An Interview with Thomas Berger

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I met Thomas Berger in 1982 and began a correspondence with him that has continued for thirteen years. In 1989 I suggested we undertake an interview, and he agreed, though cautioning me that "I do interviews *only* in writing." On the surface such an arrangement is without the usual anecdotes—what Berger's house or study looked like, how he was dressed, what books lined the shelves—and naturally there were none of the "usual" surprises. However, surprises, for me at least, came frequently and always promptly in the mail. In response to some queries, he was positively expansive, and others he dispatched briefly, only to be pestered again with the question inelegantly rephrased. I have always found Mr. Berger to be an affable, witty, and pleasant correspondent, and this interview, although a long while in the making, was simply the most recent installment in what I hope is our continuing friendship.

DM: The naming of your characters has fascinated me for some time. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask about some of them. For instance in *Reinhart's Women*, Edy Mullhouse has a father named Edwin. Were you alluding here to Steven Millhauser's novel *Edwin Mullhouse*?

TB: Never, until receiving your letter, had I so much as heard of Steven Millhauser or a novel of his entitled *Edwin Mullhouse*! Extraordinary! Indeed, I had utterly forgotten that I gave Edy's father a name, cannot remember that I mentioned her having a father!

DM: I know you did graduate work on George Orwell; is Georgie Cornell in *Regiment of Women* an anagram of his name?

TB: As to Georgie Cornell's name, again I did not consciously select it with reference to anything other than my need to call the hero something. But of course I do not rule out unconscious influences. Perhaps even in the case of Edwin Mullhouse I had seen the name somewhere, years ago, and unconsciously stored it away.

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DM: I'm also curious about the name Earl Keese, why that particular spelling of his surname?

TB: I was thinking of spelling it "Keyes" but decided on "Keese," so that no one would pronounce it as "Kize," which seemed possible with the other. The irony is that John Belushi delivers it with an emphatic sibilant in the film, so that we hear "Keess." My use of the name, of course, derives from the Edward G. Robinson character in the movie version of *Double Indemnity*. Fred MacMurray uses it again and again as he dictates his confession, if you remember, into Robinson's machine—not, I believe a tape recorder; the era's too early for that; probably the so-called Dictagraph, which recorded onto wax tubes. I'm sure you know the film, one of the all-time greats. Forty years ago, before it was fashionable, my cousin, who's slightly older than I, could recite passages of dialogue from the movies we both saw at least once a week. I can still remember lines from *Gunga Din*, starring Victor McLaglen, Cary Grant, and Doug Fairbanks, Jr., made in about '38, not as they came from the actors, but as my cousin delivered them, mimicking the actors. I don't know the James M. Cain novel of *Double Indemnity*, but I suspect the Robinson character's name is spelled Keyes. I think his desk, in the film, has one of those name boards on it, but I cannot see, in my mind's eye, what's printed on it.

DM: Could you comment in general, then, on your practice of naming characters?

TB: Indeed I am always concerned to find the right names for my imaginary people. Dickens has served as my inspiration in such an effort, though to be sure his names would be somewhat overblown in our era: e.g., Poll Sweedlepipe in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In the twentieth century my favorite is the guy named Klipspringer, in *The Great Gatsby*, who comes to the otherwise deserted mansion after Gatsby's death to look for some tennis shoes he left behind as a houseguest.

DM: Are the names, then, serendipitous or do they actually precede the character to the point that that figure's personality grows out of or around the name?

TB: I think I usually get a character's name at the time he first appears, just as one newly meets a human being. But I do keep a list of names that come to me at other times, and occasionally refer to it when I meet a character who needs naming. On this list, which dates back to the beginning of my career, I find, at random, Ruth Goodge, Dolly McElroy, Mitch Pratt, Lucas Oakum, and Jerry Esposito. I've already used Hunsicker, Teddy Villanova (which I heard on TV), Gus Kruse (a walk-on character in *Vital Parts*), and the name "Babe" for a woman.

