ARCHIPELAGO

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Vol. 2, No. 4 Winter 1998/99

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Contents

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About Our Contributors

Dannie Abse's newest book of poems, about to appear, is ARCADIA, ONE MILE (Hutchinson, 1999). He is the editor of WELSH RETROSPECTIVES (with Carey Archard; Dufour Editions) and TWENTIETH CENTURY ANGL0-WELSH POETRY (Seren Books / Poetry Wales, 1998); among his books of poems are REMEMBRANCE OF CRIMES PAST (Persea Books, 1993) and WHITE COAT, PURPLE COAT: Collected Poems 1948-1988 (George Braziller, 1992). Dannie Abse practices medicine in London.

Benjamin H. Cheever <benjami200@aol.com> is a Contributing Editor of Archipelago. His "Confession of A Lover, Spurned" appeared in our inaugural issue. He is the author of THE PLAGIARIST and THE PARTISAN (both, Atheneum) and editor of THE LETTERS OF JOHN CHEEVER (Simon and Schuster). His novel FAMOUS AFTER DEATH will be published by Crown in 1999.

Henry Martin was born in Philadelphia and received degrees in English literature from Bowdoin College and New York University, where he also studied Romance languages. He translates contemporary Italian literature and regularly contributes as a critic to a number of international art magazines, including *Art News* and *Flash Art*. In addition to his translations of Anna Maria Ortese (THE IGUANA; A MUSIC BEHIND THE WALL, Vols. One and Two) and Giorgio Manganelli (ALL THE ERRORS), he has written extensively about art, including two volumes in collaboration with the Italian artist Gianfranco Baruchello, HOW TO IMAGINE and WHY DUCHAMP, both published by McPherson & Company. Henry Martin lives with his wife, the artist Betty Skuber, and their son, John-Daniel, in the mountains of southern Tyrol not far from Bolzano, Italy.

Maria Negroni <negroni@ibm.net> was born in Argentina in 1951. She holds a PhD in Latin American literature from Columbia University, and has received Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundation fellowships. Three books of her poems have been published by Libros de Tierra Firme (Buenos Aires): DE TANTO DESOLAR (1985), PER/CANTA (1989) and LA JAULA BAJO EL TRAPO (1991). Two collections of poetry, ISLANDIA and EL VIAJE DE LA NOCHE were published, respectively, in 1994, by Monte Avila Editores (Caracas) and Editorial Lumen (Barcelona). Bilingual editions are forthcoming of ISLANDIA (Station Hill Press) and LA JAULA BAJO EL TRAPO/CAGE UNDERCOVER (Sun & Moon Press). She has also received a National Book Award for EL VIAJE DE LA NOCHE (which also was first runner-up at the Princeton University Poetry Series) and was first runner-up for the Planeta Prize 1997, for her novel EL SUEÑO de URSULA. She directs a poetry magazine edited in Buenos Aires, *Abyssinia*. A selection from EL VIAJE DE LA NOCHE/NIGHT JOURNEY appeared in our inaugural issue.

Anna Maria Ortese was born in Naples, in 1914. Her first book, a collection of stories published in 1937, was acclaimed as the work of a major new magical realist. (The critical phrase “magical realism" was largely the invention of the writer Massimo Bontempelli, who is also credited with having discovered Ortese.) She has written more than a dozen volumes of stories, novels, and essays, and has been the recipient of Italian literary prizes, among them Strega, the Premio Viareggio, and the Fiuggi. Although for fifty years her writing reached relatively small audiences, her most recent works have appeared on the Italian bestseller lists. In 1986, her novel, THE IGUANA, appeared in an English translation by Henry Martin, published by McPherson & Company <www.mcphersonco.com>, who also publish two volumes of Ortese's stories under the title A MUSIC BEHIND THE WALL, the second volume of which appeared in 1998. "The Great Street," a story, appeared in *Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Anna Maria Ortese died in 1998.

Anne Twitty’s <anahuna@worldnet.att.net> translations of the book-length poems of Maria Negroni are forthcoming in the bilingual editions CAGE UNDERCOVER/LA JAULA BAJO EL TRAPO (Sun & Moon Press) and ISLANDIA (Station Hill Press). A selection of her translations from Negroni’s ISLANDIA appeared in *The Paris Review* (Spring 1994); another appeared in *Mandorla*. She has also translated the Cuban poet Magali Alabau (HERMANA/SISTER, Editorial Betania, 1992; LIEBE, La torre de Papel, 1993). Anne Twitty was for some years editor of the Epicycle section of *Parabola*, which published her essays on myth, creation, and memory. A selection from Maria Negroni's novel EL SUEÑO de URSULA/URSULA'S DREAM was published in Spanish and in Anne Twitty's translation, in the journal of The America's Society, *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* (Spring 1998). Her translations from Maria Negroni's EL VIAJE DE LA NOCHE/NIGHT JOURNEY appeared in *Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

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In Memorium
WILLIAM GADDIS
1922-1998

THE RECOGNITIONS (1955)
JR (1975)
CARPENTER'S GOTHIC (1985)
A FROLIC OF HIS OWN (1994)
AGAPE AGAPE (Post.)

father of our friend and contributor
Sarah Gaddis

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Other News:
Our friend and contributor Janet Palmer Mullaney is editor of TRUTHTELLERS OF THE TIMES, Interviews with Contemporary Women Poets. University of Michigan Press, just out.

The next issue of *Archipelago*, on-line in mid-March, will feature the work of Stella Snead, the English Surrealist painter and photographer. Her spoof, "Early Cabbage," with digitized photographs, appeared in *Archipelago* Vol. 1 No. 3.

WHERE TIME IS ANOTHER

Anna Maria Ortese
tr. Henry Martin

At the beginning of the First World War — the period in which I was born — social discrepancies, in Italy as in many other parts of the world, were not, I believe, as painful as they are today. Above all, they were not so conspicuous. My family, a total of nine persons which included six children, lived a highly modest life, practically in poverty, in the south-central region of the country and was surely no stranger to economic hardship, but we didn't really notice it. At least the children didn't. So even in spite of having been born into very uncomfortable circumstances, often sad, and marked above all by a great void of culture and security, I wasn't aware of it, and perhaps didn't suffer from it, up until adolescence. And at that point, the center of my life came to be occupied by other problems, which quickly coalesced into a single problem: the problem of self-expression. The primary problem of survival — the universal problem, so to speak, which was to tarry at my side throughout the whole of my life — flanked this second and equally serious problem, making it sometimes more intricate, and at other times more simple. There were even moments when I managed to believe that self-expression was my only problem; but then I'd be forced to admit that the other problem remained as well. Both of them, now, like Poe's famous raven, have taken up permanent residence on the threshold of my life. My life has become their home.

But what is the nature of this problem of self-expression which can prove so strong as to vie with the problem of survival itself, and for all of a span, by now, of forty or fifty years? Today we are wary of discussing such things, since they don't seem sufficiently "democratic" — as the phrase currently runs. And yet if democracy is ever to prove its worth as the tool most suited for creating a certain happiness, I believe that the problem of self-expression — the problem of achieving a true individuality — may well have to occupy the very first place, and I mean within the lives of people in general.

Self-expression: a child most usually achieves self-expression by drawing, playing, fantasizing, and running, and even by inventing another "I" which offers protection from the world. Adolescents are apt to turn their attention to the ins and outs of much more sophisticated techniques, desiring to translate the act of self-expression into the production of something concrete they can call their own. If such adolescents have been blessed with adequate education, their efforts will be crowned with success, and the creative "I" will experience harmonious growth. But this period in which the adolescent wants to give autonomous form (autonomous and therefore new) to what she or he feels is highly delicate, and things can go quite wrong. The world can overwhelm such a boy or girl with its own cultural models; or models may prove to be wholly lacking, as is typically the pitfall in highly impoverished societies. The adolescent runs the risk, in the first case, of being brainwashed and enslaved; or, in the second, of being set adrift into a course of distorted development. The present-day world of childhood and adolescence is full of such boys and girls — captive to society's values in the wealthy countries, and abandoned to their own devices in the poor ones.

To dwell at greater length on this situation would not be easy, not now. But if I want to reach some personal understanding of the mystery that drives the curious

destiny of a certain kind of writer — the writer who comes from nowhere, and then returns into nowhere without having achieved what he or she desired to achieve, even in spite of having dedicated a large part of his or her life to this precious enterprise — I have to remain aware of the *gravity* of this situation: the situation of the adolescent who searches for a means of self-expression by way of education — a means of self-expression and thus a means of growth — but who cannot find it. Because education is itself impossible and unavailable. Because the one specific world in which he or she lives has no such thing to offer. Such young people are thus thrown back on their own resources: they don't give up the struggle (it's a battle for survival no less than for self-expression), but their achievements never fulfill their potential. Not by far. And finally — at the end of a life — they have to accept the perception that circumstance has shown more muscle than their own determination, and has greatly hampered their capacity for self-expression, and their growth as well. That's what I want to talk about. But first, before proceeding, I have to return for a moment to what I understood at fifteen years of age — and still today understand — by "self-expression," which centers, for me, on the written word.

I don't want to dwell on any deeply personal view — or, worse, on any self-satisfied interpretation — of the meaning of self-expression. So I do better to focus on self-expression in terms of its value as a mode of "intelligence," rather than as linked to the life of the feelings; I do better to confront its concern with the *logic* of things, and to skirt the vanity of finding oneself, like a mirror, in the midst of them. I have used the word *things*. And as a curious faculty peruses and presents us with things in their countless number, manifest variety and endless mutability, this word fills up, little by little, with a special air or meaning. Its meaning is involved — as far as I myself am concerned, or as far as my experience can fathom — with what I'd refer to as "strangeness." And there you have it. If I had to offer a definition of everything that surrounds me — things, in their infinitude, and the feelings through which I grasp them, by now throughout half a century — I could hinge it on no other word: strangeness. My writings reflect the desire — indeed the painful urgency — to render this feeling of strangeness.

For adults — or among highly cultivated peoples — the whole world is the world of the obvious, of the commonplace. They apply their labels to everything — pricing and, whenever need be, describing the merchandise. This is a *field*, this is the *ocean*, this is a *horse*, this is your *mother*, this is the *national flag*, these are two *boys*. But for children, or adolescents, and for a certain sort of artist as well — less often for writers — that's not the way things stand. Wherever they go, everything shines with a light that betrays no origins. Everything they touch — that flag, that horse, that ocean — is vibrant with electricity and leaves them wonderstruck. They understand what adults have ceased to understand: that the world *is a heavenly body*; that all things within and beyond the world are made of cosmic matter; and that their nature, their meaning — except for a dazzling gentleness — is unsoundable. Children are moved to tears by everything they touch or see pass by, and they vainly appeal to reason or their elders for explanations of the why and how of so much magnificence: those elders (including parents and teachers) are usually no more informed and attentive than so many inkwells. The child is alone. And the child's approach and descent to the earth and the so-called real-life world is often, finally, a collision. A moment of impact and ecstasy. The possession of a means of self-expression — a means of self-expression and an education in its use — might mean at such an instant to find oneself provided with a cushion or a parachute. It might bring the ability to engage with the world — the world of reality — in the way that's right and proper for the human soul: through the exercise of creativity. Otherwise, when children connect to the outside world solely by way of the objects supplied by the marketplace, they remain exposed to an inward anxiety; in spite of possessing everything, they experience an internal void that turns frequently into bitter dissatisfaction, and anger. Because their education, their birth into the world, took place without the aid of their

own creativity and sense of invention. Such a child finds everything already made. And the already made — by others — will be found to be utterly destructive, like a faceless wall. So it's something that the child in turn will want to destroy, once having seen it to stand in the service of imaginative and creative amputation. I have always thought that the world's greatest problem — the problem on which its peace as well, no matter how relative, may very well depend — is to allow its children to enter the so-called adult world as persons who themselves *create*, rather than appropriate and destroy. Creativity is a form of motherhood. It educates; it makes us happy; it makes adulthood something positive. Not to create is to die; and before dying, to grow irremediably old.

Such pure if difficult happiness is often found among children who live — without great strain — in poor communities, but surrounded by fundamentally loving people. They escape the immediate embrace of the feeling that the essence of human community lies in profit and loss. Such notions remain at a distance from their souls, and they are meanwhile able to live through days that are charged with joy and meaning; for a good stretch of time they swim outside the sway of the currents that end in the whirlpool of economic conditioning, escaping all false social obeisance to the things and interests of the marketplace. They'll encounter these violent forces at fifteen or sixteen years of age, when already they'll have sufficient strength; and not everything within them will come away shattered or damaged.

I had five brothers, and none of them, it seems to me, showed any particular inclination to the arts. But one of them — he went to a naval academy and then died in the war — wrote a very beautiful, very limpid story when he was twenty years old; its subject was a smuggler who had been arrested. He also wrote a poem on the mysteries of the stars. Another of my brothers — already an adult, and quite unhappy — turned to painting for a number of years and worked in bright, glowing colors. When a psychological crisis led him to set this activity aside, he became unhappy once again. Concerning my other brothers, I remain largely in the dark, since they were scattered here and there by the war and rarely — those who survived — came back home. But traces of a kind of nostalgia for a state of youthful creativity remain to be seen in several of them, and it strikes me that this need, if only they had developed it in time, along with the rest of the faculties that belong to living in the world and understanding it, might have changed their lives.

Even if my own life isn't what one thinks of as a totally realized life, I have to think of myself as fortunate; because I have sometimes managed, in the course of at least some fifty years of adult life, to reach the luminous shore — I think of myself as eternally shipwrecked — of a form of self-expression and creativity that find their never swerving goal in the hope of capturing and fixing — if only for an instant, meaning the span of time encompassed by a work of art — the marvelous phenomenon of living and feeling.

And there's nothing romantic, and no self-indulgence, in my use of the word "marvelous." Of all the words that might be employed as descriptions of life and the feeling of being alive, "marvelous" is surely the most pedestrian word I know. This feeling is better approached by words like "ecstasy," by terms like "ecstatic," "fugitive," "inscrutable."

My first such emotions were aroused by the evanescent beauty of the face of a child who lived next-door to us. I was struck by the purity and chestnut sweetness of his gaze. A "phenomenon." Of that much I was sure. But how could I render it? A few pastels came to my aid. And if I saw, having hidden the drawing in a closet, that a person who absentmindedly opened the closet door betrayed a moment of surprise and an inkling of having been moved, I understood that I had reached my goal of grasping and expressing the flow of life. I drew and drew, like so many adolescents, but only faces: mysterious, childlike faces. Confronted with something that spoke of adulthood, I could draw — I could capture — nothing. The emotion set off in me by very young faces was not of course the only emotion I encountered: all the phenomena of nature — principally the wind — struck me as fluid, unsoundable *faces* of the power of nature. Flowers as well,

naturally enough, and grasses, the sun, Sunday mornings, the lunar nights with many clouds that pass before the moon. Or little shards of glass that sparkled on the ground in some gloomy, silent street. Everything struck me as containing a warning and a message. Such things were more intense and secret than feelings, and they couldn't be rendered — at least I couldn't render them — with pastels. So I had to turn to the pen. But that pen was completely unpracticed. My intellect — though at most I should say my sensibility — hadn't at all been schooled to the use of writing. I hadn't been educated. As with many girls of the time, my education had come to a close with elementary school. So from adolescence until about the age of twenty — the period in which I first encountered this problem of expressing myself through writing — I never indulged the illusion that I might be able to solve it. But I constantly circled around it, and I did learn something.

I had left school when I was just about thirteen — after a woeful experience at an institute for vocational training — and my family had afterwards given in to my request to enroll me at a private school for the piano. It was run by a relative. The plan was for me to earn a diploma, to pass the examinations at the conservatory, and then to find pupils to whom I myself could give private lessons. These studies continued for three or four years — I studied music, a fact that still surprises me — and then I broke it all off quite abruptly. Another terrible passion, a terrible event, had found its way into my stock of experience, and there was no way at all to give it expression through those sheets of music. It's an event that merits brief mention.

In addition to all the unsoundable faces and events that daily erupt from life — these things I ardently desired to capture and fix in all their beauty and evanescence — I had also come to understand that life is charged with a number of cadences, or properties, of which the nature is equally unsoundable. One of them, for example, lay in the immensity, somnolence, and peacefulness of space. I had had that experience in Libya, between nine and thirteen years of age, perhaps: the way nature, as sand or sky, knows the immobility and endless extent, within immobility, of dream. Then, while crossing the sea to return to Italy — a two day voyage — I was struck quite intensely by the duplex motion which derived, on the one hand, from the ship that cut its way through the dark blue waters, and, on the other, from the waters themselves: they were never the *same* blue waters of only a moment before, but still they presented themselves as such. So the same place, I thought, doesn't mean an identical time and situation. This doubly articulated mechanism — the workings of life and place inside the mechanics of time — cast a shadow across my path. The ship was moving and kept on moving while I stood still and observed the very same sea, and meanwhile the ship's situation had changed: it lay in a different but apparently identical place. And the place it had been in before — yesterday's place — had irretrievably disappeared. So, the problem was time itself: the problem of the places and dimensions *into which things passed*. The very fact that *things passed!* And once and for all, it seemed. So, from a logical point of view, *everything that happened* — if its second, ulterior state lay in its existing no longer — was necessarily illusory. This quality of time, its practice of forming things and then of canceling them out, acted profoundly on my mind, no less than those forms themselves. I saw it all as a great enigma. Time consumed itself; and what happened to the forms in which every moment of time gave proof of itself?

One of these forms — to return to the fact that prevented my continuing to study music — was one of my brothers, whom to tell the truth I didn't know well. He too hadn't wanted or been able to study, and for the last two years he had been at sea as a crewman on some ship. Now, one January evening, we received the news that he was

dead — in a distant place, on the shores of a distant sea — and would never again return to Naples and the life we lived as a family.

At first this piece of news turned our house into a place of infernal turmoil, which later, however, gave way to a strange silence. Such silence always follows a death, even the deaths of pets, and it strikes me as resulting from a kind of collapse of the soul. Something has been amputated. A part of the soul has taken its leave forever. And the soul reacts by entirely ceasing to listen to the noises, sounds and voices of surrounding nature, no less than to its own. This silence, I believe, is of the very same nature as the great and distant azure of the vault of African skies — or of the skies of other vast continents — and it holds the same mute rumble of the sea that falls away behind a ship. So, beyond its azure vault — its happy soul — these are the world's most patent events: time — the eternal flow and vanishing of everything; and this is the response of nature and the soul: the sudden voicelessness, the stricken creature's collapse into itself. So there's a very great truth in Dante's depiction of a soul suddenly wounded and deprived of a part of itself: he tells us that Calvalcanti, believing his son to be dead, cried out "What? What did you say? He had had? Does he live no longer?" and then collapsed into the burning arc, never to reappear again.

This silence, at least for me, in my never ending solitude (my mother could look for succor in her Christian faith, my brothers had school, my father had his office) lasted for several months, and I saw no way of getting out of it. Finally one day, indeed one morning, suddenly, I thought that — if nothing else, since it was killing me — I could describe it. So I sat down at my table and wrote a free-verse poem of about a hundred lines, entitled "Manuele," in which I talked about this silence to the sailor's ghost. That was my first poem. And since I wasn't — later — to write very many poems, but mostly stories, it also counts as my first attempt at writing: my first attempt to couple the written word to a calm frame of mind and to use it to render — aesthetically to render — something atrocious, and above all else inscrutable. Life is an apocalyptic phenomenon — apocalyptic and beguiling; and it is so intense and so averse to every form of examination or analysis, from no matter what point of view — it counts as no less than a synonym for the unsoundable and ungraspable — that it can only be rendered by a contrary frame of mind: by an attitude of admiration, by a contemplation of its very immensity, and of what for us is its ferocity. Affliction requires that we take up a musical instrument — in this case verse — and attempt to sound a first few calm and smiling notes: it's only within that calm, and by means of that smile, that we'll be able to imprison the horror we have suffered. Think, for example, of a mirror. That cold, elegant and utterly motionless surface can capture the shudders of a wind-blown tree, or a great green beast of a wave as it rises up to scud along the surface of the sea. No sea could reflect the sea, nor a tree a tree. The nature and the tragic spirit of things can only be reflected in something of an utterly different, contrasting nature. In something endowed with what we refer to as aesthetic quality. The quality of the mirror, which stands in opposition to what it reflects, and is therefore able to encompass it. If you want to capture a stormy sea, or the horrors of a war, stay calm; your own pained silence is charged with a distance, and you must place that distance between these things and yourself.

