Connor; Gila Bercovitch, a splendid woman who was until recently editor-in-chief at the Library of America, a press which restores our literature to us as its authors meant us to read it; Kenneth McCormick, generous of spirit even in physical decline, who in the 1960s held the post of chief editor at Doubleday, then owned by the Doubleday family; and James Laughlin, founder of New Directions: the man who published the first Modernist writers Americans read, and the first serious books many of us when young bought for ourselves.

One quality these people shared was caring about books, in the sense that I grew up with: real books, the kind you kept and reread, probably in paperback. Who could afford hardbounds? Books were precious not as objects, but for what they contained: what mattered. "News that stays news," as Pound said famously. When young no one thought about publishers, for what was their purpose if not, as Michael Bessie says elsewhere in this issue, "to serve literature"?

On the other hand, the agony of writers is always an interesting subject, is it not? The real drama of any author's life is unseen, however extravagant his or her public behavior might be. Talking with publishers I've often thought about a particular infliction of theirs: the rejection letter. Publishers may hope to serve literature; writers write it. Gila Bercovitch, who was forthright and minatory, used to remind me how stupid editors could be, and have been, in the history of American letters.

Perhaps the French best understand the tragicomedy of rejection, for they comprehend perfectly, as well, the grandeur of the writer's undertaking, as shown in the following exchange between Margaret Duras and her interlocutor:

> Q: What is the common trait of all literature, good and bad?
>
> A: The fact that writing is a fierce need, a tragic need, in all writers, often more so in bad writers than in good ones. It is an undertaking that in some cases requires extraordinary moral courage. The writer sacrifices not only leisure time but also work time in order to write his novel. He is always alone, especially if he lives in the provinces, in which case he writes in order to avoid asphyxiation. Needless to say, rejection is always devastating, sometimes tragic. To

reject a manuscript, especially a first manuscript, is to reject the whole man, to impugn his being.

Yet, during his simplest, most transparent hours, if he is granted them, a writer may smile at his human foolishness and return to the real work. Occasionally I reread a passage by Milan Kundera in which he recalls an incident from his youth. He writes:

> When I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I used to take lessons in musical composition. Not because I was a child prodigy but because of my father's quiet tact. It was during the war, and a friend of his, a Jewish composer, was required to wear the yellow star; people had begun to avoid him. Not knowing how to declare his solidarity, my father thought of asking him just then to give me lessons. They were confiscating Jewish apartments, and the composer kept having to move on to smaller and smaller places, ending up, just before he left for Theresienstadt, in a little flat where many people were camping, crammed, in every room. All along, he had held on to the small piano on which I would play my harmony in counterpoint exercises while strangers went about their business around us.
>
> Of all this I retain only my admiration for him, and three or four images. Especially this one: seeing me out after a lesson, he stopped by the door and suddenly said to me: "There are many surprisingly weak passages in Beethoven. But it is the weak passages that bring out the strong ones. It's like a lawn -- if it weren't there, we couldn't enjoy the beautiful tree growing on it."
>
> A peculiar idea. That it has stayed in my memory is even more peculiar. Maybe I felt honored at getting to hear a confidential admission from the teacher, a secret, a great trick of the trade that only the initiated are permitted to know.
>
> Whatever it was, that brief remark from my teacher of the time has haunted me all my life. (I've defended it, I've fought it, I've never finished with it); without it, this text could very certainly not have been written.
>
> But dearer to me than that remark in itself is the image of a man who, a while before his hideous journey, stood thinking aloud, in front of a child, about the problem of composing a work of art.

KM

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