DM: I'm curious about the character of Tony Gamble in *Changing the Past*; is he modeled after Frank Sinatra?

TB: Tony Gamble differs from Sinatra as often as he resembles him, but Tony does suggest what might result if all the prominent figures in Sinatra's milieu were compressed into one. The spitting of the half-chewed sandwich into the hands of a long-suffering lackey I stole from a reportorial account of a backstage visit with Jerry Lewis. You were quite right in your review when you said *Changing the Past* is not funny. It wasn't supposed to be. But I have a hard time evading reviewers who insist that whatever I write is a "comic novel."

DM: I'm pleased that my caution that *Changing the Past* is not a comic novel per se met with your approval. However, I still remain curious about your long-standing reluctance to see your works described as comic. Could you explain why you don't see them as such or why you reject that description?

TB: On the subject of whether my work is comic or not, I can only say that my intention is to tell a straightforward story for my own entertainment. Surely there are funny passages, but my purpose is not to inspire laughter except incidentally. What I dislike about being called a "comic novelist" is that reviewers who don't like my books find it too convenient to condemn them for not being funny enough.

DM: Your answer to the above provokes this—when writing do you do so with any sense of audience in mind? Nabokov once said, for instance, that he wrote first for himself, next for his wife, Vera, who typed his manuscripts, and last for a few informed, sympathetic readers.

TB: My sole serious motive for writing is to entertain myself. I rarely think consciously of the audience, and when I do, it's usually to assume that they will probably not get my point. Thus I am always astonished when I read the rare critical piece (like those of yours) that displays an authentic sympathy for my work.

DM: Given your abiding fascination and precision with language, how do you arrive at a voice for your characters—does it precede them or issue from their personae?

TB: As to the characters' peculiar voices: each creates his own as he proceeds, with the possible exception of Jack Crabb. His came to me already fully developed, I don't know how. I simply heard it when I sat down at the typewriter. A couple of people have mentioned my debt to Mark Twain, and no doubt I owe one, but I was not consciously echoing him, and the only book of his I had read within fifteen years of writing *Little Big Man* was *Roughing It*. I *was* consciously influenced by the dialogue of the character called Kit Carson, in Saroyan's play *The Time of Your Life*. One of the colorful personages who frequent the bar therein, this aged coot tells tall tales about the Old West. It would be more precise to say that in his case, as I remember, he promises to tell such stories but either never gets around to them or is brushed off by the other characters when he makes the attempt.

DM: I've been struck by how prolific you've been, especially in the 1980s. After you finish a novel, are you set to move on to another or do you pause and let the well fill up?

TB: While I'm writing one novel I generally have another idea waiting in the wings. When I was younger, it was almost invariably the case that the next one I began after finishing the latest did not work out: that is, the idea might have been okay, but somehow I couldn't live up to it. I think my imagination needed more time between books. But for a while now, I haven't had that trouble but have moved rather easily from one novel to the next. Perhaps that's because I am older and don't have as much time left!

DM: I remember in the interview you did with Richard Schickel when *Neighbors* was published you mentioned that "Harry and Ramona may be better people finally than Keese, despite their outrages, for the reason that they are fundamentally more generous than he." In considering Chuck Burgoyne's relationship with the Graveses in *The Houseguest*, do you consider him a fundamentally better sort than they?

TB: Harry and Ramona are endearing people even though, as my friend Zulfikar Ghose uniquely saw on his first reading, they are Angels of Death. But Chuck Burgoyne is a vile fellow. The Graveses are simply worthless. Lydia is the only decent person in that book.

DM: Do you consider Lydia's position at the end of the novel as similar to, better, or worse than Earl's at the end of *Neighbors*? One can read the ending to the latter in very different ways: for going against his essential nature, Earl winds up killing himself, or at the moment when he is released from his former self, he shuffles off the mortal coil.