These thoughts arise on their own, and surely in disorder, but I have no other way of turning a personal and therefore limited experience into something universal, and therefore clear to everyone. The fact that it's a part of my personal history would itself be of no importance if it weren't accessible to others.

After writing these verses — a total of three poems — I decided to send them to a literary magazine which I had often noticed at the kiosk not far from our house. (This experience too — submitting the results of one's first uncertain attempts at self-

expression to the judgment of a learned authority — is both inevitable and educational.) Then I waited for a reply. And here I was lucky. Because the person who received and opened my letter — the director of the magazine — was a spirit of superior elevation. In other words, he was one of the deacons of the great Temple of Aesthetics, and he knew it to be the forge in which the human soul assumes its proper shape. He felt a very great love for the human soul, but like the saints and great theologians he never saw its growth and salvation as divorced from the observance of religious Law and Rule. He saw faith and obedience to the great tables of Aesthetic Law as fundamental. This was the only route through which the human soul could find salvation. He published this long piece of writing (I won't dwell on my joy, I had known no equal joy) and offered me as well a few suggestions; but his comments were always so detached and apparently marginal as to stay at a distance from both praise and disfavor (and at the time I was largely unaware even of the use of the apostrophe). His discretion has always made me think of him as a true educator.

My life, from that day forward, changed radically, since now I had an instrument with which to express myself. I also had something to which to aspire, a compelling goal: the approval of my invisible teacher. I spent about a year on this kind of work: setting all the commotion which life aroused within me into free hendecasyllabic verse, and seeing it grow instantly calm and turn into something *different* (a formal feeling). The experience was full of joy and liberation, even if the poems themselves were nothing special. But I was training my hand, teaching my fingertips to write, and in my boundless nothingness as a girl who had no future, this also, if not quite simply, seemed to hold the offer — I dare to say — of a place in society.

At this point, the editor of the literary magazine (which was printed in a far-away city) asked me to try to write a story — a story in prose — for a weekly publication with which he was also connected. This was my entrance examination to the much-loved school of writing (no matter how laxly I may have followed its courses). I immediately wrote the story "Redskin," and he published it, accompanied by a few words of praise, calling no attention to its defects.

I'd run the risk of going astray in numberless rivulets of narrative, of memory and observation, if I didn't stick strictly to the facts. My promotion (quite the proper term) to literature, or at least to its introductory courses, also earned me a higher level of respect at home, and surely I couldn't ignore the salutary change that took place in my mother as she dwelt on the thought that perhaps her difficult daughter was acquiring a profession. This was also the period in which the director of the magazine introduced me — in French, a language I had studied a bit, alone, but which in any case I understood — to two of the stories of Katherine Mansfield: "Prelude" and "On the Bay." I found myself to be looking up at peaks that shone in the sun. Such beauty was wholly new to me. I'm not quite certain if he introduced me to the work of Katherine Mansfield because of first having read a lengthy story of my own — "The Solitary Light" — or if instead I wrote "The Solitary Light" in the wake of having read these stories. Aside from Katherine Mansfield's greatness, and from all her fully accomplished art, there's a certain similarity between these two ways of seeing things — on the part, on the one hand, of Katherine Mansfield, and on the other hand, of that nameless girl: a gilded atmosphere, uncertainties that might belong to dreams, a sense of ineffability, of the tender inexplicability of things... and as well, I'd add, of the soul's befuddlement and constant trembling and loss of itself. As far as everything else is concerned, the difference was enormous and has never ceased to be: in terms not only of aesthetic results — on her part deservedly famous, on my part no more than uncertain — but also as a question of the very nature of the experiences involved. Mansfield belonged quite clearly to a cultured, bourgeois society, highly developed and pan-European, and she was able to connect

interior experience to the worlds of physical and social reality; whereas for me the worlds of physical and social reality remained entirely unknown. I couldn't avoid the sad realization, bit by bit as I tried to move ahead, that I found it ever less possible to recognize things for what they truly were and to call them by their proper names: my intelligence, since it hadn't been equipped with the arms of knowledge and factuality, withdrew into the merely contemplative, the emotive, to the point of going astray. So a certain sense of the coldness of life became my only world, and expressing it my only goal: a goal already outstripped by the narrative canons of the past, and with me they therefore took on an air of weary repetition.

These words refer to all of my stores of the period before the war, and as well to a few that were written later — the stories that went into the volumes which appeared in 1937 and 1948, entitled ANGELICI DOLORI and INFANTA SEPOLTA. All of these thirty or so stories, including the ones I didn't publish, were attempts — at first quite happy, but then ever more neurotic and tortured — to render my sense of ecstasy and wonder on first encountering the world, and then the distress of seeing this world turn ever more into a desert where nothing seemed to hold a meaning or move towards any destination: a world of ghosts and monsters. And the first of these ghosts was that little girl who had made those observations on the ship and the area *of yesterday* into which that ship had to pass. This child was instinctively devoted to musing and contemplation, and to taking possession of ever more rare and singular emotions; and this world already withered by war, this world in which the civilization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries no longer existed, and where a new and very sinister civilization was coming to the fore, had truly ceased to have a place for her. Even more than in her narrative style, her desperation is clearly seen in the subjects to which she turned her attention: gracious spirits, solitary youths, God himself — in the guise of a handsome young man, but rather lifeless; or again in the places of which she wrote: places outside of time, poorly illuminated streets, abandoned gardens, prisons, deserts. Much as in De Chirico's universe (though I wasn't to meet De Chirico until a somewhat later date) or among the French Surrealists, the world was no longer inhabited, and everything concerned with the human being had already turned into memory and regret. The whole of livable time, in my first bizarre stories, was something that belonged to the past — even while remaining present — and was seen from a place outside of it. The chance to live within it would never occur again.

If one stops to consider that these stories were the whole of my *reality* on the eve of the war, throughout those four long years, and afterwards as well, one will see how hostile my mind had become — "hostile" is the word I have to use — to what one currently refers to as existential experience, or the actual world. I rejected it simply *by saying nothing about it*. Of this there can be no doubt.

So, the tragedy of my life (a euphoric expression, so ingenuous as nearly to amuse me, since life is always tragic, even the lives of a blade of grass or a single atom, and nothing truly escapes this tragic dimension, which lies in being "swept along," irresistibly) lay in my almost immediate discovery that everything — even people, faces, books — was only void and appearance: *images*, of which the freedom and material substance were totally illusory. A single thing was truly alive, and nearly counted as separate and distinct from the life of matter: pain and painful emotion (which I also understand to include love and joy). So I quickly discovered that I had to do battle for something — for life — which in fact was an abyss and a sense of hopeless loss. I was very much aware of that, but this awareness didn't relieve me of my task. Writing was my battle; and my instrument for writing, for the constant task of fixing the fluid and ecstatic, consisted of an idiom that can only be described as *infantile*, when compared to the regular arms of even an ordinary writer My vocabulary was quite restricted; my knowledge of grammar

and syntax almost rudimentary. My acquaintance with genius and the masters of the written word was limited to only a very few — poets, like Poe — whom I had encountered at used book stalls. A desperate undertaking; and yet I had no choice: if I didn't write, I could only return into nothingness.

These were the years just before the war. And it was now that I opened my eyes and saw the true conditions in which my family lived: a wretched house, dilapidated furniture, debts. That, sadly, was the truth of the matter. And soon, since I hadn't studied or learned a trade, I could only look forward, at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, to finding myself in the streets.

So it came as a great relief — no matter how surprised I was, and no matter how much it felt like stealing — to receive a proposal for the publication of all of my first stories in a single collected volume: a proposal from Massimo Bontempelli, the writer who had succeeded my first patron as the editor of the literary magazine. I accepted, and it all came about immediately. I myself had nothing to do with it (at the time there weren't a great many people who wrote) and I also received a prize, in money — five thousand Lire — with which I could help my father to bring a bit of order, at least momentarily, into our household's disastrous finances.

My recall of these days and occurrences, now so remote, isn't sufficiently clear to allow me say if I was finally happy. But I don't think I had enough time. Events ran one right after another, just as the cars of a train follow the ones before them, now in a tunnel, now out in the open light. But the stretches of open light were ever more brief, fleeting, finished in a flash. Then suddenly the start of an endless darkness. The war. That's the way I remember the war.

Our house was destroyed during one of the very first bombings, and I found myself, in the course of those four or five years, with a mutilated family (brothers dead, or missing, or prisoners of war) as we wandered all throughout Italy, all the way to the Veneto, where we lived on the island of Burano. Before the war — a year or two before it began — I had already spent a year in Venice, working as a proofreader for a newspaper. The war turned my thoughts to Burano as a place without bombs. After our house in the district of Naples' port had fallen — a rented house, and already decrepit on its own account — it struck me as sensible to take my parents and other relatives there. We lived — part of us — in the house of the village street cleaner, but the place was safer and more amenable than anywhere in Lazio, where, as I later learned, true horror was taking place.

And this word: *horror*. My experience, up until that time, may indeed have prevented me from seeing its meaning in anything other than social or historical terms, but still it was the last great word I learned to apply to the universal framework in which we live our lives.

Space; *azure skies*; *dream*; then *time* (yesterday's absence, the shifting position of the human ship); then the sudden disappearances of human beings; then *silence*. And now, finally, *horror*: those recurrent periods of generalized slaughter — folk against folk, man against man — that then unfailingly find their termination in a peace in which the only thing no longer possible is justice for the dead, which is to speak of their resurrection.

In a short span of time — that's what fifteen years amount to within the space of a life — I had made the acquaintance of almost everything that defines our existence as human beings: the beatitude and impossibility of seeing it endure; wonder and the struggle to express it; the majesty of fully achieved expression and the immaterial greatness of literature; and the gulf that divides them from *explanation*, and from all our daily confusions. *Over there*, every beatitude — but like the light of a star already exploded. Over here, the miserable frenzy of the fall which has already happened, of existence as the already devastated dream.

All that remained was life itself — no longer any literature — and what a life!

I was ever more repulsed by reality — the mortal spoils, rather than the essence of the real — and my desire to find refuge in words was ever more intense and ever more desperate. But writing demanded conditions — a minimum of economic security — which had nothing to do with my own.

On returning to Naples in 1945, I found myself in precisely the future I had once foreseen. I was homeless. The generosity of a few friends kept me going (otherwise I wouldn't now be alive and able to write these memoirs) but only when the going was roughest. I see myself for example as I hunted for a furnished room, recoiling at its gloom and the roaches; or while making an evening meal of a couple of doughnuts and a glass of wine, thanks to contributions from a couple of friends; or sitting in the kitchen of a well-to-do family, once they had finished lunch, consuming the plate of food they had set aside for me. I see myself in pawn shops, relieving myself of a typewriter or other personal objects. Or in the streets of old Naples, on a morning lit by a melancholy sun, as I bargain with a vendor for a new typewriter ribbon, for a portable: a session of bargaining that ended in a brawl. Or I am sweeping out an office (the seat of some sort of political organization, of which the time knew so many) and taking excited exception to quite legitimate observations on the dust I hadn't removed. Or I am here and there throughout the city climbing endless stairs, trying to make a living as a bill collector. Then, suddenly, I'm getting onto trains for Milan, for Reggio Calabria, for Rome. Or I'm all in a desperate tither while boarding the packet boat for Palermo; I remember the kindly face of the unknown captain, and the help he was good enough to give me.

All of that lasted for five or six years, and now remains in my memory as a kind of inferno, but I don't really know if it was, since I was very strong. This was also the period, even while continuing from time to time to write a tale or two, in which I turned my attention to journalism. Again I had a bit of luck. A few of my longer, and I think more attentive, pieces on the city of Naples earned me the attention of Luigi Einaudi, who was then the President of the Republic, and he came to my assistance in a great many ways: with money, by supplying me with train tickets, and above all by arranging for the Olivetti Corporation to invite me to live as their guest in Ivrea for two or three months. It was there that I completed nearly all of the final work on my third book: IL MARE NON BAGNA NAPOLI, which dealt with precisely this subject, with the conditions of life in southern Italy in the period after the war — conditions which made themselves apparent in the postwar period, but which came in fact from a long way back: no less (according to me) than from a tradition of Nature worship, which I attributed to the people of Naples.

How ingenuous. I now reject this thesis, or at least any need to talk about it. Never again, today, would I affirm that Nature in any way harms us. I simply accept the perception that life at the level of nature — like the lives of domestic animals — is impossible for the human being; and that any attempt to adopt such a form of life — as in part it was adopted in Naples, and partly inculcated by an unreformed church — will lead to our certain undoing. Yet even if this book was grounded on a faulty thesis, it nonetheless had said something new, revealing an Italy that stood deprived of that spirit of charity or mutual assistance which truly forms the basis of civilized life and its institutions; and since at the time we weren't so sensitive to flaws and shortcomings, it enjoyed quite favorable reception. And I suddenly — living alone in Milan, my family a thing of the past — I suddenly found myself (as the saying goes) almost famous. Famous, but still with no money, since books didn't get sold in large numbers of copies. I sold

something like seven or eight thousand copies of this book, but I had already asked for several advances and nothing more was due to me. So I had to continue to make do as best I could. There was still no question, for quite some time, of being able to set up a home of my own, and I continued to live in furnished rooms. And when I finally took an apartment — taking on as well a rent contract — I was quick to lose it: my sporadic earnings couldn't cover all the bills.

This was the point when my mind began to dwell on another of the sadder sides of human life; I began to grasp the gravity of owning nothing while living in the midst of a system based on the privileges of property. I began to grasp the way life slowly falls apart in the effort to please or satisfy the proprietors — including the owners of newspapers — always painting a pleasant picture of their systems. There was no possible meeting ground, no possible comparison between these squalid, beautiless exercises and true writing, true Self-Expression, which seemed to me to embody the freedom, the absolute freedom, of the human mind. For a moment I had fondly imagined that writing conferred the right to write again, but now I saw that this *again*, if writing didn't turn into a source of money, was destined to decorate the banner of still another fond Illusion. Courage, in a certain sense, abandoned me. I was like a badly injured soldier who then had found bandages with which to dress his wounds; but then they wound him again; and now he can find no other bandages, and dies from loss of blood.

I was doing advertising. And between one job and another, for this or that product, I wrote a series of melancholy "pieces" (melancholy and without great vigor, as I now remember them) on the real conditions of life in Milan, as seen through my immigrant's eyes. I saw a city where everything was for sale, where everything was decked with a price tag, and where the tasks of art and writing — the contemplation and definition of the world — enjoyed no further hopes. Art and writing lay crushed beneath the weight of foreign fashions that found their strength, quite precisely, in the vision they offered of vast, foreign markets. I thus became aware of what it can mean for a nation to find itself mortgaged to the great cosmopolitan markets and to have no further space or freedom in which to pursue a road of its own. Too many concessions to money — when the problem of survival appears to be the only one, presenting itself, moreover, not only as a question of survival, but also of successful competition with the keener survival techniques of more prosperous peoples — mean the loss of all hope for those who find their work in the field of self-expression. The field narrows down to masquerades and conformity.

I had nothing that was any longer salable, other than clichéd slogans. In as early as 1960, freedom of expression in Italy was only apparent, and in fact a thing of the past. The actual life of the country already lay in the hands of the mass media, which daily undermined it and made it incapable of understanding language — that language of "symbol" which in fact is the language that literature speaks. Symbol was the language in which I spoke, and no one any longer could direct attention to a thing like that. Attention waned, and the market vanished.

Just before leaving Milan — a step I had finally understood I had to take — I dashed off a story, in the space of a month, which was intended as sarcastic and amusing, but which turned out instead to be quite delicate. "Il Cappello piumato." I never saw it as a full-fledged book, but there were ways in which it was dear to me. It was only some twenty years later that I managed to see it published. At a time when people could see it, somehow or another, as making a political statement. The political — close on the heels of the vapid and salacious — is nowadays, here in Italy, the surest route to acceptability. And perhaps that's somewhat unfortunate.

The 1960s were already underway. I moved to Rome and wrote a brief novel, entitled L'IGUANA. A book that was charged with scorn and rebellion. Rebellion in its style, since I suddenly abandoned all superficial realism; and scorn in its pretended equanimity in the face of human folly, and of the folly of the notion of class. A gentleman travels to an island — he's very rich and can go wherever he pleases — where he makes the acquaintance of a monster. He accepts it as something quite possible, and would like to effect its reintegration — presuming it to have suffered some sort of a *fall* — into human, or indeed bourgeois society, which he sees as the summit of virtue. But he has made a mistake: this monster is truly a monster, and indeed discloses the soul, at its purest and profoundest, of the Universe — of which the gentleman has lost all knowledge, if not for the knowledge that it's merchandise, that all of it can be given a price tag, that stars can be leased and bought and sold, and so on and so forth. The story didn't come to a happy ending (it concluded with Nature in a state of revolt), and after a bit of thought I changed it, adding another which was lighter and more serene, thinking that this might save the book from disparaging remarks on the part of silly critics, and thus might give it a chance on the market. But it didn't sell in any case. One thousand nine hundred and ninety copies in five years hardly amounts to a book's having sold.

Another regrettable aspect (though surely it has its justifications) of the economics of publishing — aside from the huge promotion campaigns set up for the marketing of vacuum-cleaner books — is the use that publishers make of books, without any need to ask anyone's approval, when once it's established (when they have established) that it's difficult to sell them. Such books can get passed on, *en bloc,* to various clubs and remainderers, with a truly risible percentage for the author. You then know nothing more about that book. Maybe you receive a check for sixteen thousand and fifty Lire in *rights* for a whole year. In short, the book — often well known and in demand — ends up, with no further involvement of the author, as an object of private exchange between two or three or any number of publishing companies. It travels a road of its own, of which it's presumed that the author has no need to know the various stations, or markets. You could say that the author can't so much as send an occasional postcard to his or her creature. The book by now is the property of a business concern (the publishing house) that can use it as it best sees fit, for the whole of a lifetime, employing it for any purpose at all, or otherwise for simple retransformation into kitchen rags — by pulping it.

There were so many things I had understood, and so many things that no longer made any difference to me. Once the IGUANA was over and done with — it's still in circulation and still gets sold, but brings me no hint of money, thanks to the former receipt of a few advances — I returned to Milan and wrote an ironic little book: the irony lay in the schoolboy style I used for narrating sad and insignificant events. I had lost all belief in the printed page! POVERI E SEMPLICI. But the book was very easy reading, and therefore did fairly well, for a couple of years, even winning a prize; and I have to admit I have never forgotten it, even if it's not a book in which I recognize myself. Perhaps there was something good in it. I imagined that it might perhaps have given me a little money and made my life a little easier; that it might have offered me a little stability, and above all a house: this, by now, was my only dream. But that's not the way it worked out. Once again I had to return the advances received from the publisher in the course of several years (including the advances for two other books of stories which had found no market at all) and quite soon I again found myself staring into the face of slim probabilities of physical survival.

This was the moment — towards the end of 1960s — when another publishing company, of imposing proportions, sailed up to the flanks of the small, tarred, and much-patched hull of my old Florentine publisher, clearly intent on boarding maneuvers. I myself, it seemed, was the booty they had in mind. And a part of me was already willing to make its peace with the notion of leaving Florence — or what Florence meant in the publishing world, with its grace and good form, as a place where culture was still untouched by mammoth business interests, a place that still consisted *only* of culture, but tremendously poor — in favor of Milan. For money! I felt an enormous need for rest, that was the whole of it, for a place where money might be found: a place that offered a truce, by means of money, to the body and the weary soul. I imagined that the moment had come to get busy — strange isn't it? — so as finally to be able to *rest*. I fondly believed that this sort of rest was permitted to *all* writers, which is not at all the way things stood. The law demands — it is nothing less than a law, and a highly mysterious law — that precisely the weariest never find repose, and that the battle cry of life resound unceasingly around their heads. "Stunned," wrote Coleridge, "by that loud and dreadful sound."

This was the state of mind — stunned by dint of living in an endless hell of emotions, reactions and images that uninterruptedly followed one another, and also needful of a means of survival — in which I readied myself, in March 1969, to write my most recent book, PORTO DI TOLEDO.