TB: At the end of *The Houseguest* she is in quite a different situation from Earl Keese's in *Neighbors*. Earl is done, whereas she's really just beginning adult life. Earl by the way is already dying when his story begins: here and there I mention his high blood pressure, as I recall, but more seriously, he is morally moribund. Harry and Ramona in one sense give him the coup de grace, but, in another, provide him a final twenty-four hours of vivid existence. By the way, I regard *Neighbors* as being, with *Little Big Man*, my best book. It's about Death but is a happy story, all in all.

DM: I agree that Lydia is the central character in *The Houseguest* and that she is clearly superior to the Graveses, Chuck, and the Finches. However, the conclusion seems rather enigmatic to me, for she aspires now to assume the role of houseguest, a role that's been revealed to be rather dubious. How do you see her, especially at the novel's close?

TB: I think that at the conclusion of *The Houseguest*, Lydia is prepared to become a tyrant, though perhaps a more honorable one than Chuck. At least her intentions are better than his, for he is nothing more than a scoundrel. The subject of that novel is power, whereas that of *Neighbors* is dying.

Though in neither case did I arrive at that understanding until the final word was written.

DM: My students are often very concerned about Chuck's rape of Lydia. It seems one of the novel's many unresolved enigmas—Lydia claims he has, Chuck argues he was invited, but our narrator offers no opinion. Do you want to have a say about this?

TB: I suppose you have to say that Chuck rapes Lydia insofar as he doesn't have her consent, but he takes her by deceit and not by force. She really is asleep at the outset. As soon as she is conscious, she throws him out of bed. The situation is really unambiguous. Chuck's saying she invited him is, I believe, the standard self-serving excuse of a certain kind of rapist. I don't want to be pious on this subject: I despise cockteasing, but detest rape. Not that Lydia does any of the former, in my memory.

DM: Whom would you describe as the protagonist or hero of *The Feud*?

TB: The hero of *The Feud* or anyway the central character, though perhaps he's more of a *raisonneur*, is Jack—though I confess to you that I forgot his name completely and had to turn to the book now to get it! By the way, he was omitted entirely from the movie.

DM: Do you have any plans for future additions to the Reinhart saga?

TB: I'd like to write one more Reinhart, about R. as an old man.

DM: At the conclusion of *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*, Russel Wren comments that "Peggy was not . . . serving her novitiate in venery." Could you interpret his remark? The answer seems obvious, but my students, and some very good ones, have interpreted that line in wildly different ways.

TB: All that Russel Wren means when he makes his final comment on Peggy Tumulty is that she is far from being the frigid virgin he has taken her for throughout the narrative.

DM: The unprinted subtitle to *Neighbors* is "A Tale of Harassment." While that certainly refers to the involvements of the characters, doesn't it have other implications, especially for the reader who finds him- or herself trying to find some stable ground in the shifting allegiances and motives of the characters?

TB: I take it you mean *Neighbors* is harassing not only to its characters, but also to its readers. That may be so: my grocer made such a complaint. The effect was not intentional on the author's part: what I so like about *Neighbors* is that in effect it wrote itself. At no point in its composition did I use any ratiocination. I was eager each day to get to the typewriter and see what happened next.

DM: In a class discussion of Harry and Ramona—their mysterious origins, outlandish pranks, threatening gestures, and general unruliness—one of my students said they reminded him of Germanic tribes, the "barbarians" who

would lay siege to a castle, win it, only then to destroy it by fire or some other means, but not inhabit it. He argued that they shunned such places because they believed that to live in them would be to inherit the spirits and values of its predecessors, and they wanted none of that but to cleanse the place of earlier influences. He then wondered whether, since you were of German-American origins, you weren't availing yourself of this bit of cultural lore in creating Harry and Ramona, with their laying siege to Earl's life and castle and burning down the house they briefly claim. Do you have any response to this theory?

TB: Your student's idea that in the case of Harry and Ramona I might have had Teutonic barbarians in mind is intriguing, but I had no such conscious intention. However, who knows whether it might not be valid as to my unconscious inclinations. In preparation for the writing of my first novel, *Crazy in Berlin*, I steeped myself in German lore, going as far back as Tacitus' work on the savage tribes met by the Romans, and no doubt some of this stayed with me.

DM: Ramona seems to me an especially complex and fascinating character. Initially she appears as an importunate temptress, but later, especially in her dealings with young Greavy after the fire, she is a figure of deep intuitive resources and one who possesses a strong, almost moral, force over others. How do you see her?

TB: Yes, Ramona is an extraordinarily wise figure, underneath it all, and so is Harry. Being heterosexual, my bias is in favor of the female, though both of them have godlike attributes. Just about my favorite scene is when Ramona disposes of the younger Greavy, who has been such a terror to Keese. One almost feels sorry for the lout when she's done with him. She also says something great at some point to the effect that "they'll nail you to the wall if your sequences are off."

DM: When writing do you see your work as participating in some critical debate—as a deconstructionist, poststructuralist, or whatever fiction?

TB: As a graduate student at Columbia, forty years ago, I had some interest in critical theory. I have had none whatever in the years since and have successfully kept myself totally ignorant of the -isms you mention.

DM: Another novelist has mentioned to me that he felt any writer has a finite number of deeply held ideas to which he or she returns frequently. Without being hopelessly reductive, can you share some of those you are consciously aware of?

TB: I am not aware of having any deeply held ideas to which I return frequently in my fiction, though no doubt critics could find some: that's their job, not mine.

DM: In various critical analyses of your work, writers have noted influences of existential thought. Have you been influenced by the existentialists, and

if so, could you comment on that influence? Also along the same lines, I have noticed lately that your works (*Being Invisible*, *The Houseguest*, and *Changing the Past*) have been referred to as modern "morality" tales. Do you agree, especially given your aversion to Shaw and to instructing anyone about anything?

TB: I have no conscious philosophical intent in my novels. Nor do I preach morality, though I am interested almost exclusively in moral situations.

DM: But surely there are at least echoes of existentialism in your works. I see it over and over again, particularly in *Being Invisible*, but by no means in this one novel. Is this an intellectual influence, and do you see it figuring in this novel?

TB: I always thought that the Indian parts of *Little Big Man* are existential, and got a chance to say so in an interview published in a Parisian newspaper at the time the French translation was published! What I did not say, however, was that I always despised Sartre and had not read much of Jaspers and none of Heidegger. Martin Buber would be my influence, if there was one.

DM: Do you, then, agree with John Carlos Rowe's contention that *Neighbors* and subsequent novels amount to a rejection of existential humanism?

TB: Perhaps. In any event, I am fascinated by Rowe's essay.

DM: Could you explain? Are you ambivalent, uncertain, or still deciding? I would assume that the influence of Nietzsche is profound enough that you have some strong opinions about existentialism one way or another.

TB: My only own philosophy is an amalgam of Nietzsche and Simone Weil, who may superficially be seen as impossibly divergent but come together in a stern *amor fati*: one must "not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it . . . but *love it*" (Nietzsche). "I saw it [the love of fate] as a duty we cannot fail in without dishonoring ourselves" (Weil). But my conscious purpose in writing novels is not to promote my beliefs or even to suggest or reflect upon them: it is rather, as I have continued to insist, only to amuse myself. Therefore I can say "perhaps" to almost any reasonable interpretation.

DM: What role does setting or landscape have in your works? I ask because it seems to me that setting in so many of your novels—*Regiment of Women*, *Sneaky People*, *Neighbors*, *The Feud*, *The Houseguest*, to name just a few—is of major importance. These aren't simply convenient locations for activities; in my view they are as strong a narrative force as the characters themselves. How do you see the role of setting in your fictions?