My plan with PORTO DI TOLEDO, initially, was to write a free and happy "introduction" to my early stories, the stories in ANGELICI DOLORI, which I had been planning to suggest that my publisher in Florence reissue. But the question of where and with whom to publish the book rapidly ceased to interest to me, and my mind turned entirely to the narrative experiment itself: the experiment of reproposing a former world — the *old* — while mixing it with the *new*, which instantly bathed it in a different light, and subjected it to commentary. The *old* consisted of a few of the stories and poems I had written during the period of the literary magazine. As little by little I reached an understanding of the relationship between *life and expressive dream* which at the time had lain beneath them, I recalled and wrote about the real events of the period in which I had thought them up. And it's clear that this commentary held very little "criticism." Whatever might appear to be a criticism of my own work was simply *a new imaginative event*. (I seem, in fact, to have no doubt that all true criticism, of art as of the world, has to take up a place on the outside, and never on the inside, or as an act of participation.) So, to say that I was "criticizing" or writing a commentary on my expressive efforts of the 1930s amounts to nothing more than a turn of phrase. Rather than criticize, I was only involved in *reliving* that time of hopeless shipwreck (so hopeless, perhaps, as even to have held no desperation) and my appeal to abstract judgment was only a way of pulling it back more clearly into view. (Rather than to any true judgment, I appealed to a *figure* of judgment, which in fact opened out into an act of ulterior participation.) This *second part* of the book — this second part which embraces and winds in and out among the older writings — was therefore the *real book*, and I can add that affection and disgust for that period of time and the special way in which I then expressed myself (in the 1930s) were nearly all that TOLEDO hoped to formulate.

This plan, from my own point of view, was quite clear, and I'm certain that proper surroundings would have led to achieving the results I was aiming for. I could have counted on finding fluency by flowing ineffably back and forth through memories of writing and the life attached to it. But the actual surroundings in which I was living at the time — 1969 and the following years — unleashed a level of aggravation that affected not only my former mode of expression — in yesterdays' stories and poems — but equally the mode of expression I was working with today, which is to speak of my

oppressed and enchanted reappraisal of those former times. The whole of TOLDEDO, half-way through it, turned into something else: I ceased to be in control of the operation.

What surfaced now into the midst of my life — the life of a writer who lives in obscurity, or without the mothering protection of a provident and benevolent society, knows so many reversals! — was simply a question of noise. In this moment of fatigued disaffection for the outside world, I was living in Milan, in Via Mulino delle Armi. The room I used as my studio, the sort of studio I had always had, measured no more than a few square meters, and air passed freely through its narrow window (barely sixteen inches wide) only in the winter. Toward March, when I started to write, and well into April, this little window was always open, and sufficient air indeed flowed through it. But after the middle of April (I was then beginning the book's second section, "Terra in lutto," and the parts that follow) it had to stay shut, since all sorts of work were being done in the streets, and the building was also being renovated. Suffocation, and the nightmare was underway. I got up early, but that wasn't enough. I tightened a scarf around my head (around my ears); again that wasn't enough. This noise lay always at the edge of my thoughts, and as soon as it began, at eight o'clock in the morning, something inside of me snapped: my equilibrium snapped. That mirror I have spoken of was shattered. Unable to write, I only made notes. I said to myself, I'll write later on, while working on the second draft. And that was the way — quivering with mental pain — in which I wrote that ghostly, unstable, stuttered and highly repetitive part of TOLEDO called "Terra in lutto." That was the way I wrote it, since no other way was open to me. And I saw that the rhythm — in the shift from the first to the second section — wasn't at all what I had planned on. Some sort of suture had remained unsealed. The second part of the book seemed displaced, I'd say, by several meters from the first; and it clearly revealed that here we were sailing on another boat: this was no comment on life as experienced yesterday: it was life as lived right now, with all its suffocation and delirium.

The second part of my memories of TOLEDO thus seemed to be compromised, but I didn't despair of being able to save it — if various conditions could be brought to bear on the second draft at the typewriter.

That was the only goal of the life I was living then (a life, moreover, that knew no consolations) and still today I am able to imagine that I might have reached it, if destiny — my personal destiny, which I no longer guide, accepting instead that it guides me — hadn't arranged things differently.

I had to move — the reasons are already clear — and I moved from Milan to Rome; and there, during the first few months of the following year, I worked my way through the second typescript. I wasn't able to work every day, and the best of days were at most a question of two or three typewritten pages — of a total of five hundred. No more than two or three pages, since then I'd begin to feel faint, and it made no sense to try to push on further. In any case, I had managed to set up a rhythm, no matter how laborious, when two new facts transpired and plucked me again away from it. My Florentine publisher discontinued my modest stipend — throwing me into desperation and forcing me to pass along to another company, to the one in Milan. And at much the same time — the new contract had just been signed — the apartment directly above my own was rented to people who were anything but tranquil. The world, yes, is full of people like that — in constant need of movement and parties, and without regard for neighbors — and surely there's no point in belaboring any single case. But for me it marked disaster, and more so for TOLEDO.

The project already had met with approval on the part of my new Milanese publisher, and just as the company's editor was starting to ask — justly, I think, since I don't have much experience with this sort of thing — that I show a bit more attention to the text (this now was the third draft) and establish firm control of form, no less than of the flow of *experience*, the anguished state of mind I had known in Via Mulino delle Armi presented itself again, and this time around I could see no hope. Or, to state things more

precisely, the only hope I managed to descry, after several months of useless protest, lay in building a kind of hut in the center of my room (which luckily was a rather large room): first a compartment in which to write (at the then considerable cost of a quarter of a million Lire) and it required several months, but a place in which to write struck me as more important than a place in which to sleep; and then, the following year, a second compartment for a bedroom, which had shown itself to be utterly indispensable if I wanted really to write, and not simply to copy things out on the typewriter. It hardly needs to be added that the air in these two huts inside my room was very limited. The room had only a tiny window, covered by a screen. The whole situation had brought me to the verge, or nearly, of physical collapse, and I started to hear my publisher's injunctions — the company was keeping an eye on my work — as still more noise; a noise that made me desperate, and I found it ever harder to obey. Finally, indeed, I no longer obeyed at all.

The whole tragicomic affair found its culmination in year three: the third year of my living so absurdly in my Roman hut. My building, here again, as before in Milan, was thrown into the turmoil of renovation, for a whole pitiless year.

This was also the year of the cholera epidemic, and all these sources of anxiety — the summer heat, the danger of cholera, the bricklayers, the dust, and my work necessarily set aside — wore away at me relentlessly. The things that the publisher had to say about my work fell on an ear that by now was utterly deaf to them. Such a horrid period! And laden with all the reasons for my having started out by talking of the writer who comes from nowhere, and then returns into nowhere. I had known no education and remained incapable of any appropriation of the physical and social world; otherwise I would never have sailed my boat onto such remote shoals: the shoals of my need for self-expression.

But why talk about it? Now it's all over. No matter the way that book got written, I feel that its pages — at least the first of them — allowed me to save, or at least to attempt to illuminate, the feeling of strangeness that lies in the way the world takes shape in the eyes of a child — a girl, in this particular case — who hasn't been sufficiently apprised of its nature and structure. Its mystery then collapses on top of such children and destroys them. (Their sense of enchantment remains, but the look of the world turns grave.) It strikes me also that in the second part of the book (despite the unfortunate, irreparable cleavage dividing it from the first) I have somehow depicted the lengthy shadow or shadows of a destiny that meshes with the course of things in general (the war, the power of a few over all the creatures of the youthful world, the tardy perception of the rights denied to each of us, the subsequent lament). I haven't offered much more than that, and what little I may have offered unfortunately lapses into illegibility, not only owing to my own almost convulsive mode of self-expression, but also to the ever more virulent phenomenon to which I referred above: to the ever greater loss of the knowledge of language, as a result of the workings of the mass media: a phenomenon, by now, which has even invaded the universities. It strikes me too that this loss of the knowledge of language — at the national level — derives from an even more grave and terrible loss of the vibrant sensation of being alive. In Biblical times, and up until not too long ago, this feeling was indivisible from all cognition of the life of the earth itself. One knew the implications of an apple, a horse, the setting and rising of the sun. Such things today no longer speak to us. How could we demand that language — that always new and never-changing symbol of the whole of our sublime and terrestrial world — now reawaken those images? Like the image, for example, of love! With the figure of the young bourgeois who approaches a separate and wholly unknown world — the world of the gates of the port, of the hovels of the poor, the world of the deformed — who approaches Damasa — I meant to say that love contains nothing real (as reality is currently defined). It consists wholly of the pain and splendor of incipient knowledge. It's entirely a fact of hidden and majestic equilibriums, no different, for example, from those that accomplish the spectacle of springtime, the implosion of stars, or the way the stars

appear before us, broaching incommensurable epochs. But none of that — in a culture now based on material objects (and such a culture, for the moment, is perhaps a necessity) — any longer means anything.

Fine. I feel at this point that there isn't much more to say about the species of artist I have been describing: the artist who comes from nowhere and then returns back into it, having followed an erroneous path, outside the walls of the human, or social, city — where time is another.

I finished TOLEDO in 1975. It had taken six years — between one desperation and another. It wasn't legible. As soon as it appeared, it disappeared. Authors who haven't made themselves legible don't sell, and that was the way things ended up. The sale of the book never got off the ground, and it was even withdrawn from various bookstores. Once again I had no money, or nothing more than pocket change. So I abandoned my huts in the capital and left for Liguria before the year was out. At the start I lived in a house that was flailed by every wind — winds that were often quite terrible — and which stood in the midst of a landscape that showed not a sign of human life. The various trials I had recently experienced — as well as this condition of intolerable isolation — caused me to suffer from curious nervous disturbances. Every night — for a good half hour — I seemed to hear a group of little boys — a whole school class — running in a whirlwind up and down the stairs; yet everything was quiet. I would get up in a cold sweat and wander around the immense, silent terrace. Or, on seeing a fire in the woods on the high, surrounding hills, I'd be suddenly convinced that the war had resumed, and I seemed to hear gunfire and the screams of people in flight. One night, at about three o'clock — it was autumn, and raining — I was out on the terrace and saw a lightning bug hovering in front me, with its tiny lantern; and since it had been dozens of years since I had last seen a lightning bug, and remarking as well that now it was autumn, I believed myself to be in the presence — please pardon my effusive expression — of all that remained eternal of a kindly friend (in reality I had never met him) who had died a while before, quite obscurely, in Rome. He had written words of praise — for me, for TOLEDO — which others had then been quick to reject and refute. I seemed to hear singing. On another morning, a great rosy light shone from no apparent source into a gray November sky and shed its illumination on the mountains and the sea, the farmhouses, the steeple crosses, the villas that were scattered here and there in the dull green landscape.

In short, I was no longer able to recover from a true and proper breakdown that exhausted all of my resources, and I attempted and finally managed (already it seemed an act of grace, as later, indeed, became the general rule) to find a new house. I moved into the center of town. But since this is a tourist city — only a few remaining postcards attest to what was once the peace of Liguria's Levantine coast — I was confronted all over again with the mayhem of the cities I had abandoned: the eternal flow of traffic, the dire summer heat and cacophony, the loudmouths, the cranks, the fog, the nighttime crowds, the wailing sirens, the bands that blare their music all day long on Sundays and in the spring. Not to mention the insipid holidays with their high-flying fireworks — one might as well say bombardments — which hour after hour make the houses tremble, starting in May and recurring throughout the summer, and which kill, I imagine, so many birds.

But winter is sweet and motionless; it is also poor, and therefore livable; and certainly in this city I was sure to accomplish something. But to begin with I had no money, and I had to finish revising a few older things (like CAPELLO PIUMATO). The

slumps and magical impressions (magical and fearful) that had marked my arrival into the area were also to return. I was ill, too. And finally, here again, in this dilapidated building, urban money — the new money — was to make its appearance and demand its privileges. The old tenants were sent away; everything was sold; and again I was faced with a Renovation. Which for me is the name of a true and ghastly monster.

This last year... I don't even want to talk about it. I used a stairway which nearly had ceased to exist. Dust and detritus everywhere. A worker, one day, took to kicking at my door: he had said that he couldn't do his work if it didn't stay open all morning long, and I hadn't been willing to put up with that. I not only had a run-in with the building's owners, but finally clashed with the foreman as well. I told him he couldn't keep his workers hammering for ten hours a day (rather than eight) and that otherwise I would *kill somebody*.

Yes, I spoke these words without realizing it. They told me about it later, and my surprise and contrition were enormous, since I have never thought it permissible to raise a hand against another living creature, not even a mosquito. My run-ins with mosquitoes have indeed been very rare, no more than two or three. And now to hurl such words at a workman, me!

Yet it happened. And if I laugh about it now, I don't laugh broadly. This episode led me to think through a number of things; and a great, melancholy understanding of so many ills made its way forward. If I myself — a person already fatigued, and thrown off balance, and considerably subdued by my awareness of my nothingness — could react in such a grave and reprehensible way against a workman whose lust for activity interrupted my desperate need to think, and stood in the way of my attempt — as everything for decades has stood in its way — to express myself, what then will be the fate of the generations for whom this will or destiny of self-definition never finds realization at all? The enjoyment and consuming of goods which others have produced — things through which others have expressed themselves — seems a happy lot to people who have money. But it isn't. Buying and enjoying are in no way essential; what's essential is to make and think on one's own. For the child of the slums, for the child of the great majority.

And now I have truly finished.

I'd like to be able to hope that my moral dilemmas will little by little find a resolution, and likewise those of the younger generations. So, I'd like to cry out to everyone — defying the din of hammers that sing their painful music from every point of the horizon — I'd like to cry out: let all human beings be creative, making something with their hands or their heads, at any and every age, and especially in early youth. Allow them to learn the mysterious laws of aesthetic structure and composition — all other laws can recede — if you are truly committed to freedom and a sense of community on this fast and fleeting meteor which is life itself, surrounded by all the absence of life (by all the bleak endurance) of which the rest of the Universe appears to consist. Make a place for *aesthetics* — and its laws — within this prison, this dullness, of human life. You will have made a place for freedom — the suspension of pain — for elegance, for tenderness.

POEM

LA JAULA BAJO EL TRAPO
CAGE UNDER COVER

An Excerpt

Maria Negroni
tr. Anne Twitty

half light

mother daughter

both are seated, looking distracted, or rather, melancholy. With a lingering flush of frenzy or reproach, although it would be premature to inquire at whom or why. The mother, at left, mouth awry, eyelids half-closed, as if smoldering coals from previous devastations. The daughter in the same posture, but restless: at times she is corroded by hope. Although occasionally we seem to hear the mother's voice, it is the daughter who speaks, always (the interior voice is not a monologue). Her tone, on guard, ships at alert, flags flying, almost never degenerates into a sermon. Never into lyricism. It is just barely postulated as a destiny; it confesses like a hunger for something.

from the light technician's booth, located centerstage, emerge notes that are interspersed with the daughter's speeches; they sound like a radio broadcast, in a light impersonal tone.

details to note: boreal butterflies
(odor of lilacs, of China roses)
faded chrysanthemums
empty bottles of coca cola
leftovers
in a word: living matter. The stage
is complete in itself. Only the television
(to one side) is so very immaculate.

Only the images that it projects into the
room, which we watch with a kind of horror,
relief.

a voice (impossible to identify) repeats like a litany:

–little girl lost

this, intermittently, throughout the scene

once I have named you
I won't be able to restore you to desire
to a climate of blank
spaces

I prefer you like this like now
cage with a cloth
covering

...camera panning slowly, my curiosity taking notes on your body: temperatures–planes–volumes. An enclosure, a cunning animal, who starts everything, always, blood boiling, eyes, this almost rage. Why have I come? To interrupt what indolence? What kind of presumption? What burning never?...I insist on the details (astonishment). So much hope hiding within a meticulous image.

in the dream I am born between your legs
they are delicate lattices windowleaves

you break out laughing
it could have been
tears
an image dread of world

I am not raving

only time is confused (rebels)
time swells in me

(as if I wanted to know who you are and at the same time
didn't want at all)

do I see a beatific smile before me
or a rictus of suffering?

I begin to perfect
the idea of your death
eat and run etcetera

god knows
what *tableau vivant* we settle into
what stagedoor johnnies
of yours

I imagine you as a child faint rose before that image
grow sentimental as if I watched you walk
medieval pavements (the gothic quarter
of Barcelona)
oh I'm a woman of the world
"that distempered lute"
Chicago's Ballinger
Olivia de Havilland

–forgive me–the very thought of you
and a big fat tear slips out

...a dream that encircles imprisons us both, soft idleness, mirrors from Glasgow. Irascible shuttlewinders, at last we weave together, voluptuous. Hook and curves. Pure sadnesses, de queli tempi. On the crest of the circle, parallel to the body, to time's panting breath, words do not –simply–whistle any more. I swear love is like this: with a little luck, the circle contracts until it coincides with the center: I could dwell in your eyes (and even risk reality) for ages...

(note)
Rosy or *fahrenheits* or *pennies* or peroxide gazelles in *subways*. Transitory splendor. Beds of newspaper, inhabitants carefully *keep America clean*. Is everything that suffers beautiful? Hours fly quickly in Manhattan (the cold helps). Joni Mitchell is singing. Where's Virgil?

you didn't know couldn't accept beside the essential
the presence of the accessory
for example the world
me
as if that would dissolve you
would open the way to a desire unable to lead
to embracing
(to the curve of an embrace)

(*cool*, imitating Paul Anka)
–"*you are my destiny*"

...in this constant skirting of edges, is that where I must look for you? in a brown nipple, the sumptuosity of your polkadot dress, tepid deflection? in the noes, in the yes buts, the time of your hand in a cast, the sleep cures? before? after? in your other daughter, the bedstead, the cemetery of an icy dining room, ampicyllin? here? inside? in this howling of abandoned hordes? vengeful?

...repetition–the mother is heard to say–has a certain charm but is inappropriate. When you speak of me, sieve, file down, round out and then eliminate the pointée expression (on your face or mine). Like someone reviewing dreams aloud, forget me, or, at worst, turn distortion into a destiny, the mourning of images into a task. On the road to the uncertain, to err is a mistake. The most beautiful thing in life is the fade to black...

ah if I could make this ephemeral
bubble
plausible

a peroration of caresses
such a cumulus of antagonisms
I don't know

(something that would not be style only style)

–the princess is melancholy
what can the matter be?

(note)

It rains luminously in the metropolis: a Japanese woman crosses the sky, the most beautiful violinist in the world plays in Times Square, Pan Am, graffiti, the Taviani brothers imitate the great Fellini, races, languages, the Bronx looks like Beirut. Light, camera: the confusion is complete, angels sell their bodies on the docks.

two perspectives
foreground:
exhibitionism and reticence
persian carpets, swords of damocles, intonations, epigraphs,
little windmills, candelabra

like one who indulges in hints the better to guard a secret
("in hell everything is distinct" Mishima)

background:
woman in white robe. in silence. rhythmic or mechanical movement
of hands and feet. eyes blank.

no, daughter–said the mother–explanations will not help you capture me, nor explosive scenes. (Look me in the eye when I talk to you.) You must do exactly what I tell you: I want you to single file all by your lonely so that you will stream backwards, bewildered, until you become entangled. It is easy to avoid the temptation of the future, but how to preserve the plurality of pasts. Now you will have to examine every detail in a futile search for the center of the pattern. Now, stumble.

I cling to your scolding
your voice barely furious strident
like a symbol representing love
(or an outbreak zone of the body)

curious how memory considers the subject

slightly a discord in the logic of things
a certain dismantling

what is this sadness shielding me from?

...missives, sentries, combatants. Intensity traveling without words. Diametrical. From all sides. Avidity in your antithesis. I struggle. How long? Spasmodic, somnambulant, silence rebounds along a canyon trail. Between your body and your body. As if caring for something I can't see. That windless place where dejection can be provoked by anything, a white fan, an empty or spotless nightmare...

you can also be perceived like this (cost me blood, sweat
and tears)

high heels
a sight for sore eyes
white polkadot dress

something like a happy time
boats at rest

(hell is full of young beauties
Holy Mother Mary
what kind of slum are they talking about?
–asked Francesca)

–"she is so young and so
untender"

...In a multiplication of homages, echoes, stupor, hope, I decimate you, sack you. Cuirasses, harnesses, bridles, troops in square, foam at the mouth, ambushes. Lugubrious air like a sound of war. With such perfect furor the bellicose...And if I did it the other way? Through reticence? If I reduced you to the tics of your asthma attacks? To somber void? Sparkling? To austere and sandy a Nordic island?

it's like this

thanks to your suffering I am exempt
my cheeks burn
I am capable of uniquely dirty tricks
no morning sun at the tip of the tongue
I whirl past you like a waterspout
flower of the plum

this is miracle

(screaming your head off)
–I could bash your brains out you piece of

Blackout.
The characters vanish as if becoming lost in time,
or in themselves.
We see only words flying, pausing, interrupting the equilibrium–quite a feat–of nothingness.
In the wings, if there were light: reflected buildings, a photograph of Jean Harlow.
The melody is invisible.
The white circles of the spotlights do not know
where to rest.