TB: The setting of a novel is indeed often important to me, but usually I'm not aware of that until I get well into the narrative. Just as the characters begin as formless blobs and sketch themselves in by what they say, the physical situation gradually reveals itself, just as it does in life when one

moves into a new house, a new town, a new country. I never have even a mental floor plan until I am far into the narrative. When Keese goes downstairs for the first time, what he sees was news to me: I hadn't known of the shower there, for example. Outside, I hadn't been aware of the swampy area next to the house until Harry's car sank into it. And so on.

DM: I know that you have a high regard for Vladimir Nabokov, and in rereading *Little Big Man* I was struck by the character Snell who writes the insane and self-serving introduction and epilogue. Were characters like Nabokov's John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., in *Lolita* and Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire* any inspiration—conscious or otherwise—for Snell? Brooks Landon, in his introduction to the most recent edition of the novel, mentions Nabokov.

TB: Indeed I was, and am, an admirer of Nabokov. Perhaps I was influenced by John Ray, Jr.'s foreword to *Lolita* when writing the one signed by Ralph Fielding Snell, but if so, I was not thinking consciously of it. I needed another voice than Jack Crabb's to make some acknowledgment of recorded history, in which despite Crabb's claims to have participated in and survived the Last Stand (and to have known most of the celebrated figures of the Old West), there is no reference whatever to this person. Snell serves to make such a point, but he is otherwise a pompous ass.

DM: Could you expand on a remark in a letter to Zulfikar Ghose in which you write, "My recent [Dec. 1977] books mean little if taken literally: the meaning disappears if the text is unravelled."

TB: What I meant in my 1977 comment to Ghose was that if *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* and even *Arthur Rex* were synopsized, abstracted, or paraphrased, they would be meaningless: the text is the meaning and the meaning is the text. To some degree that's true of all of my books, which is why throughout my career, I have paid little attention to editors, who are by nature without interest in words.

DM: I'm also curious about another remark in which you say, "plot is something I have never given ten seconds' thought to throughout my career. Such plots as I use have developed organically, as it were, from the style." There is a similar technique I find in many of your novels, a movement between the actions of various characters and suspensions in time and focus. Does this shifting and pausing have any thematic connection? (For instance, the nature of "reality" which in your works is *never* linear but fractured and truncated. By the way, this also reminds me very much of the practice of many eighteenth-century novelists who delight in the episodic, often simply for its own sake, such as Defoe, Fielding, Smollett.)

TB: I never consciously make fictional plots because to do so would be to stifle that which is natural and organic and replace it with dead artifice. When a work of mine goes well, the Muse steps in and writes it for me, and being a lazy fellow with limited talent, I welcome this process. I never

know what's coming next, nor which characters, which is why writing fiction has always been so exciting for me. Yes, Smollett is one of my favorites, all of whose principal novels I read at the outset of my career. I think you are shrewd in finding his scent here and there in my forest.

DM: Why in the early seventies were you more enthusiastic about drama than fiction and do you still write plays? Are there any plans for the plays to be collected and published; I've never seen them in print.

TB: A play of mine called *The Burglars* was published in *New Letters* a few years ago (along with an interview full of typos, one of which criminally misrepresents me as making a libelous pun to the effect that too many "crooks" spoiled the pot of the *Neighbors* movie!). And one act of *Other People* appeared in a paperback book-magazine, published by the Literary Guild under the title, *Works in Progress*, 1972. *Other People* was performed for the first two weeks of the season of 1970 at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in western Massachusetts. Despite the prestige of that event, the producers were unable to raise the money for a Broadway production, and that was the end of my career as a playwright, though I wrote two other plays in quick succession during the same era. I enjoyed my brief experience in the theater, but I am fundamentally a writer of fiction, in which I'm not dependent on anyone else to realize a work. Writing a play, unless it's intended to be kept in the closet (which surely must have been the case with some of the plays written in the nineteenth century by people like Shelley), is only the first phase: it's not a complete work until it's performed.

DM: I'm also curious about your use of various structures or subgenres of the novel—detective story, utopian novel, knightly romance, futuristic fiction, the Oresteian saga. I know you have said that these spring from your appreciation of these forms, but is there another provocation—whom you are reading at the moment, an opportunity for a stylistic challenge, or perhaps a thematic exploration?