A CONVERSATION ABOUT PUBLISHING with WILLIAM STRACHAN

Katherine McNamara

"I come back to this: the writing. You've got to look at the writing."

In this third conversation with literary publishers, I talked with William Strachan, director of Columbia University Press, formerly editor-in-chief at Henry Holt, who had taken the rare step of crossing over from trade to academic publishing, and who thought in an interesting way about those two not wholly compatible domains: about what they had in common and what they did not. Furthermore, Columbia had taken up e-publishing, producing several CD-ROMs and sponsoring the first of what it hopes will become a series of scholarly journals published on the internet. Yet, while technology entered the discussion of institutional changes in publishing which has been the theme of this series, it did not dominate; as would be expected, the making of good books — writerly writing, editorial acuity, the publisher's willingness to take a chance, and readers wanting to read — was the real subject.

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, around the mid-1970s. If true, it marks nicely the beginning of changes I've been interested in tracing. Substantially, however, what has changed? Are there fewer good books, more bad, than ever? Is the art of editing no longer widely practiced in the trade? How can we speak of publishing "houses" in this era of conglomeration? What sorts of people became editors and publishers; why? Do the same sorts run the business now? I had been inquiring of distinguished representatives of an older generation what they thought; now, a fellow member of the baby boom, generation of the Sixties, had something to say.

Generously, these persons have told how they entered the profession; spoken about writers they've published and declined to publish; described the (changing) class structure of their domain; talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism; preferred "responsible" publishing: the mid-sized company that may, increasingly, be a "refuge." Without exception, they are serious readers, usually of more than one language. They recognize that times have changed. They speak with wary-friendly observation of the generations coming up.

Excerpts of these conversations will continue to appear regularly in Archipelago *and may serve as an opening into an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current corporate structure, reflecting on glories of its own, 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

A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 3
A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 4 and Vol. 2, No. 1

William Strachan, Director, Columbia University Press

William Strachan said of himself, with the self-effacement of a certain sort of editor, that he had joined "the accidental profession"; an amateur in the good, old sense? No, a generalist educated in the liberal arts, characteristic of a good part of a generation for whom schooling was not job-training. He graduated from Carleton College, an excellent small college in Minnesota, then took the Radcliffe Publishing Course, from which he emerged, in 1970, as an editorial secretary at Anchor Books. Having discovered what kind of books he wanted to publish, he moved on to various houses, was editor-in-chief at Henry Holt, and joined Columbia in mid-1998. He is tall and looks fit, though his once-lanky frame (you feel) is filling out with middle age, and dresses in not-too-new, tweedy-casual clothes. The offices of Columbia University Press, where he is director, are located in utilitarian rooms in a college building undergoing renovations, on W. 113th Street in Morningside Heights. The receptionist reports a visitor and, when she hears footsteps pounding lightly downstairs from the second floor, says, not wholly approving, "That's Bill: *never* takes the formal way" (i.e., the elevator) "when he can run." Seated behind his desk, his back to the distractions of Broadway below the window, he is cordial, discreetly gossiping (has recently returned from the Frankfurt Book Fair), very much the director (still testing his way) of a very respectable publishing company. His speech evokes distant seminar rooms and is without personal reference, respectful of its elders, perceptive, aware of what it now also knows, sounding with a modesty that is never false.

Several themes recurred during our two conversations in New York, last October and November: writerly non-fiction, its importance and nourishment; how one tried to make sense of the great shifts in the culture; e-publishing (novelty for a former trade publisher); and, unexpected pleasure, the tastes of generations, ours-in-common in particular. "Writerly non-fiction" is Strachan's admirable phrase, neatly leaping over reams of self-involved "creative" genres; privately, I thought it worth stealing. Aloud, I wondered how the transition from trade to university press impressed him and asked if he would begin by describing the differences between those two kinds of institutions.

For a certain kind of publishing, this may be a refuge

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What do you do as a publisher: what is the job of a publisher, as you conceive it?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, I think you run a publishing company. First and foremost, we have to remember that we are publishers. Some of publishing is printing, some of it is distribution and the like; but, by and large, it means finding the books that you want to publish, then making sure that they are seen all the way through to publication, and then giving them full service.

My role as chief executive is to make those decisions about the company. There are all sorts of decisions you make, because there are a lot of ways to spend your money, and a lot of priorities. Most of what, I guess, falls to me is to establish those priorities, the hierarchy of those priorities: to make some decisions, not only about what comes first, but how we go about doing something, what the strategy might be. Where you're going to go with the press down the line. Are we going to go wholesale into electronic publishing? or are we going to say, "No, that's not what we want to do, we don't have that sort of money, or go into those areas of publishing."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So you came over here.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: So I came over here, and here we are.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Maybe the topic is culture shock.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, I went from seeing this as not so different, to seeing this as a completely different world, to saying, No, this is different and this isn't. Part of the

confusion, if you will, in my mind, is the fact that I am still living in New York City. The people I see at the cocktail parties, the people I fraternize with, are those I used to see. And so one is tempted to think there isn't a difference — "Oh, I just needed to change offices." That, of course, is not true. The adjustment would have been greater had I left; as Peter Gazardi left Crown, to go to Duke: he went to become the editor-in-chief at Duke, and was out of the realm. But suddenly you are *really* in the world of a university press community. I'm not sure I would have gone to any other university press.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I've been interested in the view, from inside, of the institutional changes in publishing over the last decade: what they are; how they affect the work you do; and, equally, how the work you do affects the institution. That is, how *do* people act in and upon the institution of publishing? Would you talk about your own experience, having gone from trade publishing, or what might be called corporate publishing now, to the university press?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Sure. For me, the switch from trade or commercial publishing — better put, from corporate publishing — to a university press was an idea I had, to somehow recreate what trade publishing was when I started in 1970. I am now working, at Columbia, for an independent publisher which is owned and operated without conglomeration with any other publisher.

That used to be the case all around this town of New York. What are now different imprints within houses, were, once, publishing houses, free-standing and, in most cases, independent. That's been a rather remarkable change in publishing, though maybe necessary. Actually, I guess I should back up a little. That has been a change in New York publishing; I don't think it's been quite the case outside this city. But if, as many people do, you define commercial publishing by what goes on in New York, then that's the change in publishing.

People are fond of pointing to all the new independent publishers that have jumped up. That being the case, I don't think for the most part they have had the effect on book publishing that commercial publishing has had on the general trade. I don't think there's the replication of what existed here. And that's interesting, because, given the way business has changed, they *should* have had an effect. But the distribution system is concentrated; it's much easier now to get to all the different book outlets than it ever was 20 years ago, when you had so many independent bookstores. You now have Amazon.com. You have all these wide-angled changes in distribution, but I don't think the small publishers have the penetration that they might have risen to have. What I hope we have here is a sort of moderate or smallish independent publishing house. I like that scale of operation; it works for me; and I like to see what we can effect with that. For a certain kind of publishing, the kind I'm interested in, this may be a refuge.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Will you say more about the kind of publishing you're interested in?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I was raised up in non-fiction, basically. I started at Anchor books in 1970, which Jason Epstein had started, back in the '50s. At that point, it was still one of the few trade paperback publishers, along with the Vintage list; and it was fun, because that was the '70s, and it was the turn of the paperback revolution. It was going to change the world; half of our list was academic publishing, in a sense, and half of it was 'cutting edge'. What was new went into trade paperbacks.

I cut my teeth on non-fiction, and I stayed with that throughout my career, going from Anchor books in 1980, to what was then The Viking Press. The desire there was to move into hard-cover publishing, and what I looked at changed. At Anchor, you thought up ideas for books, or people came to you with one-shot books, and you did them in paperbacks, and you sort of went on to the next book.

But at Viking, what I hoped to do was to develop some of the writers who had been doing non-fiction, book in and book out. Alan Williams, who was there at the time, said we published authors, not books. That was the philosophy of The Viking Press, and it was a nice change. It had recently been sold to Penguin — what was then Penguin —

although at that point it was a separate entity. Well, the twain met, a little, but they were editorially independent even though they worked under the same roof. Penguin then was owned by Pearson, and it still is. *[The publishing conglomerate is larger and now called Penguin Putnam Group.]* But at that point, curiously, Penguin wasn't as renowned in this country as it was in the U. K., and it was still growing up under Kathryn Court, who was the editorial director then. So I stayed with non-fiction. I can count on maybe ten fingers the number of novels I've done over the history of my career. That's what interested me about Columbia, and about university presses, which, by and large, are non-fiction publishers.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Who are some of these authors you published with Viking?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Witold Rybczynski, whom I first published at Anchor Books, in a paperback original, and then brought over to Viking, where I did his next several books. I edited people like Marc Reisner (CADILLAC DESERT) and Gretel Ehrlich (THE SOLACE OF OPEN SPACES). Writerly non-fiction.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I like that: 'writerly' non-fiction.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: So. I went on from Viking, to Houghton Mifflin, in the new York office *[corporate headquarters were in Boston]*, to what was then Weidenfeld & Nicolson, before ending up at Holt, in 1990, where I was editor-in-chief. And now this. The idea that university presses publish non-fiction is interesting; and I think, you know, we can bring some of my trade there, although running the press leaves much less time to be an editor, which is a change.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But you do still edit?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, and probably once I settle into this job a little bit more — I came over to Columbia in June 1997 — I might have some more time to do it, rather than to figure out where everything lies in the hierarchy.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Holt was going through some changes as well, when you left. *[It was bought by the German publishing company Holtzbrink.]*

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Holt has gone through some changes, and continues to go through some changes, yes. That company is part of Holtzbrink, the German publishing conglomerate, which here owns Farrar, Straus and St. Martins, *Scientific American*, and a number of other outfits. I think they have to figure out where Holt fits into that conglomeration.

We don't have those confusions here, which is very nice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A look of relief is on your face.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, I've seen this time and time again with my colleagues in publishing, where you sign on to do a certain kind of publishing, and the house is going in a certain direction, and over the years the changes haven't come at the bottom, they've come at the top. A new administration, or a new ownership, or whatever, comes in and, suddenly, what you were supposed to be doing, or what you *were doing,* very happily, is no longer very desirable or wanted or rewarded. That makes it very hard to make a long-term commitment to writers. I think it's the longer-term continuity that works best for writers, and for publishers, as well. Obviously, there are exceptions; but I think that is how a publishing house gets its character: how it builds a stable and works with writers: over a long period of time.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: If they still care about that.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: If they still care about that. I don't know that they need to. I *think* they do. It works better, I think, if you push a house: "This is what we know to publish, and this is *who* we publish; and therefore, if you're a kindred spirit, or you like that, then we know how to publish you well."

The business has changed, but so has the culture

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I was trying to place a book, a non-fiction narrative, and asked a poet for advice, as I had had some difficulty with it. I carried on for quite a while about this, until he said, very simply, "Why don't you just give it to a good publisher, and let it go?" I stopped in my tracks. There was nothing I could say. Books are turned down all the time for reasons that have nothing to do with literature as I know it. He was from two generations before me and had no idea of the kinds of difficulties serious writers face now from publishers.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, the business has changed a lot: but so has the culture, and that's what's hard to figure out in publishing today. I'm not sure where you place yourself in the culture — I was thinking about this — because the idea of reading and books, if you will, used to be kind of divorced from other parts of the culture. You had movies, you had books or literature, you had drama, and increasingly—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And there was a hierarchy.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, and increasingly these things are blurred. There's plenty of book stuff on TV. There is plenty of book stuff on the internet, god knows, and there are wonderful magazines. All this blurring, or mixing, we're still sorting out, but it's had an enormous effect on what you publish, and how you publish it. I think the books published by the larger commercial publishers are seen now as entertainment. I mean that not just pejoratively, because the best, most wonderful book in the world is supposed to be entertainment, you know, the highest literature is wonderfully entertaining to a certain audience. I haven't sorted it out yet. I don't think anybody really has, and can say, "*This* is why we're publishing" this or that book. What is getting drowned out is the idea of quality entertainment, if you will; but, again, I say that too quickly, because the flip side of it is that, actually, what's succeeding in the trade is either a very high quality in books, still, or a kind of mass-marketing entertainment.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So once again the mid-list...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The middle falls away. People don't know quite what to make of it. It's not either literature or, quote, entertainment, unquote.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And the difficulty abut the shrinking of the mid-list is that was a standard of good writing.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, it was, and is, a standard of good writing. It's also the kind of proving ground, or developing ground, for many writers. You do one book; you do another; you keep writing, you keep publishing, you suddenly have an *oeuvre*, something's going on. People don't know what to do about that right now.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You mean, publishers don't.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Publishers don't. They don't know how to support it. You as a writer have to make it very quickly, in a book or two, so that you're not consigned to the scrap-heap. In today's climate, it's harder and harder to get attention for that mid-list; it just goes unappreciated, it's not championed and it's not recognized. Even if you get good reviews, the response is, "So what?"

But that's conglomerate publishing, too. One of the changes in the book world is that, when the houses were independent, you saw yourself saying: "This is the list, this is what we're publishing; and we'll make some money off of *these* books, and that will allow us to publish others." It sounds strange, now. But it was thought of that way. When I started at Doubleday, which Anchor was part of, we had the same publishing board. It was one of the first corporate publishing boards; you went to it every week. But you still said about a book, "This is part of the list."

I watched that change to P&L *[profit and loss]* statements. Suddenly, there was this idea that every book had to be profitable! No longer was it that you balanced the list; now you balanced the profitability of the company *not* on the back of a list, but on the *back of every book!* If you look at it that way, it won't work: I mean, 90 percent of books still lose money. Even if you were trying not to, that practice changed the way you looked

at books. Completely. You didn't say, "Yes, but it fits in, we just have to publish this writer because it's part of our commitment to him," or "part of the list," or whatever. That affected the mid-list as well. You had people kidding themselves, either knowingly or with rose-colored glasses, saying, "Oh this isn't a mid-list book," when everybody should have admitted that it was. I think that changed things too. Very odd, but true.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: An English editor told me he showed the conversation I had with Michael and Cornelia Bessie to several of his colleagues, and they were all amazed: Michael talked about how they used to publish books with no P&Ls.[*] You don't have to have them here at Columbia?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We do P&Ls at Columbia. But as a tool, a sort of snapshot; that's how they started out, of course. The interesting thing about a P&L is that it will reveal to me, sometimes, that, for all this *sturm und drang*, all this effort, at the end of the day we're going to make 35 cents. Well, maybe it's not worth all the effort. Or, at least, you're thinking: "Just what we are getting into?" What we do here is, after you've done a P&L, if it doesn't work, you still have the right to say, very nicely, "Yes, we know it doesn't work financially, but we wanted to publish this book," for whatever reason. Commercial publishers do this as well, of course, sometimes. We have another advantage, however, which is being a not-for-profit organization. It's easier for me to say that here than at some other places.

Categories, 'product', and the economics of independent publishing

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Now, I wonder if we can think in two directions for a moment. They'll have to be serial, not parallel directions. One is, your very interesting statement about seeing a book differently once a P&L is attached to it: what does that mean for reading and for readership; even, if you want, for the work of the imagination? — We won't touch the writer's imagination here; let's say, for the imagination as it makes it way through the trade editorial process.

The second is, What does it mean to be an independent, not-for-profit, but also academic press?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, which is a very different structure and with different constraints. Well, in a trade situation, with a work of imagination, you're trying to catch that handle that will allow everyone to catch the same magic, the high concept that you see in it throughout. If you can get that, then there is no barrier to what you can do. I don't think trade publishing is that tricky, and, in fact, sometimes it's easier to do. An editor can say, "Oh boy, you just have to read this, it's wonderful, it's totally unique." Or, "It's just like something else that's wonderful." That's fairly easy to do.

When you work for a publishing corporation or a publishing company that does things pretty much in lockstep, though, that is when you have to be able to *categorize* a book, because "we have to be able to sell it in a certain way," *or:* "Where does it go in the bookstore?" This is not a bad question to ask yourself: "Where am I going to put this in a bookstore; how is the sales rep going to sell it?" But most of those aren't surprises, you'll have pigeonholed them very neatly. Again, a good editor can pigeonhole a book very neatly and sell it that way; and that works, but it's harder.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In its way, it's another kind of mid-list.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; yes, it is. Very much. Because if it's not bought as a bestseller or a blockbuster — because then you can do these rote things for it — but rather, it's interesting, then it makes you concentrate more, as an editor, on how you're going to publish the book; not simply saying, "Well, we'll just put 'em out there and see what happens."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is that the old way they did it?

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[*] A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, Archipelago, Vol. 1 No. 4.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think there was enough of it that we just didn't have to worry, because certain automatic mechanisms could take over. A certain number of books would be bought by the public libraries, which would snap up three to five thousand copies no matter what you did, if you had a good library sales force; and then you got more on top of that, and it just rolled along. Those days are over, forever: sadly, in a way, because the library system isn't capable of supporting the vast output of the trade anymore; but it does leave you, then, to think more carefully about what you're publishing, and how you're publishing it. And everybody still says too many books are published. That's probably still true; but who's ox are you goring when you say, "Cut this back"?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you, in your mind, distinguish between what you think of as books and what you think of as...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Product, if you will? No, yeah, I guess. Yeah.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Books, presumably, are what you want to publish, whereas product is what there is too much of.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: But someone's books are someone else's product; and vice versa, I guess.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That's not entirely true

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I don't think it is, but when you turn a corner and you just say, "Product is book-selling; I know how to sell this book regardless of what's in it," or, you could sell it because it's a genre, or because it's a 'brand name', that sounds like a "product" to me.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Were book salesmen, though, like that when you knew them? Sales reps?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Sure. When I started at Doubleday, the idea was to have a bestseller every month. I mean, they did. They had Arthur Haley one month, they had Irving Stone the next; they had Phyllis Whitney; they had Allen Drury. That was a very profitable publishing company.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And as those things went then, that was not bad writing.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No. It was the bestseller house. Betty Prashker was then the editor-in-chief; Ken McCormick had just stepped down. The Doubleday family still owned it. It was a publishing Behemoth, on one hand, and a very savvy publisher, on the other. We used to joke then: if this company weren't so busy making money, it would go out of business.

I think it's come back to that in a way: you've got a machine that drives certain bestsellers, best-selling writers, and then everything else needs to catch on in their wake, or distinguish itself from them. Maybe we have come full circle. But it's hard to distinguish the others from them, even though there are all theses new avenues in which to do so. The sound of the larger books drowns out the voice of the smaller ones.

(pause)

We were talking about the idea of agent and submissions. Yes, we do get submissions from agents. I lost a book last week to Harvard, which Oxford, Columbia and Harvard were all considering and bid on. Harvard won out.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You started out at $5,000 and went up to $20,000. What kind of advances are you able to pay?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Not what I once paid in the trade, clearly; but that removes a certain amount of pressure or expectation from the publication of the book. What I was going to say was, certainly we want to sell every copy we can, for both the author's and our sakes. But I think expectations about what is going to happen when the book is published are kept within a certain frame. Scholarly people — most scholarly people — have a day job. Publication is not everything, or that "everything" that as a writer you're riding on, with the disappointments, expectations, and the like; and that fact insulates everything a little bit. We pay advances, and we pay royalties, which is very nice.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Which means the advances are earning out.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Right, the advances are earning out, which is another side of the world it's nice to see. Royalty checks were few and far between after a certain point in trade publishing, because the advance had been all.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When did you notice the advances starting to rise? And how did you stay in that game?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think the advances probably always rose. Look back at legendary stories of old: you know, the million dollar advance, back when. When I was at Doubleday, in the '70s, I think the change came more or less then. In the early '70s, Betty Prashker *[then editor-in-chief]* was fond of saying that the change came in when the Xerox machine came in, because that allowed multiple submissions.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Ah, of course; and, there were still plenty of publishers.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I remember talking to Cork Smith *[Charles M. Smith, a respected literary editor]* about this at Viking in the early '80s, and he said that old idea of actually "earning out" was being replaced by the phrase "You're buying a book." That's what you're doing now: you're *buying that book*. It's no longer, "Oh, we'll give you an advance." That changed drastically, and *that* really happened in the early '80s. There was more money. The chains had expanded, so that you could sell many, many more copies of a hardcover book then you ever had before; this is still true. Doubleday was a house of bestsellers: 60,000 copies was a big sale. Now you're looking at initial print runs of two million copies.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But often, huge returns follow.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, but you're capable of selling in excess of a million copies. Charles Frazier [COLD MOUNTAIN] sold a million and a half hardcover copies! That's remarkable these days.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Or John Berendt's MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL — whatever that's sold!

Do you have a problem with returns?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, we don't. We *are* affected by returns, we have returns. The problem is ameliorated by the nature of what we publish. The good news is we don't get returns; the bad news is that we don't get that many books out, because bookstores buy in ones and twos, for representation, and then reorder; much more so than for trade books. Because we publish reference works, and expensive reference works, that keeps our rate of return down. You're not going to order a $750 copy of THE COLUMBIA GAZETTEER on spec. You're going to say, "We have a customer for it, we'll order one." That affects the percentage of returns. We're running, oh, 18 to 19 percent, which is about half of what trade or commercial publishers are getting.

You've got to look at the writing

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How is university publishing different than you thought it would be?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: One of the big differences is, the writing; and the fact that we don't publish fiction. But that's peculiar to Columbia, because some other university presses do publish fiction. But the fact that you don't have that writerly aspect around as part of the fabric of the house affects your non-fiction as well.

Again, I come back to this: the writing. You've got to look at the writing. That, partly, is what people are looking for. Part of it, too, is just that scholarship can carry the day, rather than, simply, the writing. So that's one aspect that's very different. I think the other aspect is this notion of peer review. The publications committee is a wonderful sounding board and helps us constantly, not so much as checks and balances, but by saying: "This is not, I'm here to tell you, the cutting edge!" That's a very helpful expertise. Or, "If you're going to do this, be aware of this, that, and the next thing."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Because you expect to publish the top of the list.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; and that's great. What I am not used to, or in full adjustment to, is that is that we can't publish something that doesn't have the stamp of approval of the publications committee. I'm just not used to operating that way as an editor. That was on your shoulders in commercial publishing. But when people say, "How do you get used to it?" I answer, "Yes, but *you* have to go ask your sales and marketing department. *Can* you publish something without having your sales and marketing department signing off on it?" Increasingly the answer to that is, "No." I say, "Well, I can; but I have to go ask my publications committee." That's a different side of the process. I'd rather ask a publications committee.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: You're in the same arena.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, it's an editorially-inclined committee. I think that's one of the nice things about this university press: it is still an editorially-driven publishing company. The genesis of what you're doing springs from the editorial matter.

He fell into publishing; it was the accidental profession

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: There is another way of looking at this question I haven't quite formed, which has to do with imagination and, perhaps, mid-list writers. I suppose the question behind it is, what took you into publishing? What made you want to be an editor, or a publisher? That is, What did you want to be able to read, as opposed to what you did get to read? Or, is writing as good as it was when you started?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Oh, I think so, yes; I think writing is as good as when I started. I fell into publishing; it is the accidental profession and everybody practices it.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Did you write a novel and...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I didn't; no, no. I was an English major. "Gee, what are you going to do with your life? Well, have you thought about publishing?" No, I hadn't. "You know, well, you might."

So I came to New York. I went to the publishing course at Radcliffe, and it seemed interesting, and I came down to New York and knocked on doors, and got a job, and, as it turned out, it *was* interesting. You sort of have a knack for it, or you don't; but what always interested me was writing. I don't know that it's still the case, but by and large, that's why people got into publishing. You liked writing, and you liked reading. I think that's very pleasant; and I think the writing is as good today as it ever was. And, maybe, today it is stronger in non-fiction. There is more non-fiction; either it's replacing fiction, or it is what people are writing, or I'm more aware of it now, and less aware of good fiction. Although, god knows, there's tons of it.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: But you were always more interested in non-fiction.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: This is a certain professional bias. On the other hand, for pleasure I read only fiction.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: What do you read?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The last two novels I read, were Don DeLillo's UNDERWORLD and Robert Stone's DAMASCUS GATE, so I now have the luxury of not reading these in manuscript. Actually the DeLillo is funny, because when I was at Holt, we were the underbidder for UNDERWORLD. I read it in manuscript, but I read it as an editor, which was to read it very hard for 150 pages, and then — it's a long novel — start 'kangarooing' through it.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: A thousand-plus...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: ...manuscript pages. I was having a conversation about the novel. Someone started talking about a scene I had no recollection of, and I thought, I bet that was that 100 pages between such-and-such and such-and-such. So I went back and read the whole novel right through. Now I feel on a firmer basis with it....

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: How do you read it differently now? You've read it now, as a finished work.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: You do read differently as an editor than, I think, most readers do, because you're looking for "what's going on here, what is the writer trying to do and is he doing it well; if not, can you help him or here?" Maybe you can; maybe it's just fine and this major flaw is just part of the work, and you live with it. Novel falls apart in the middle, but goddam he picks himself up and goes on with it and there you are at the end, loving it. And I'm sure that's said often about what we now consider classic works of fiction. Anyway, I like reading and think you have to stay with it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How old were you when you knew you liked to read?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, as a kid I read constantly. That was what I enjoyed doing, it was fine for me, not just an escape, but for when you found yourself with free time. That's not all I did, but I would be as happy reading as doing anything else.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you remember the earliest book that affected you?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I don't, Katherine. I can't say, "Oh boy, from there on it was good." I remember having very good English teachers, who affected me. Maybe it was because you were sympathetic; but they remained focused, certainly; they made it interesting.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you joined Doubleday, what did you start as?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I was Doubleday's first male editorial secretary.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So you opened manuscripts, and...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I did the whole thing. I was an editorial secretary at Anchor and was, literally was, their first male editorial secretary. Men, at that point, got into publishing as sales reps, and then advanced to editorial; having sold books, they would come in and learn, then, from outside, how to put books through the editorial process. But you got your background from the field rather than from the publishing house. I was a change from that. I sat there and typed rejection letters just like everybody else, and came up that way. It quickly broke down thereafter, that was the nice thing. I can remember the personnel director at the time being worried. He said, "Well, you know, you're the first male secretary," and asked if that was going to be a problem. And that was not: it was a job.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said you went to the Radcliffe course.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I went to the Radcliffe [publishing] course in 1970. It was the second or third year that they admitted males; it had started as an all-female course, as a way to bring women with degrees into the professional world, as publishing was.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you think the publishing courses are still useful?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I do. We hire regularly out of there; my current assistant is a graduate of the course. I think they're useful as a kind of pre-screening for employers, to sort out those who are really serious about this as a career. What the students get is a good overview, an exposure, so they come into the job understanding what the big picture is, and having a network, that is, your class and those teachers who were there. I think the courses work.

At a big publishing house, where you sort of get pitched into a corner of Editorial and wonder, "Gee, what do subsidiary rights do?", if you hadn't had that overview, you'd feel a bit lost. That's why the course is useful. I know it's changed, even from when I started, but at least you knew, the first time, when you were a secretary and they put those long white sheets of paper on your desk: you knew those were galleys. You didn't say, "What's this stuff?" That was a big difference, you knew a little bit how it works.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How did you become an editor: when did you *know* you were an editor: a real editor, engaged in a book?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: People say you're doing the job before you get promoted to the job. I think that's probably the case. I thought, Oh I can be an editor, I'm doing the rote. That was useful at Doubleday, where there were so many routines and regimes, because if you learn the system, you could actually operate within it before you actually knew why they did it that way. Later, when you discovered "Oh, *this* is why," you'd think, "Wow, get me out of here!" So it was probably after I became an associate editor

that I really thought, "Oh, gee, I get this, I understand this. I can now distinguish good from bad, possibility from hopeless: you know, 'This is not going to go anywhere.'" And I could see a different *idea* of what you want to publish, to *identify* what you wanted to publish. I would say, probably, you're not born with that insight; but it's a quality of being a real editor, that you know *what* you want to publish: not just what you *can* publish, but what you *want* to publish. That's a big distinction. When you ask the kids who are coming up now: "Well, what do you want to publish?", they haven't got a grip on it, yet. They say, "Well..." In the corporate ethos as well, they say, "Well, whatever the board lets me buy!" Yeah, but do you *want* to publish it? Sure, they'll let you buy it. If you want to publish it, what can you do for it, what do you *want to do* about it? That's part of what's changed.

He wanted to publish writerly non-fiction

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When you knew what you wanted to publish, what was that?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That was writerly non-fiction. I thought, "Oh, boy, you can find these people and develop them." The model at the time was John McPhee. You saw somebody who had started here, and worked on that, and developed the craft, and you wanted to read him regardless of what he wrote about; and you saw that with other writers, and in certain areas. I was always a sucker for natural history and history; I liked them very much. History and a kind of biography. "Okay, those are the kind of books I like to publish and think I can make something go with that; and I sort of understand how to publish them, as well, develop the network." It's kind of a hierarchy of writers, those whom you admire, whom you would like to publish. You ask, "Who's writing what?"

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How did you find writers?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Reading, going out with agents, all the usual efforts. You read magazines, you read periodicals. For instance, I wrote — god, I can count on two fingers the number of times this has worked in my history, but I wrote Witold Rybczinski, who had written a review, or an opinion, for what was then *Co-evolution Quarterly*. It was on appropriate technology. He had had a lot to do with appropriate technology, and he said, I don't believe in appropriate technology. I wrote him a letter: "That's very interesting, do you think there's a book there about this?" He wrote back saying, "I've actually been thinking of a short book on this." He said that appropriate technology existed very neatly in the minds of a lot of people, and on paper, but did not exist in the real world as a viable alternative to the present situation, and that the people who had set it up were paper heroes. Like "paper tigers." The result was a book called PAPER HEROES.

That was 1975, something like that. I think I published that book in '78. Then the next book was TAMING THE TIGER, which we did in the early '80s at Viking, which was on the idea: If you invented a technology, did you have to use it? How do you control it? That sort of thing. Then he went on to HOME, which was a bestseller. That was one way you developed writers.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You said it worked twice in your history. Who else did you find that way?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Chris Camuto [A FLY FISHERMAN'S BLUE RIDGE], who's a very good natural history writer in your part of the world. He had written such an intelligent book review in, I guess, *Sierra Magazine*, that when you read it you said, "Boy, this guy can write." I wrote him a letter: "Are you working on anything?" I think you find writers by reading. Even if you're having lunch with an agent, and they're telling you about a writer, you still have to go back and read what he or she has written.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Are there writers whose work you didn't take, that you regret not having taken?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Oh, I'm sure there are. I've learned from *not* publishing certain books: "Oh you just approached that wrong, where you didn't see the possibility," or, "Something was wrong with it when you were looking at it and didn't think, but if you only just fixed that, then it would be just dandy, wouldn't it?" There was a book a couple of years ago called HAUNTS OF THE BLACK MASSEUR [by Charles Sprawson], which was on swimming. Pantheon published it; it was by a British writer. I remember reading it and thinking, "Oh, well, this starts so well," and then it went in a direction that I wouldn't have gone with it, and I thought, "Oh, well, too bad!" What I should have done was, I should have published it anyway, because it was better than anything else I've seen since on swimming.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Having come here now to Columbia, do you find that there are authors who come to you even here?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, though the playing field is a little different here, one of the differences being that, in fact, we are a university press; and like most university presses, we have to have our books reviewed by a publication committee; and they have to go through a process of peer review; and so, some of my writers in the past, who are wonderful writers, would not pass muster in terms of scholarship, and don't have "peers," as such.

But certain writers whom I have published in the past could easily come aboard. I signed one of them here, an historian, Charles Alexander, who writes on baseball. The sort of travel writers whom I've published over the years won't come, because what they do is not scholarship. I would hope that our vision would expand to include some of the natural history writers, like Stephen Pyne [BURNING BUSH], or Ellen Meloy [RAVEN'S EXILE]. John Mack Faragher [DANIEL BOONE] or Greil Marcus [INVISIBLE REPUBLIC] would also fit.

Stephen Pyne is not going to come over, I don't think, but he is interesting because he originally had been published by university presses; and then I took him on in the commercial world. Viking just published his most recent book, HOW THE CANYON BECAME GRAND, which is a very nice book. I don't know that he will ever go back to the university press, although he's doing some books on fire [most recently, VESTAL FIRE, 1998] with University of Washington Press.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you have done the fire book?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, absolutely. There is that kind of writer who the trade may not support any longer. If it does support them, I think those people are better published in the trade, because it's a wider exposure; but, whether the trade will support them, I doubt. I don't think the trade supports books such as VESTAL FIRE. They are probably better off at a university press. The book on the Grand Canyon is probably better off with commercial publisher, so Stephen Pyne may have a foot in both worlds.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would you, do you think, edit differently here than you would at Holt?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, I don't think so. Again, it depends on what you're working on. What I have found in editing some writers here is that, where I would have simply drawn a line through things before, for the sake of the writerliness of it, I will now query, to say, "Is this important scholarship?" and I would explain that "for the sake of just the flow of this book I don't think you'd need it, but if you feel if you have to get this in for the scholarship, then I understand." But I wouldn't have even asked that before, in the trade, because the writing would have been primary. And they might have asked, "Gee, why'd you cut that? Because of the flow?" and they would work it in some other way. But that's a different way of approaching it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How did your writers tend to respond to your editing?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, I think that as long as it's clear why you're doing something, and you're consistent about it, it's either: "Yeah, we'll go along with this," or "No, what have you done!?"

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Would the writer have the last word?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; absolutely. It's their work. My name's not on the book: they've got to live with it. But I think a good editor has just sort of gone into the writer and said, "I think I know what you're doing here and we'll go along with that." And of course, there are writers with whom you practically don't touch a word, you're reading along just to make sure they're not tripping over themselves.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But that would be the ideal thing!

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, yes. But that's a little different in approach than what we do here. I think that, when push comes to shove, writing is what carries the day in the trade, again because of the entertainment value, good, bad or otherwise... Here, scholarship can be enough to qualify you for publication.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: About four years ago, an Italian publisher remarked to me that, while the best fiction was coming out of New York, much — even most — of the best non-fiction was coming out of the small presses, away from New York: because, and I infer some of this, because the complexity of non-fiction was being edited out here, in New York, and the tone, the quality of the work, was becoming broader and thinner.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That might be true. People say, "Well, this has to be a book about *this*, not have all those other sides into it."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Editors here have difficulty with complexity.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, very much. I remember when I published THE MEADOW, James Galvin's book, he sent in about half a manuscript. Do you know the book? It's a very unusual form for non-fiction. Jim called it "weather." When I read it, I called the agent and asked, "Can I talk to him about this?" I said, "Well, you can go one of two ways with this book. You can be conventional; but if you actually think you can pull off what you're doing now, you've got something brilliant." And he said he thought he could do it; and he did! He said, "I was surprised that you asked if I could do it in the kind of non-linear way that I've been working out. Because I thought somebody would say, 'Yeah just put this in order, and here we go, and tell the story.'"

Initially, the interest in that book was very much grass-roots, in the realm of the small presses. I remember getting a call from a small press to ask if we were selling the reprint rights for the book. I said, "No, we're doing it ourselves in paperback." He said, "Oh, are you the editor? Oh, then you *know*. I thought you guys wouldn't know what you had there. You know that sort of complexity," which is very flattering. But it may be a way of saying that small presses are more attuned, or have time, or make the effort to go that way.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Could you have published that book now?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think so. At good publishing houses, people still say, "Sure!"

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Are there particular editors you think of?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Not any editors, in particular. What you'd have to have is the sort of climate where, when an editor says, "You've got to give me one: just trust me on this," somebody will. That sort of situation does come up — should come up — at least once a year. I think the hard side of it, for an editor, is not whether the corporation will let you publish the book you want, but whether it will then embrace it; say, "Let's go!"; and not just, finally, say: "Print it, I just don't want to hear about it again."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That makes me think of the famous Alfred Knopf story...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: THE MOVIEGOER!

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It is it's a great story. Would you like to tell it?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: As I understand this story, THE MOVIEGOER [by Walker Percy] was taken on by an editor at Knopf over Alfred's objections, over his dead body practically.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Apparently, it was during a brief bout of 'democracy' on the editorial staff.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: And Alfred walked out of the meeting, turned to an assistant, and said, "Fine, we're going to do this, and nobody is ever going to hear about that book again!" When the judging came up for the National Book Award that year, some one of the judges had been sent a copy...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It was Jean Stafford, who was married to A. J. Liebling. She went home and said, "We can't find anything." He said, "Well, I've been reading something interesting," and gave her his annotated copy. That's how I heard it.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I heard that they then said, "This is great. Can we call the publisher and get some more copies?" The warehouse said, "We've never heard of the book." So they circulated that one copy among the judges, and it was voted the winner, and there goes a career; and it is a great book too, just wonderful.

Changes coming: contraction; e-publishing

KATHERINE McNAMARA: There's been much discussion, in the trade, about university presses. *Publishers Weekly* occasionally runs pieces about them. What do you see happening on the ground in university presses that we ought to pay attention to?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think several things are happening. The world of university presses is going to go through some contractions, in the same way as the trade publishers; a kind of Darwinian change. I would say there are going to be several of the smallish university presses over the next several years that are either going to combine or go by the wayside.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: As University of Arkansas Press almost did, until they were reprieved, at the last moment.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Exactly. We are not immune from the same pressures the commercial book publishers are. But, university presses are going to succeed in a kind of regional publishing. That's what saved Arkansas, in the end: it is the only publishing company in the state of Arkansas. If you want representation, I think that's very nice; it's not quite the WPA, but it *is* a *regional* interest, and a base and should be part of your mandate. If I were sitting in Arkansas I'd be damn sure that part of my mandate was to be publishing the regional materials. And, certainly, Oklahoma and Nebraska and others have made fortunes doing that. I think, more and more, that that mandate will be embraced by the university press communities around the country.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What, then, if not regional publishing, is your mandate?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, we are given the mandate of publishing scholarship. I said at the AAUP *[American Association of University Presses]* convention, in June of this year, that in being given a mandate we were given a niche, and that that's what everybody is looking for in publishing: "Get niche, or get out," as they say. We've got a niche by definition; it's what we all need, a niche to try and exploit. So our mandate is publishing scholarship; but also, defining that, and seeing how that fits, and "Don't kid yourself about being what you aren't!" That's the sort of thing I said, using sports metaphors: "Are you going to go the net, or you're going to play baseline? Well, if you go to the net, you'd better be able to serve and volley. I can't serve and volley with what I have, so I'm going to hit from the baseline for a while." That is what I think we can do; but you just have to know what kind of player you are, what kind of niche you're in, if you're doing that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You've become an e-publisher here at Columbia.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: On the electronic side of publishing, university presses are light years ahead of the commercial world, partially because they're connected to libraries and to the internet, and the commercial publishers aren't. And, partially, because being, by-and-large, not-for-profit or underwritten organizations, they don't have to make a profit off what they're producing, not as quickly. And so they can afford to try some experiments. Certainly, CIAO is a great experiment for us.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What is CIAO?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It's *Columbia International Affairs On Line*, a repository of on-line publications for material about international affairs. It's part of an experiment being underwritten by the Mellon Foundation. We're interested in developing a self-sustaining on-line publication which would augment what we publish in the field of international relations, and would lead to some other things.

CIAO is full texts, abstracts, working papers, proceedings of symposia, the like, working with different organizations to be content-providers. The idea of it — this is why it's an experiment — is that everything that goes up on it is peer-reviewed. If we can establish a viable model for the publication of material in this arena, will it later count for tenure, promotion and scholarship? But you have to have a viable scholarly model operating, to see if you do it, and that's what we're trying to provide with CIAO.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It is available by subscription?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It is by subscription. There are a couple private scholars who subscribe, as well. Something we're looking at now, is to try to enlarge the bases.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Say, for American libraries abroad?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: There are 145 USIA centers around the world. If each of them had some sort of access to CIAO, I think that would be interesting; as well as the business journals and business press, which would also have use for it. That's part of the marketing outreach. What we're interested in learning is, what works, what doesn't? What do people use it for, and how do they use it? What we find about scholars is, they like it not only as a 'one-stop shopping center,' especially in smaller universities which couldn't afford access to all these things for whatever we're charging for it; but also, that scholars like the idea of works-in-progress: that you can kind of try out ideas, rather than have only what is has traditionally been the final publication after peer review. This kind of gray scholarly material.

We're also going to try and do a another on-line publication in earth sciences, called EARTHSCAPE.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You also publish some CD-ROMs.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We did do some CD-ROMs in the past, and we will in the future. Again a learning process: we were successful with some, we were less successful with others.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: THE CLASSIC HUNDRED POEMS is enchanting.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That is a wonderful CD! It is something that we developed out of an existing project, the GRANGER'S INDEX TO POETRY; but this has a life to its own. We've been most successful with so far with the reference-works: GRANGER'S INDEX TO POETRY, THE DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS, the database-type CD-ROMs. Next spring, we're going to try putting the GRANGER'S INDEX TO POETRY, which has previously existed in print and in CD-ROM, on-line. The other CD-ROM we had a great deal of success with was Diana Eck's project, on religious diversity in the United States, ON COMMON GROUND, which has to do with religious diversity in America. That has been a great success for us. We've sold it to institutions; we will also sell as a textbook for students.

KATHERINE McNAMARA *[reading from the brochure]*: "Geographic courses. America's many religions, Fifteen Religions in the U. S. Diversities, Pluralisms." This looks interesting. Essentially, it's a kind of ethnographical approach.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, and a kind of advocacy as well.

So we're experimenting with what we can't make work, and what we can. The real scholarly monograph, which is fading from the shelves because libraries have no space for it, and fading from publishers' lists because you simply can't afford it, but which is the backbone of scholarly publishing, might have a future on-line or in electronic form. This doesn't save you any of the peer review in the process, but does save you printing, paper, and binding, which is not inconsiderable; and also may allow you to publish, in the sense of disseminating it, more widely than the 300 copies that sit on library shelves somewhere. That's why we're interested in e-publishing primarily: as a future mechanism for a distributing network.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In that regard, you're also doing a Lightning Print Book. *[Lightning Print Inc. is a subsidiary of Ingram, the wholesale book distributing company bought in November by Barnes and Noble; it provides what it calls "'on demand' printing and distribution services to the book industry," by storing and printing books electronically, one at a time, as ordered by bookstores and libraries, through book wholesalers. It is a development of e-publishing which raises important questions about authors' rights and publishing economics.]*

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We are. We have one National Book Award winner in our history, THE BLUE WHALE, by George Small, which is based on research done on the blue whale in the early '60s. The research is out of date, and, therefore, the book is out of print; but for those people who like a copy of every National Book Award winner, or just want to see what this was about, we licensed to Lightning Print the right to produce bound copies on demand, from our edition. I think, more and more, that this approach will be a certain salvation for the life of books. I think it's an intermediary technology, if you will: from digitizing to print, or from digitizing to downloading from our site, or whatever. I don't know that Lightning Print, itself, will be necessary as an intermediary after a while. It may be that that is the service they provide, and we won't want to be in that business, which is something I think they're banking on.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That you don't want to print *per se*?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Either we don't want to print *per se*, or we don't want to be the intermediary. If somebody calls us up, even if we have it digitized, is that how we want to spend our day, filling telephone orders for a digitized version and downloading them? That is the job of a publisher; but maybe there's a distributor that could do the job better than we can as a publisher.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Right, and then you could do the real work of a publisher, which is making...

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, making the text available, and they can do the rest. I think that that is where all things are possible in this Brave New World. It's another question people have to ask themselves: "What business are you in, and what is your role in the dissemination of information?" Because you can be in almost any area now. It's very easy to become preoccupied with something that you probably shouldn't be doing, spending your time on; that's not what you're on earth to do.

Academic writing and peer review

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Since you're an academic press, how does the peer review process alter the work of the editor, compared to how that work was done in the trade world?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It alters it a couple of ways. Quite often, the peer review is used by editors here as a sort of stage of editing. We get all sorts of peer reviews, ranging from "This is a wonderful manuscript, you should publish it," to almost line-by-line critiques of a manuscript. It's very interesting when those instances arise.

Both forms are a form of editing. I think peer review helps an editor with shaping a manuscript. There is, quite often, less hands-on editing here than in the trade, although everybody decries the end of editing in the trade; who knows? And because you have a publications committee or peer review that has to approve what you publish, there is some deference to the opinion of others, rather than to your own opinion about what you want to publish. That's overstating it: but, sometimes, the decision to publish is left in others' hands. You may think, "This is a perfectly good project, but we'll see what somebody else thinks." It goes back to what I said earlier: I think the role of the editor is to decide what you really want to publish; and, sometimes — I wouldn't say this role is abdicated, in scholarly publishing, but — there are other reasons for publishing than your own judgment.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It has a different weight.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: It has a different weight; it does. The decision to publish something is not wholly your own. If that is still the case! Arguably, with the publishing committees in trade publishing, the decision there isn't your own.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I'm curious about whether you've found, on the academic side, that the integrity of the manuscript is important. That always should be a very large issue, don't you think, the integrity of the manuscript?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, the integrity of the text.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What happens, for example, when the review comes in and demands a change in the manuscript, which perhaps the author disagrees with? This can happen, too, with dissertations. What if the review goes against what the author wanted to do? What do you do when there is that sort of conflict?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think you have to decide whether or not to publish. The writer would certainly have a rebuttal to the review. In that case, you have to not-quite arbitrate. Either the reviewer has a certain axe to grind, or the writer says, "That's not what I'm writing." Just as a reviewer in the media quite often goes wrong on a book: "Well, that's not the book I wrote, you know, you're not reviewing the book I wrote." I think, there, you decide who you're standing by. And, most of the time, you come down on the side of the author, rather than the reviewer. That's been the experience I've seen here, unless someone is being accused of completely sloppy scholarship, or is just wrong about something. We rarely arbitrate. You'd go with the author who said "No, this is what I mean, and that's what I want." I think that integrity of text is respected all the way through.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Have you noticed a change in tone or texture of the writing?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, the writing is looser. Because things could be left mutable till the end, people tended — I don't know, this may be slightly unfair — tended not to figure it out at the outset; it wasn't as tight, thinking you could go back or change this later, not having thought it all the way through on a first draft. The differences are odd. I remember talking about this to Witold Rybczynski, years ago, when he first started writing on the computer. For him, it almost restored the silence of writing. You didn't have an electric typewriter you felt you had to keep up with, that *clack clack clack*. It almost took him back to longhand. I think there are all sort of aesthetic advantages, as well as, god knows, the practical ones.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You can write as fast as you can think.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: You can write as fast as you can think; you can change things very easily. Just the factor of time: that's a wonderful boon.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Have you found any differences between on-line and print publishing in terms of procedure and so on? Or are they simply technological?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Actually, there *is* a difference. In print publishing, quite often, you are not publishing speculation. You don't get to try out ideas in print; they've got to have been through all the review process, whereas on-line there is a kind of gray area, sometimes. "I've researched this, and this is where I'm going, and I don't know that this is where I'm going to end up. And could I have your feedback? And, what else is going on?" That's what — we find — scholars like about CIAO, the ability to try things out before they are, if you will, committed to paper.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That is what the internet was for, when it was started.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: And it's been very nice. We've got a couple of things that we think will end up in print, after they've been through a number of stages on the internet.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So, it's a kind of editorial process. And that raises, for a writer, at least, an interesting question about drafts: not just about preserving them, but having material out there before it's in the final version. You must have some sort of a protocol for marking, and also for downloading and printing; do you? Do you restrict access and accession?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, you can download and print, in certain areas, but you can always block anything you want to block, so that certain things can't come down, while other things can. By and large, CIAO is pretty 'downloadable,' as I understand it.

Persuading Readers to Read

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I was thinking about your being drawn to non-fiction, that it is what you love. Very often, it also is the domain of the intellectual. We are all in a little discussion, or a cultural argument, that goes on here and there, about the matter of the 'public intellectual.' Where are our Edmund Wilsons, we ask? That sort of criticism also is the realm of serious non-fiction. You published such work at Holt, surely. I wonder if you find that trade publishing is less receptive to the sort of serious writing I'm referring to, here?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think the culture is less receptive to it, in a way. You don't have, well, I don't know if you have public icons like Edmund Wilson, or the like, whose opinion on something mattered across the board to society. I think it's much more factionalized now.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It's a small group of society, still?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes. On the other hand, this sort of discourse still exists. Certainly, if you read the *New York Review of Books,* one sees that this is a community of ideas, and thought; that discourse does go on. I don't know that it ever was seamlessly integrated into society. Now, I think, it is more of the two cultures: the popular culture here, and the intellectual culture over here, rather than their crossing back and forth. But you see very serious books published constantly. People are seeking them out and making successes of them: books that deal with issues, that are issue-oriented, which is, theoretically, the hardest kind of book to publish successfully.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And you still see, to your satisfaction, books like that being published?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes. Princeton has this book called THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER, by William C. Bowen and Derek Bok, that has to do with the long-term consequences of race and affirmative action. They are pushing that book hard, not only to the academy but to the trade. Princeton's not a trade publisher; they are a university publisher acting like a trade publisher, for this book. They hired a freelance publicity group in New York to promote it, and they are trying to tour the authors. They feel the book has a trade audience, as well as one in the academy.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That leads us to the matter of readership, rather than market, although I'm sure everyone uses the word "market." But doesn't a book like THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER, along with the sort of books you're interested in as well, appeal to a *readership*? How is it now more nearly the job of, say, university presses and small presses to find that old, perhaps legendary, serious readership? Publishers used to attach numbers to it, do you remember?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: "Seventy-five readers."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I even heard someone say, 60,000. "There are 60,000 serious readers in the U. S., period."

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The question is, how many readers are there: serious readers? It was always a great debate in trade publishing, and it is still such a debate, because when you look at a serious novel, or a work of fiction everybody agrees is serious — look at Don DeLillo, for instance — and you can sell 75 to 100 thousand copies of it, you say, "Well, is that the upper reach?" Or is the typical sale, 7500 to 10,000 copies, the real readership, and you somehow magically, with one book, expanded it? Or, are you just capturing ten percent of the total each time with all these other serious books? It's a remarkably small number, whatever it is, in comparison to the total population of the country.

But that has always been the challenge, reaching an audience, and I don't think that's changed. The challenge is now harder than ever, for trade or academic publishers: either to capture that audience, or to *create* an audience, in the sense of convincing those people who might be interested in reading, to actually spend their time *reading this book*, as opposed to spending their time reading something else, as opposed to spending their time doing whatever. That's increasingly the challenge.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is to persuade readers to read....

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes: persuading readers to *read*. It used to be, calling readers' attention to a book. There's been a subtle change. We used to say, 25 years ago, that publishing was recession-proof; that, historically, there was always a certain population that would rather spend their money on books than on food; that there were always the sort of 'poor' readers to march us through. I don't know that that's case anymore; or, that there aren't so many other sorts of intellectual distractions, or just distractions, that you don't have to pay attention to convincing people they have to read. It's the peril of non-fiction. Once someone summarizes a book, the reader can think, "Well, now I've got the information, why do I need to read it?" You either have to give it a better context than the summary, or write it so it's worth spending the time reading! The ongoing information stream is part of our challenge: "Okay, stop. Read this. Don't just consume the information."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I overheard a funny little conversation in a new restaurant. A woman was telling about a friend of hers who had recently been fired from her job: one of the middle class, the New York middle class, which means reasonably literate and reasonably well-to-do. This woman, now out of work, found that her day was different than it had been, because she was no longer a "consumer": she now had to *think* about what she did, what she bought, what she ate, what she read, what she paid attention to. And so, she found herself becoming more of a "customer," and she was becoming more — the dread word — "creative" about what she chose, rather than being caught in a kind of consumer-rut.

I thought it an interesting conversation for all sorts of reasons, most of which are ironic. But it might be something like that which you refer to, that subtle change of difference: not so much persuading the readers to read this book, but persuading the readers to *read*!

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, in terms of trying to figure out what's shaping everybody, that "consumer rut" is a good example. "I'm on this sort of treadmill, not that I can't get off, but...." You know, the urge; there's such an automatic, ongoing situation that you can't stop. That I spend *x* hours every day reading what I think I have to read to keep up with the industry, the trade journals, or review media, or this that and the next thing. So that you, perforce, are not reading for pleasure or the cultivation of intellect. Whereas, "maybe if I didn't have that job, maybe I'd switch over and do this." Yeah, the consuming side of it is interesting — I mean, going back to books as entertainment.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That analogy makes me flinch. Books are overpriced, is my notion, because I think they ought to be free as air, though that's another question, isn't it? But books are very expensive. So, I've heard publishers and editors say something like this: "Well, the cost of a novel is the cost of two and a half movie tickets!" It's a bad analogy, I think, because books and movies are not comparable; and when you make them comparable you remove the unique quality of the book. There is nothing else like it. It can't be compared, and it oughtn't to be treated frivolously.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think that's true. I don't know the answer to the problem of the price of books. Because I'm quite sympathetic. On the one hand, they are cheap by comparison to what other things cost, as well as what goes into the manufacture, the time of everyone involved to bring the book out. Here's a unit, for $25. It's almost like food: you can't believe food is so cheap, even though we're decrying it, after, my god, this farmer raised it, transported it, took it to market...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It's not like the farmer gets much return on investment.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That's part of it too. Nonetheless, you're still convincing someone to part with $25 to $30 of their hard-earned-money, for this object.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Well, I'll ask you a question: Why publish in hardbound editions? Why not do as the French do, or as the old North Point *[a defunct, once highly-regarded small press; its name is now an imprint of Farrar, Straus]* did, and publish in handsome soft-bound?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Many people have done it. I mean, having been born and raised up in paper books, we thought hardbacks were going to be dead tomorrow, back in 1970.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They're so heavy and they're so expensive.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: The only answer I have to this is the old cultural prejudice: It's not "real" in paperback; if this were truly valid, truly good, it would be in hardcover first. In many respects there is validity to that, because publishers say, "Well, then, it's true, and we put our best stuff in hardcover."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: A certain pat decree / pedigree there.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: We perpetuate it ourselves. But paperback publishing has been tried.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I wonder what generation started buying hardbound? Ours? When we finally got jobs with tenure?

WILLIAM STRACHAN [grinning]: We have.

KATHERINE McNAMARA [laughing]: We don't have to mail our books now from one temporary address to another. We're not grad students; we've even got gray hair.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Well, it's not only that. I found this fascinating: when I was at Holt, we bought Thomas Pynchon's novel, which turned out to be MASON AND DIXON. When we bought the rights to publish the book, we were counting on a certain sale in hardcover, but a kind of annual 'annuity' in trade paperback, based on the sales of GRAVITY'S RAINBOW. And while I think that's true, what took everyone aback last year — I was gone, but I looked at this somewhat carefully — when the trade paperback came out, it didn't suddenly rocket onto the bestseller list. In fact, what everybody said was that maybe Pynchon's audience had grown up, and were buying in hardcover, and were not interested in the trade paperback anymore. I mean, our generation, that was raised up with trade paperbacks, may now have turned their back on them.

Our generation, those before, and the next

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you think about generations of book buyers?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yeah, I do.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: How do you think about them?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I think about them in terms of a kind of taste in what's represented. When I worked at The Viking Press, Elisabeth Sifton was our editor-in-chief. This was in the early '80s. I said, "This is a really wonderful publishing house," and she said, "Of course," and I said, "One of the reasons is that you have these various generations of editors." At that point, Malcolm Cowley was still coming in once every other week. Then it dropped down from Malcolm to Cork Smith and Alan Williams, who I guess were both in their fifties. And then to Elisabeth Sifton, who was a decade younger. And then down to Amanda Vaill and myself, who were a decade younger. She said, "You know, this isn't an accident." I said, "Oh?" She said that if you looked at the history of Viking Press, you saw a certain generation of editors that bought D. H. Lawrence and a number of other people. And then you went maybe a generation later and you had Steinbeck, and you had a couple of other writers that came in.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That would be under?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: That was Pat Covicci, and Marshal Best, and a number of other people. Then you had them picking up Bellow and the like in the '40s. But, she said,

if you look at the history of The Viking Press in the '50s, you don't have the new generation of writers coming in. You have Steinbeck continuing to publish; you have Bellow continuing to publish; you have a number of other people they've always published. There was no new editor brought in from 1948 till Cork Smith got there in 1962. She said, "We missed a generation of writers, not having that generation of editors to represent the taste of a generation. We don't have the history from the '50s." I know, when I read submissions or look at editors who are in their late '20s, that it's a different taste. You need that. And, you know, they're probably looking in abject horror at somebody like Don DeLillo. Maybe, I don't know; I'm making this up.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Actually no, they're not, they're looking at him with some respect. "Content" is why. Somebody told me this about the internet, too: it's now chic to have "content."

WILLIAM STRACHAN: But I do think about generations of readers, what is attractive to them, stylistically, in content, themes, etc., changes.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you find yourself able to read younger writers?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: I can't, you know, say "This interests me," as often as, "I don't get it," or, "This doesn't speak to me."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So, yours is a sort of sociological reading.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; or you can say, "This is a technically skilled writer." When I see what they're up to, it's not of remote interest to me, but I see what they're trying to do, and I try and do a clinical reading, rather than an interested reading.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you find yourself noticing that kind of response more, are you tracking it, when you look around you at your colleagues in the trade?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Only to the extent that I read the gossip columns in the trade papers about the hot deals. At cocktail parties or in the trade journals, I am continuously aware that another generation is in place, that people who are from 25 to 35 are making a huge impact. And I'm aware of that, constantly. I don't see it as much, interestingly, in what is actually published, and I don't know if this is my radar, or what channels you tune to, in the trade reviews, or the papers: I don't see that as much is cracking into the establishment in the way that it used to. I mean, in some ways the writers that I'm aware of—

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Are not taken so seriously?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: No, they are taken very seriously. I'm not aware, when I read trade reviews or reviews in the *Times* or the like, of the younger writers. Maybe I just read over them. When I was a kid, as an editor, people like Ann Beattie or Lorrie Moore were the young people rising then. And you were a contemporary of them as an editor, as well. There's very much a tie to that generation.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In terms of the kind of non-fiction that you like, do you see anything interesting happening in the younger generation of writers? Do they know enough to write about?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Hmm, yes; yes. Well the 'memoir' thing, that's another story. But the writers that I worked with who were coming up and who were writing, they were very concerned with place, a great many of them. Not just *their* place, but physical location, or detail or history: local *place*.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That was very much of our generation.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes; maybe I'm just drawn to those writers who were exploring these themes when they were younger. But beyond that I don't know. The memoir, if you will, the self-absorption, or the that old "figure out life through me," is certainly part of the landscape now.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What is called "creative non-fiction."

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, exactly.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Maybe the 'memoir' is a sort of sub-genre of fiction, but that's somebody else's argument.

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, I'm not going to go on with that one.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do we have a literary culture? If we do, what does it look like?

WILLIAM STRACHAN: Yes, I think we do. There are a great many good books being published that count as literature, and are being talked about, and appreciated. I guess in some ways it looks more fragmented, for many reasons, than it ever did before; is maybe not as homogenous — although maybe it is, because it's linked up in ways that we never saw before. Suddenly, you're getting books on the internet, you're getting books on TV. The book culture exists in many different areas, other than *just* in a bookstore, or *just* on the page, which made it seem neatly compact before. Now, it looks diffuse and fragmentary, but maybe it's just an expanded circle. It may be illusory that it's more fragmentary. Maybe there is a wider dissemination of material than ever before. I think a lot of people are reading, and care about books. Certainly, the numbers prove it, whatever they're reading. And they are certainly *talking* about books: all those readers' groups and the like.

So the book culture has become more a part of the culture than, maybe, it was before. Maybe the change is in the literary part: is it is more communal than the solitary life that it used to be? That may be a change. Or, the change is in what people want: they don't want to lose themselves, or bury themselves in a book. They don't say, "Stay here; I want to be alone."

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William Strachan, Director, Columbia University Press
562 West 113th Street, New York, New York 10025

A Selection of Books and Writers Edited or Published by William Strachan:
Witold Rybczynski, HOME: A Short History of An Idea
TAMING THE TIGER: The Struggle to Control Technology
PAPER HEROES, Appropriate Technology: Panacea or Pipe Dream?
Gretel Ehrlich, THE SOLACE OF OPEN SPACES
Marc Reisner, CADILLAC DESERT: The American West and Its Disappearing Water
Christopher Camuto, A FLY FISHERMAN'S BLUE RIDGE
Charles Alexander, OUR GAME: An American Baseball History
Stephen Pyne, BURNING BUSH: A Fire History of Australia
Ellen Meloy, RAVEN'S EXILE: A season on the Green River
John Mack Faragher, DANIEL BOONE: The Life and Legend of An American Pioneer
Greil Marcus, INVISIBLE REPUBLIC: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes
James Galvin, THE MEADOW

Books Mentioned during the Conversation:
Charles Frazier, COLD MOUNTAIN
John Berendt, MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL
Don DeLillo, UNDERWORLD
Robert Stone, DAMASCUS GATE
Charles Sprawson, HAUNTS OF THE BLACK MASSEUR
Walker Percy, THE MOVIEGOER
William C. Bowen and Derek Bok, THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER
Stephen Pyne, HOW THE CANYON BECAME GRAND; VESTAL FIRE

New /Noteworthy Publications from Columbia University Press (Selected):
Columbia University Press <http://www.cc.columbia.edu/cu/cup>

Multimedia:
THE COLUMBIA GRANGER'S WORLD OF POETRY on CD-ROM 3.0. ed. William Harmon.
ON COMMON GROUND, Diana L. Eck & the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. CD-ROM. "Multimedia introduction to the changing religious landscape of the United States."
Reference:
THE COLUMBIA GRANGER'S INDEX TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN POETRY, ed. Nicholas Frankovitch and David Larzelere.
THE COLUMBIA GUIDE TO ONLINE STYLE, Janice Walker and Todd Taylor. However, the authors don't hypenate "on-line."
THE COLUMBIA GAZETTEER OF THE WORLD, ed. Saul B. Cohen.
THE COLUMBIA DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS, ed. Robert Andrews.
THE COLUMBIA READERS ON LESBIANS AND GAY MEN IN MEDIA, SOCIETY, AND POLITICS, ed. Larry Gross and James D. Woods.
THE JAZZ CADENCE OF AMERICAN CULTURE, ed. Robert G. O'Meally.
General:
SERENDIPITIES, Umberto Eco, tr. William Weaver.
THE RISE AND FALL OF CLASS IN BRITAIN, David Cannadine
THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST: Popular Uses of History in American Life. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen.
VILLAGE BELLS, Alain Corbin, tr. Martin Thom.
THE WORK OF POETRY, John Hollander.

Related Sites:
Lightning Print <http://www.ingram.com/Company_Info/lpihtml/>
Ingram <http://www.ingram.com>
Bookwire <http://www.bookwire.com>
National Writers Union <http://www.nwu.org//book/pubdemnd.htm>

Institutional Memory:
A Conversation with Marion Boyars, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 3
A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, *Archipelago*, Vol. 1 No. 4 and Vol. 2 No. 1

from ARCADIA, ONE MILE

Dannie Abse

In the Welsh National Museum

(to Josef Herman)

Josef, in your thaumaturgic studio,
long live cobalt blue and brown!
Autumn is your season,
twilight is your hour.

Now, in my hometown, you, spooky,
conjure up, abracadabra,
this melancholy impostor
who steals my name.

Is he listening to someone
beyond the picture's frame,
playing a Chopin piano
of autumnal unhappiness?

Josef, this other is not me.
This golem hardly looks like me.
Is this your unbegotten brother
lost in menstrual blood?

If so, his passport (forged)
would have been Polish,
his exile inevitable,
his wound undescribable.

Look! My best brown coat
not yet patched at the elbow,
my cobalt blue shirt
not yet frayed at the collar.

As if challenged he, dire,
(Passport? Colour of wound?)
stares back — that look of loss —
at whomsoever stares at him.

Or across at Augustus John's
too respectable W. H. Davies,
at prettified Dylan Thomas
whose lips pout for a kiss.

Infelicitous! Wrong! Impostors
spellbound, enslaved in their world,
with no *emeth* on their foreheads,
without speech, without pneuma.

But the Welsh say, 'Whoever stares long
at his portrait will, with dismay, see
the devil.' So who's wearing my clothes?
Josef, I know your magic. I'll not stay.

New Granddaughter

You don't know the score, what's you, what's not.
Remote ancestors return you can't disown.
This prelude, this waiting for an encore.

Is that raised hand yours, this wind-pecked morning?
Enigmatic trees, askew, shake above the pram.
All's perplexity, green reverie, shadowland.

By why this grandfatherly spurt of love?
Your skin is silk, your eyes suggest they're blue.
I bend to smell small apricots and milk.

Did I dream that legend of the Angel
who falls to touch each baby's fontanelle
and wipe out racial memory, leaving *déjà vu*?

I'm confessing! Your newness, petite, portends
my mortality — a rattle for you, the bell for me.
Hell, I'm old enough to mutter blessings.

The determinates of the clock increase.
Sometimes you close your eyes noiselessly, turn
your head, listening to music that has ceased.

Inscription on the Flyleaf of a Bible

(for Larne)

Doubting, read what this fabled history teaches,
how the firework, Imagination, reaches high
to dignify and sanctify.

You need not, granddaughter, be religious
to learn what Judges, Kings, Prophets, yield,
thought-lanterns for Life's darker field,
moral lies of piety and poetry.

You need not, granddaughter, hosanna heroes:
this wily shepherd, that bloodthirsty tough;
yet applaud the bulrush child
who, when offered gold, chose the coal.
Satisfied, the tyrant Pharaoh smiled,
did not see the pattern in the whole.

Forgive the triumphalism and the pride,
forego the curses and the ritual stuff.
You, older, I hope, will always side
with the enslaved and hunted,
deride the loud and lethal crowd
who vilify and simplify.

What is poetry but the first words
Adam, amazed, spoke to Eve?
On the first page of Genesis
hear the next to Nothing.
Later sound-effects, God off-stage, or theurgic stunts,
(water from a rock, a bush ablaze) might deceive
but bring ladders only to nerveless heaven.
Better to walk with Jephthah's luckless daughter
among real hills. And grieve.

Enjoy David's winging gifts to praise;
Solomon's rapturous serenade; also Job's
night-starred elegance of distress —
though such eloquence can bless,
indiscriminately, the last flags of the just
and the unjust on the barricade.

Read, granddaughter, these scandalous stories,
screaming Joseph in the pit of scorpions,
champion Goliath of course outclassed;
so many cubits of sorrow and delight,
so many visions of our ruffian Past.
They do not stale or fade
and may fortify and mollify.

COME HERE, I WANT YOU

Benjamin H. Cheever

My great-grandfather is famous for having heard the first words ever spoken over the telephone: "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." That was in March of 1876. By 1881, Thomas Augustus Watson had stopped working on telephones, surrendering his third of a business which became Bell Telephone.

This was not the only time one of my beloved forebears is supposed to have turned his back on substantial wealth. My father's great-uncle Ebenezer was an abolitionist who had been drawn through the streets of Newburyport behind a carriage by copperheads, locals whose sympathies lay with the slave-holding states. "He [Ebenezer] ran a biscuit factory that turned out hardtack for the sailing vessels," my father once wrote in a letter. "When the War between the States was declared, he was offered a contract by the government to make hardtack for the soldiers. He rejected the offer because he felt that his hardtack wasn't good enough for the Union Soldiers. A competitor named Pierce accepted the contract and made a fortune and founded a dynasty on the proceeds. Uncle Ebenezer had no regrets. He played the flute. The Pierce bakery has since grown into the National Biscuit Company while the wind whistles through Uncle Ebenezer's abandoned flour mill."

Of course I regret the loss of so much dough and also money, but the turn of history that has me grinding my teeth at night is the one that began in March of 1876.

Without the telephone, my great-grandfather might easily have slipped unnoticed into the mists of time, but not Bell. Alexander Graham Bell and his father, Alexander Melville Bell, and his grandfather, Alexander Bell, all worked with the deaf. Bell taught a system his father developed and which enabled the deaf to learn to speak. Why, that's similar to the function of the telephone, you say, enabling communication where it had not previously been possible. I don't think so. Or not anymore.

On the night in March of 1876, before the day that everything started to go awry, I draw up a the scene in which Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Augustus Watson (can you imagine either of these men fitting his signature onto a credit card printout?) stand at the door of a laboratory. Perhaps it is beginning to snow. My picture of Bell is taken from the movies and a few old photographs. I see him as a somewhat girthy fellow, given to dark, uncomfortable suits and facial hair. Watson, the younger man, would have been slighter and perhaps more casually dressed. After exchanging a few final words, Bell goes off down the street. I see cobbles. Watson stays to lock up.

Bell eats a solitary dinner at the Ye Olde Fish & Chips. He'd have something reasonable, perhaps the cod. Then home and to bed. It's widely believed that visualization is essential to any sort of success. Having read his 19th century self-help books, Bell therefore begins to fidget with his telephone the moment he loses consciousness. The dream world, after all, is the point at which the past, present, and future all come together.

The inventor keeps a glass of water on his bedside table and sleeps with the windows opened. A gust of air tips over this water glass and spills its contents into the

great man's bed. Still asleep, Bell reaches for his spectral phone and calls for assistance: "Mr. Watson come here, I need you."

He hears a strange ringing. First checking his alarm clock, which had not gone off, the flustered Bell calls out again: "I'm cold! I'm wet."

A human voice comes on the line, but not his trusted assistant. This is a woman, clearly pleased with herself and speaking in tones of such intimacy as to denote a long and torrid sexual affair. Bell had heard a voice like this only once in his life and that was near Covent Garden in London, when he had been accosted by a creature he assumed must have been a prostitute.

"Thank you for calling Bell Telephone," the whore continues. "To insure the highest level of customer service, this call may be monitored and recorded. If you are using a touch-tone phone, please press 1."

A touch-tone phone? Bell had never heard of such a thing, but this is a dream, and so he looks down at the machine in his hand and discovers that, lo and behold, it has a keypad with twelve buttons, curiously labeled.

"Damn it Watson," he says. "I've spilled on myself. It might be acid. Come here. I need you!"

"Congratulations!" the strumpet continues in honeyed tones, "for having selected Bell Telephone. If it isn't a Bell, it isn't a telephone. We are the premier world-wide communications service. If you are a current member of the Bell Telephone family please press 1 now. If you would like to join the family today and at temporarily reduced rates, press 2."

"Listen!" shouts the inventor, still groggy, but greatly agitated, "I've spilled on myself. I may be in grave danger."

"If you have a question regarding billing," continues the cheerful whore, "please press 3. If you are experiencing technical difficulties, press 4. If you would like to hear the details of our new comprehensive business plan, please press 5. If you would like to hear this menu again, press 6."

"I don't want to press anymore bloody buttons," Bell roars, into the darkness of his empty bedroom, "I want to talk to a living breathing person. I want to talk to him now!"

By now his own rantings had shaken the unfortunate man into full wakefulness. He found himself alone in bed, cold, wet, but otherwise unhurt. He was uneasy, though. Was this dream in any way prophetic? he wondered. Or had he simply eaten a bad dinner. The inventor had broken one of his basic rules in having the cod special at the Ye Olde Fish & Chips on the last day before the menu changed. "I knew that cod smelled oddly," he mumbled to himself, putting on fresh sheets and a dry nightshirt. Before retiring a second time, he went down into the kitchen and re-examined the prototype. It was a simple device, not beautiful by any means, but also entirely without buttons. The engine that had starred in his nightmare had had 12 buttons, including a pound sign and a star. "Ridiculous," he thought. "What would a pound button be for? Must have been the cod."

The next morning, Bell ate a hurried breakfast and rushed off to the laboratory. Watson met him at the door. The young assistant looked much the worse for wear himself, his hair a wreck, his eyes bloodshot.

"Dinner at the Ye Olde?" asked the inventor, solicitously.

"No," said Watson.

"Bad dreams?" asked Bell.

"No," said Watson, shaking off his mentor's gloom. "No dreams at all. I stayed up all night. Look what I've done!" The prototype he thrust now into his colleague's hands was identical to the one they had labored on together the night before, with one exception: it featured a keypad, with 12 digits. "We've licked the problem of addresses," the young man boasted. "Each telephone owner will have his own numerical identification. Then we can put the letters of the alphabet beside the numbers, so that, for

instance, 2 also stands for ABC and 3 for DEF. This will also make it easier to remember the numbers. In some cases you will be able to simply dial the name of the person or business. For instance, a bedding store might have the number 62887377, or was it 62887737? In any case it spells mattress."

Bell was not enthusiastic." What's the pound sign for?" he asked. "Besides I can't read those letters at all! They're, well, they're tiny!"

"We'll buy you stronger glasses," said Watson. "The invention is going to take off. Teenagers will love it. I know this is far in the future, but someday there will be little mechanical operators built in to answer the phone if the owner is busy, or not home. At first businesses will have them, finally even private residences. If you call someone up, and he's not available that instant, why, you can listen to a symphony, or leave a message, or even — and this sounds too good to be true, but it might happen — ask and answer rudimentary questions, by simply pushing the buttons in response to prerecorded prompts. Think of the man-hours that will be saved. Nobody will ever be in a hurry again!"

Bell looked terribly sad. He moved to his assistant's side and put an arm around the younger man.

"You know what, Tom, I've got a bad feeling about this," he said. "Let's scrap the whole damn thing. Let's stick with the deaf."

some sort of seeming hope. god. why do we do this blank page stuff?

Fae Myenne Ng

&&&&&&

Mail Order Catalog

A friend sent me a stamp from the Berkeley Public Library, which "had to do a retrofit and had a giveaway." I suppose this means they were replacing the card catalog with computers. The stamp prints FICTION. It reads about this size. I'm going to stamp every page I write, even e-mail.

&&&&&&

A Flea

1. The Salmon

Years ago my friend, who was a fly fisherman, fell under a disabling illness. The continent separated us and rumors of his condition were bad; and so I copied out the First Meditation by John Donne, from his Devotions, and mailed it to him. "Variable, and therefore miserable condition of man! this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute. I am surprised with a sudden change, and alteration to worse, and impute it to no cause, nor call it by any name. We study health, and we deliberate upon our meats, and drink, and air, and exercises, and we hew and we polish every stone that goes to that building; and so our health is a long and a regular work: but in a minute a cannon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all; a sickness unprevented for all our diligence, unsuspected for all our curiosity; nay, undeserved, if we consider only disorder, summons us, seizes us, possesses us, destroys us in an instant. O miserable condition of man!" — and so on and so forth in fine rant, to equal and give voice to, surely, my friend's grand irk.

Along with this consolation went another, fully suited to my friend's true, piscatorial vocation: THE SPAWNING RUN, by William Humphrey. No better book about fishing — the book is not "about fishing" — exists than that high-humored, graceful essay on an angling holiday in Britain (my friend knew it well already). William Humphrey opens his meditation with a (more subdued) mutter of irk. "The Itchen, the Test, the Frome: the fabled chalk streams of south England, where Dame Juliana Berners and Izaak Walton fished — here I am in the middle of them, it's spring, the season has opened, and I'd might as well be in the Sahara."

My friend, also unable to fish just then, lived (and does still live) in Alaska, where, when we said "fish," we meant Salmon. William Humphrey, on the other hand, was stumped by (uncatchable, by law — English fishing laws are unfathomable to us) trout. Off he went, therefore, to Wales, after possibility ("The Severn. The Wye. The

Usk....")! In lovely Wales, in Thomas Hardy's country, Humphrey's possibility was salmon.

Ordinary fish are caught; salmon, king of fish, are killed. Preferably with a fly; more preferably, with a dry fly; supremely, with a fly tied by the fisher himself. My afflicted friend was a fly-tier from boyhood. The author of THE SPAWNING RUN was not; something else caught his attention.

"In the spring a salmon's fancy also turns to thoughts of love. Not a young salmon's but an old salmon's. And not lightly. With the single-mindedness of a sailor returning home after a four-year cruise without shore leave.

"The salmon is anadromous. That is to say, he leads a double life, one of them in freshwater, the other in saltwater. His freshwater life may be said to be his private, or love life; his saltwater life his ordinary, or workaday life." An historical note: these words were written when public and private lives were by convention kept separate; indeed, when private lives existed. The book was published in 1970. Because Humphrey's theme is — I will be frank — the *varieties* of the spawning run, his subject includes *salmo* in fresh water. He goes on:

> The salmon reverses the common order of human affairs: a lot is known about his private life but nothing at all about the rest. We get the chance to study him only when the salmon is making love. For when the salmon, aged two, and called at that stage a parr, leaves his native river and goes to sea (to be a smolt until he returns to spawn, whereupon he becomes a grilse), nobody, not even Professor Jones, D.Sc., PhD., Senior Lecturer in Zoology, University of Liverpool, knows where he goes or how he lives, whether in the sea he shoals together with his kind or goes his separate way, why some stay there longer than others or why some return home in the spring and others not until the autumn. He disappears into the unfished regions, or the unfished depths, or both, of the ocean, and is not seen again until — it may be as little as one year or as much as four years later — impelled by the spawning urge, he reenters the coastal waters and the estuaries and up the rivers to his native stream like some missing person returning after an absence of years from home.
>
> Nothing of what the salmon does in the sea is known, only what he does not do: namely, reproduce himself.

That is the wonder and mystery of this noble fish: his and her drive for the home waters to renew their kind. (Though the author seeks to kill a grilse of his own, he notes that "It is as impossible for a salmon as it is for you or me to tell whether another salmon is a male or female just by looking. For most of their lives they don't care. When the time comes to care the salmon have a way of telling who's who, or rather, who's what. A salmon sidles up to another salmon and quivers. If the other fish quivers in response then it's a male like himself, but if it turns over on its side and begins flapping its tail on the river bottom, then it's a match.") By perhaps courtly convention, the salmon is referred to as "he."

Salmo means "the leaper" (*salire*, to leap); salmon, breasting upstream, do leap over barriers, so great is their urgency. Since earliest times they have been observed doing this; I myself have seen spawning salmon, their aging flesh tattered, old jaw hooked, hurl themselves airward upstream over any impediment. It is a thrilling dance these leapers dance. Izaak Walton, whom Humphrey naturally consults, wrote (as Piscator): "Next, I shall tell you that though they make very hard shift to get out of the fresh Rivers into the Sea, yet they will make harder shift to get out of the salt into the fresh Rivers, to spawn or possesse the pleasures that they have formerly found in them, to which end they will force themselves through *Flood-gates*, or over *Weires*, or *hedges*, or *stops* in the water, even beyond common belief."

Piscator, however, doesn't advocate catching them on the fly, but tells us instead "that which may be called a secret": that "Old Oliver Henly, now with God, a noted fisher both for Trout and Salmon," would take three or four worms and put them in a little box in his pocket; and that in this box — here is the secret — he put a drop or three of the oil of ivy-berries, for anointing the worms. Whether this works the author cannot confirm, though he thinks it probable, and refers his reader to Sir Francis Bacon's Natural History, "where he proves fishes may hear, and, doubtless, can more probably smell." Thus the virtue (odiferous) of the oil of ivy-berries. Oliver Henly, the angler attests, "has been observed, both by others and myself, to catch more fish than I, or any other body that has ever gone a-fishing with him, could do, and especially Salmons."

Piscator's lecture on salmon, by the way, ends in a familiar purse-mouthed tone, in which he describes the markings of trout and salmon when first taken, "the one with such red spots, and the other with such black or blackish spots, as [to] give them such an addition of natural beauty as, I think, was never given to any woman by the artificial paint or patches in which they so much pride themselves in this age."

2. The Flea

Lately, two young persons, friends of mine, announced their wedding-date, a cause of much rejoicing in their circle, for their happiness and for the new hope they gave us all. This sent me to the poetry books for an epithalamium to match their amazed delight in each other. John Donne answers so nicely to this human event.

He was born in 1573 in London, of a Roman Catholic family of good and ancient lineage on both sides; and was educated at home until his eleventh year, when he was sent to the University of Oxford. He spoke French and Latin already. After several years of concentrated study he was invited to receive the first degree, but declined, being unready to swear the required oath of allegiance to the English church. At about age thirteen he transferred to Cambridge, where he remained four years and left without taking the degree, for the same reason as before. He then read law. His father had died, leaving an estate, and his mother continued arranging his education, including instruction in the Roman church; but he professed no allegiance to any faith except (reported Izaak Walton, his biographer) that of a Christian. He entered into serious private study of "the body of Divinity, as it was then controverted betwixt the Reformed and the Roman Church." In his twenties he resolved to travel; entered the service of the Earl of Essex; and spent several years in Italy and Spain, learning the languages and observing the customs of those countries. To his disappointment he was not able to journey to the Holy Land.

Now comes the event that made his life what it was: in service to the Lord Chancellor of England, who treated him as a friend, he met and fell in love with Anne, daughter of Sir George More, then Chancellor of the Garter and Lieutenant of the Tower; and she with him; but her father did not approve. He separated them. They married in secret. This her father would not bear, and he pressed the Lord Chancellor, who was his wife's relation, until he dismissed Donne. More then prosecuted the friend of Donne who had married them, and the brother of that friend, who had stood up for the bride at the ceremony. The three young men went to prison.

A time of unhappiness followed. Then the men were freed; the spouses eventually reunited, and went to live with a generous noble kinsman; and Anne Donne's father became reconciled to the match, and used his influence for Donne's benefit. The love of this husband and wife for each other moved Izaak Walton, though he pointed out that Donne had also thought his marriage the "remarkable error of his life; an error which, though he had a wit able and very apt to maintain paradoxes, yet he was very far from justifying it." Walton believed that Donne would have paid a heavy repentance

"if God had not blessed them with so mutual and cordial affections, as in the midst of their sufferings made their bread of sorrow taste more pleasantly than the banquets of dull and low-spirited people."

Donne did later truthfully swear allegiance to the Church of England and was made a Divine, with a doctorate conferred by Cambridge. He was given numerous livings and, in his fiftieth year, became Dean of St. Paul's. His darling wife had died; seven of their twelve children lived, and he promised them never to marry again (and he did not but remained widowed until his death in 1631). At age fifty-four he was brought down by a dangerous sickness resembling consumption; upon recovery he wrote his Devotions: "a book that may not unfitly be called a Sacred Picture of Spiritual Ecstasies." Izaak Walton does, however, give short shrift to Donne's early poems, being assured, he writes, that Donne himself in his "penitential years" regretted the efforts of his youth, though "it may appear by his choice of metaphors that both nature and all the arts joined to assist him with their utmost skill." But "though he was no friend to them, he was not so fallen out with heavenly poetry, as to forsake that; no, not in his declining age; witnessed then by many divine sonnets, and other high, holy and harmonious composures."

Here is what I would like to say. The Devotions, the Holy Sonnets, even certain Hymns, have given strength and elation to many in hard and soft hours; and a marriage may be seen as an error in opportunistic terms, without being abandoned or, finally, regretted. We can't know from the outside what such an espousal is made of, just as we cannot know the making of a poem. Donne wrote some thrilling love poems, "his sharp wit and high fancy" infusing carnal desire with the highest, gravest, *lightest* intention. And it is wonderful that Izaak Walton, angler, would report the life of John Donne, poet and doctor, with such faith and zeal. I will not draw a conclusion. Walton did not use the dry fly on a salmon, but William Humphrey, who did, consulted him anyway. My Alaskan friend, in his illness, read Donne and Humphrey and, though he could not fish, kept tying flies. I who don't tie flies and don't fish am tickled by a faint echo, an off-rhyme, for when I suggested Donne to the pretty bride, she answered, with ardor: "Read anything by Donne, even 'The Flea'!" And so, I shall read it for them.

KM

THE FLEA
John Donne

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
Thou knowest that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead.
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered, swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we are met
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that self murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and sayest that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now.
'Tis true, then learn how false fears be;
Just so much honor, when thou yieldst to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

&

N. B.: "The Flea" was downloaded from the wonderful, funny site "Incompetech"
<http://www.incompetech.com/authors/donne/flea.html>

> Memory techniques of the kind I have described, using strongly visualised imagery, were invented in the ancient world and became the basis of learning in the Christian Middle Ages, when books were scarce. They were taken for granted, regarded as essential, and developed further by such giants of learning as St Thomas Aquinas, the angelic Doctor of the Catholic Church who has been called the patron saint of memory systems, and who made the unforgettable remark: 'Man cannot understand without images.'
>
> In England in the seventeenth century, the Puritan / Protestant ascendancy of the Civil War made a serious bid to eradicate imagery from all aspects of life – methodically destroying the religious imagery of churches and forbidding the imaginative play of drama. The same spirit also banished from the schools the old-established memory techniques that used 'imagery' and officially replaced them with 'learning by rote'. The discarded methods, dimly associated with paganism and Catholicism, were soon forgotten. If any attempt was made to reintroduce them, they were dismissed as 'tricks' and 'cheating'. 'Learning by rote' became the norm.
>
> Ted Hughes
> "Memorising Poems," THE SCHOOL BAG
> ed. Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes
> London: Faber and Faber, 1997

Several writers and readers, friends of Archipelago, suggest some good books:

Susan Garrett (TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN, Dutton, 1994; MILES TO GO: Aging in Rural Virginia, University Press of Virginia, 1998):

"I marvel at the hours of total delight I spend pouring over a large book called ON THE ART OF FIXING A SHADOW. This is a treasure house of photographs, from the beginnings of photography in 1839, through photography's transformation into art and beyond, to 1989, accompanied by four essays written with penetrating grace by some fine art historians: Sara Greenough, Joel Snyder, David Travis and Colin Westerbeck. Hold this book in your lap and make yourself comfortable, let your eyes travel deep into the magic of Fox Talbot's ordinary scene "The Open Door" (1844), from there to French, British and American photographs of architecture, soldiers and chimney sweeps, bridges and industrial plants (I love Albin Coburn's "Pittsburgh Smoke Stacks" [1910]), street scenes in Paris, London, New York, the wild American West, and the artistic amazement to be found in light on the human body. If your library doesn't have it, beg them to buy it." **ON THE ART OF FIXING A SHADOW, ed. Sarah Greenough, Joel Snyder (National Gallery of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, 1989).**

Elizabeth Benedict (THE JOY OF WRITING SEX, A Guide for Fiction Writers, Story Press, 1998; SLOW DANCING, 1985 and THE BEGINNER'S BOOK OF DREAMS, 1988, Knopf; SAFE CONDUCT, Farrar, Straus & Giroux):

"My favorite definition of fiction is Henry Green's, who said that it should be 'a long intimacy between strangers.' On the scale of intimacy, the three books I've picked are all at the extreme end, and all, it seems, are about nostalgia for lost worlds, or longing for the innocents we were when we got to live in those distant but flawed lands.

"Elizabeth Hardwick's SLEEPLESS NIGHTS is a dreamy yet tightly written burst of what she calls 'backward glancing.' Back at the childhood in Lexington, Kentucky; the flight to intellectual life in New York; the encounters with Billie Holiday; the marriage that is over ('Are you lonely?' a young women asks the divorced narrator. 'Not always,' is her answer.)

What endures for the narrator in this work of what she calls 'transformed and even distorted memory' is her life of reading books, 'all consumed in a sedentary sleeplessness.' The last page of SLEEPLESS NIGHTS is magnificent." **Elizabeth Hardwick, SLEEPLESS NIGHTS (o.p.** but available in used bookstores).

"It's only been in the last few years that James Salter's books have had the wide audience they deserve. My favorite is LIGHTS YEARS, a novel about the slow, quiet disintegration of what seems like a perfect family. Set in the late 1950s and mid-late 1960s, the parents are ex-urban intellectuals and aesthetes and devoted to their two small daughters. They live in a great old Victorian house along the Hudson, among good friends, good books, children's games from another era. 'They lived a Russian life,' Salter writes, 'a rich life, interwoven, in which the misfortune of one, a failure, illness, would stagger them all. It was like a garment, this life. Its beauty was outside, its warmth within.'" **James Salter, LIGHT YEARS (Vintage).**

"THE BOOK OF EBENEZER LE PAGE, by G. B. Edwards, is an oddity and a great literary wonder, written in the beautiful French patois of Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands. It was brought to light by John Fowles, who wrote the forward, after the manuscript was found among the author's papers when he died in 1976. It's set on Guernsey, between the 1890s and the 1960s, from the time of the island's isolation and innocence, to its darkest days when occupied by the Germans – and to its current status as a trendy, 'quaint' vacation spot, which we're as angry about as Ebenezer is, by the time we've spent so much time in his company. He feels intensely about everything and everyone in this deliciously rich novel of longing and love." **G. B. Edwards, THE BOOK OF EBENEZER LePAGE (Moyer Bell Ltd., paper).**

Katherine McNamara (editor of Archipelago; NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH, Mercury House, 1999):

"The Dutch writer Maria Dermoût began this lovely book when she was 67; it must have been in her bones. A mysterious novel, it is centered in a spice garden on an island in the Dutch East Indies. 'The girl was born in the Small Garden and her mother wanted her to be named Felicia. The father agreed, he always agreed to everything. The grandmother did not agree at all. "Happy! You dare to call your little child Happy! How do you know in advance?" / But the mother had insisted.' A book dense with life; humane; to be re-read." **Maria Dermoût, THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS tr. Hans Koningsberger (o.p., but available in used bookshops)**

"Tomboys are fine girls; girls such as Alice Munro described: 'There are times when girls are inspired, when they want the risks to go on and on. They want to be heroines, regardless. They want to take a joke beyond where anybody has ever taken it before. To be careless, dauntless, to create havoc – that was the lost hope of girls.' Christian McEwen, herself a writer, has collected a lively set of tales, essays, reminiscences to hearten any girl, in a time when girls need all the heartening they can get." **JO'S GIRLS ed. Christian McEwen (Beacon Press, 1997)**

"This novel, senselessly out of print, seemed to me essential, from the opening lines: 'One January in the year 1941 a German soldier was out walking in the San Lorenzo district in Rome. He knew precisely 4 words of Italian and of the world he knew little or nothing. His first name was Gunther. His surname is unknown.' He meets a woman who 'stared at him with an absolutely inhuman gaze, is if confronted by the true and recognizable face of horror.' A child is born; the woman, not young or clever, must keep it, and herself, alive in the terrible war-machine of history. This is very great fiction, a necessary book." **Elsa Morante, HISTORY: A NOVEL tr. William Weaver (o.p., but may be found in used bookshops)**

John Casey (THE HALF-LIFE OF HAPPINESS, 1998; SPARTINA, 1989; AMERICAN ROMANCE, 1990; TESTIMONY AND DEMEANOR, 1979, all Knopf):

"Don DeLillo's newest book is the work of art about America that Oliver Stone must have dreamt of in his best dream." **Don DeLillo, UNDERWORLD (Scribner, 1997)**

"Another great American novel, by Russell Banks, about the same length as UNDERWORLD but reaching back to the life of John Brown as remembered – and struggled with – by his son Owen Brown. A great wooden ship of a novel." **Russell Banks, CLOUDSPLITTER (HarperFlamingo, 1998)**

"This book, now out of print, tells the last days of an Irish gentlewoman's full life. An unsentimental but acutely felt and perfect short novel." **Janet Johnston, THE CHRISTMAS TREE (o.p.)**

Robert Kelly (RED ACTIONS; THE TIME OF VOICE, Poems of 1994-1996, pub. 1998, both, Black Sparrow Press. His poem "The Flight of the Crows" appeared in *Archipelago* Vol. 2 No. 3.):

"A hard mosaic of unsentimental precisions from that terrible place and time [Auschwitz]. Sarah Nomberg-Przytyk was a leftist, not a religious Jew at all – and her distance from ordinary Judaism sharpens her glance. A book I find hard to stop reading, and then it hurts so much one puts it down." **Sarah Nomberg-Przytyk, AUSCHWITZ , TRUE TALES FROM A GROTESQUE LAND (UNC Press, Chapel Hill, 1985)**

"After all these years Ellingham's research materials on the life and work of Jack Spicer has been brought into joyous, sympathetic and detailed coherence by the poet Kevin Killian. A study of the most important of the neglected poets of the last half century." **Killian and Ellingham, POET BE WONDERFUL (Wesleyan, 1998)**

"Exciting and seemingly masterful treatise that proposes an important agenda of Dutch painting as (implicitly) a rejection of Italian Renaissance targets; Alpers studies the mapping of everyday reality, and is especially good in bringing forward the work of that great painter Pieter Saenredam, whose work astonished me when I first saw it in Amsterdam." **Svetlana Alpers, THE ART OF DESCRIBING Dutch Painting in the 17th Century. (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983)**

"I hadn't known Woelfli until this book was recommended to me, and I find myself amazed by the man's oeuvre – one carried out in the very same Swiss madhouse in which the writer Robert Walser was confined. Woelfli's work came to the art world (I guess) via 'art brut' and Dubuffet's famous exhibition. Adolf Woelfli's work is powerful indeed, intricate, inveigling. And bears comparison with 'our own' Henry Darger, the Chicago loner who wrote the world's longest novel (REALMS OF THE UNREAL – 15,000+ single-spaced legal pages) and acres of paintings – a kind of *naif* Balthus, and with an almost identical focus on images of the child. Darger's work, as far as I know, is discussed only on the Web, but well worth checking at the several sites." **Elka Spoerri, ADOLF WOELFLI, DRAFTSMAN, WRITER, POET, COMPOSER (Cornell, 1997)**

Interesting Sites and Resources

Independent Presses

Catbird Press <www.catbirdpress.com> publishes, among other notable books, a number by Czech writers in translation, including Jaroslav Seifert, whose THE POEMS OF JAROSLAV SEIFERT is the first large collection of his poems published in America; a garland of these poems appeared in our last issue. A volume of Czech fiction from the "post-Kundera generation," is DAYLIGHT IN NIGHTCLUB INFERNO. Robert Wechsler, publisher of Catbird, has written an interesting book-length essay, WITHOUT A STAGE; THE ART OF LITERARY TRANSLATION; worth reading.

Chelsea Green Publishing Company <www.chelseagreen.com> in White River Junction, Vermont, specializes in books about sustainable living, with selections of environmentally friendly, thoughtful, and hopeful books. GAVIOTAS, A Village to Reinvent the World, by Alan Weisman, received has received much attention. The editor in chief, Jim Schley, wrote us about our conversation with Michael and Cornelia Bessies (*Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 4; Vol. 2, No. 1): "As a younger editor who has every intention of emulating such ... predecessors, I find this conversation to be truly illuminating." This press has high standards.

Columbia University Press <http://www.cc.columbia.edu/cu/cup> puts up a utilitarian site through which their useful catalog of books and reference works, including CD-ROMS, can be ordered. Two noteworthy CD-ROMs are THE COLUMBIA I CHING and THE CLASSIC HUNDRED POEMS; the latter is very expensive, but delightful. William Strachan, the director, speaks about publishing elsewhere in this issue.

The Harvill Press <www.harvill-press.com> publishes, among many estimable authors, Richard Hughes, Richard Ford, and in translation, Anna Maria Ortese (THE LAMENT OF THE LINNET), Ismael Kadare, Javier Marías. Many of their titles are available in the U. S., particularly at independent bookstores. We urge our Readers to look for their books. (Ortese's "Where Time Is Another" appears in this issue.)

The Lilliput Press <http://indigo.ie/~lilliput> is an Irish publisher founded in 1984 by Antony Farrell. Some 150 titles have appeared under its imprint: art and architecture, autobiography and memoir, biography and history, ecology and environmentalism, essays and literary criticism, philosophy, current affairs and popular culture, fiction, drama and poetry – all broadly focused on Irish themes. Since 1985 they have brought out four volumes of the essays of the late Hubert Butler. Hubert Butler's "The Artukovitch File" appears, with their permission, in Archipelago, Vol. 1, No. 2.

McPherson & Co <www.mcphersonco.com> publishes such writers as the fascinating Mary Butts (THE TAVERNER NOVELS), Anna Maria Ortese (A MUSIC BEHIND THE WALL, Selected Stories Vol. 2, just published), and the performance artist Carolee Schneeman. A beautiful story by Ortese, "The Great Street," appeared in our inaugural issue, and the writer's testament, "Where Time Is Another," appears in this issue.

Mercury House <www.wenet.net/~mercury> is a not-for-profit literary press in San Francisco. Members of the staff used to be associated with the respected North Point, before that imprint closed its doors. Alfred Arteaga's HOUSE WITH THE BLUE BED is out now; "Beat," from that volume, appeared in our Vol. 1, No. 3. They are to publish NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH, a non-fiction narrative by Katherine McNamara; a chapter of it appeared in our last issue.

Online Originals <www.onlineoriginals.com> is an internet publisher of literature who take the position, one we find ourselves much in agreement with, that "Conventional book publishing has changed dramatically in recent years. Most of the world's publishers are now owned by a handful of media conglomerates, ruled in turn by their finance and marketing departments. To guarantee high profits, they tend to accept manuscripts only by celebrity writers than authors whose output conforms to the conventional mainstream market. ... We believe that the Internet is the way forward for all kinds of publishing. But for the benefit of our authors, we do not prevent them also publishing printed versions of their works at a later date." They deliver "book-like" texts by e-mail.

Sun & Moon Press <www.sunmoon.com> is a fine, serious, literary press with a long backlist. They publish classics as well as contemporary fiction and poetry; writers and poets such as Arkadii Dragomoschenko (astonishing Russian poet), Paul Celan, Harry Matthews, Djuna Barnes, Paul Auster, Russell Banks. In 1999, they will publish Maria Negroni's LA JAULA BAJO EL TRAPO/CAGE UNDER COVER, tr. Anne Twitty, in a Spanish-English edition; a selection appears elsewhere in this issue.

Fine Arts

Colophon Page <www.colophon.com> and Photo Arts <www.photoarts.com> are two handsome sites devoted to the fine arts. Colophon Page reproduces artists' books, which are displayed in pages as if in a gallery; there is an attendant shop, and review and forum pages. Photo Arts

presents and offers for sale the works of fine-arts photographers and photojournalists. The design and quality of reproduction of these sites are excellent. Read Jeanette Watson's 'Off the Wall,' book reviews by the owner of the now-closed Books & Co., Manhattan, at <http://colophon.com/offthewall>. "The Ancient Jewish Cemetery at the Lido in Venice, On the Photographs of Claire Turyn," hosted by PhotoArts, appeared in our last issue, at <www.archipelago.org/vol2-3/lido.htm>.

Fray <www.fray.com>. Strange. Cool. Heartbreaking. A delight.

Incompetech <http://www.incompetech.com>. We can't quite figure this site out, but we like it very much. They want to publish interesting and good material and have resigned themselves to not making money at it. Laura McLeod does a fine job with her "British Authors" section, from which we downloaded John Donne's "The Flea" for Endnotes, at <http://www.incompetech.com/authors/donne/flea.html>.

Octavo <www.octavo.com> is a digital publisher committed to conserving books, manuscripts, and antiquarian printed materials via digital tools and formats. They make original works available to readers and book lovers through partnerships with libraries, individuals and institutions. As a sample, they offer a PDF download of William Shakespeare Poems. We are always pleased when web publishers use PDF files, as we do for our Download edition.

Literary Reviews

Arts & Letters Daily <http://www.cybereditions.com/aldaily> A portal site organized and selected for intelligent readers, directing us to information about books, authors, and commentary worth reading; nothing flashy or 'entertaining' here, thank goodness.

The Barcelona Review <www.web-show.com/Barcelona/Review>, Jill Adams, Editor. A fine, multi-lingual offering published in Catalonia by a multi-national group. Intelligent editing; interesting reading.

Jacket <http://www.jacket.zip.com.au> was founded and is edited by John Tranter, an interesting Australian poet. "For more than thirty years he has been at the forefront of the new poetry, questioning and extending its procedures," according to his biographical note. His own work has been published widely and deeply; and in this quarterly literary journal he publishes the work of other writers generously.

The Richmond Review <www.demon.co.uk/review/> received approving notice (along with Archipelago) in the *TLS* last year. The founding editor, Steven Kelly, "lives and breathes" literature as an editorial consultant for various English publishers. He set up this site in October 1995, "when it was the UK's first lit mag to appear exclusively on the World Wide Web." Published ten times a year.

Bookstores

Politics and Prose <www.politics-prose.com> is the largest independent bookshop in Washington, D. C., with a full and beautifully-chosen stock-list and a nicely-arranged web site.

The Village Voice Bookshop <www.paris-anglo.com> lives in the heart of Paris, and makes American and English books available to customers on several continents, via phone, fax, post, and e-mail <vvoice@europost.org>. Odile Hellier, the proprietor, is a Contributing Editor of this publication.