TB: As to why I've tried my hand at various genres of fiction, when I admire and enjoy something I am generally inclined to try my hand at it: e.g., after years of pursuing my interest in food exclusively by eating it, it occurred to me that I should learn to cook, and I did so. I always loved the way sports cars look, and arrived at a point at which I wanted to own and drive one. Being about forty at the time, I thought it too late to think about a career in competition driving (though I may have been wrong about that: whenever Paul Newman began, he is still racing, and he's my age), but I had a lot of pleasure on public roads with an E-Type Jaguar and other high-performance machinery, especially when I lived in then speed-limitless England. I have always enjoyed tales of crime, Westerns (though curiously enough, not in print but rather on film: the only Western novel I think I ever read was Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* as a boy and didn't care for it), the Arthurian legends, and so on. I have never cared for space operas

or horror stories and avoid both if I can: you will notice that I have written no novels with any reference to any venue but Earth and none that features haunted houses, the residents of ancient Indian burial grounds, or malignant wraiths. (Though I admit to having produced a piece of short fiction in 1988 for *Playboy* entitled "Planet of the Losers," in which some inept visitors from space land in an American field, and an attempt at a ghost story, many years ago, which went unpublished, so I can't be too self-righteous. But I don't quite know why I wrote those things, because I despise the genres.)

DM: You dedicated *Changing the Past* to Ralph Ellison, and for some time I've been curious about your selection of the surname "Reinhart." Is there any connection with Ellison's Rinehart (different spelling I realize)? Both characters are chameleons in a sense, ever-changing figures who wander through their worlds. Where Ellison's is threatening, even an incarnation of evil, yours is far more benign, even benighted. Would you care to comment?

TB: Though Ralph Ellison was a friend to my work early in my career and though I was and am a great admirer of *Invisible Man*, I did not (consciously, anyway) lift the name Reinhart from his character Rinehart. I chose the name because, as I say somewhere in *Crazy*, the meaning of the German original is Pureheart. Also, about one of every ten persons in the town where I grew up had that name in one or another spelling: e.g., the chap to whom I dedicated *The Feud*, one Mick Mooney, had a mother maiden-named Reinhart.

DM: A detail in *Sneaky People* occasions, this next question—Laverne's makeshift version of Roman Catholicism and penance. I may have asked you once if you were Catholic (and I believe you said no), but a number of Catholics appear in your books. Can you explain this; have you studied or been influenced by Catholicism?

TB: No, I haven't ever been a Catholic, but I was raised among Catholics and several of the girls and women with whom I have been close were of that persuasion. Most of the rest of my associations, with only a few exceptions, have been with Jews, and I'm not Jewish, either. I am usually interested in the other and not the same.

DM: I'm curious what provoked you to return in *Nowhere* to the character of Russel Wren.

TB: Russel Wren simply seemed the appropriate fellow to send to *Nowhere*. I first thought of a Utopian novel of which Reinhart was the hero, but that seemed too far-fetched.

DM: In deciding on the utopian genre for *Nowhere*, were you writing with any particular examples or models in mind? Were you responding, obviously in the twentieth century, to the work of specific writers from other eras?

TB: I had read many of the familiar treatments of the theme, More, Butler, Bellamy, and the others, including a (at least to me) lesser-known example

by my fellow Ohioan William Dean Howells, but I don't remember thinking of any of them when writing my own. This is as appropriate a place as can be found to confess that *Nowhere* satisfies me least of any of my novels. Mind you, I should not have published it at all had I considered it unworthy of me—more than once I have discarded huge fragments of works—in progress and on one occasion the manuscript of a complete book of more than four hundred pages—but in this case I think I was a bit too impatient to complete the project and so fulfill a legal obligation to a publishing firm at which a great friend to my work had been replaced by an enemy, who nevertheless, presumably so as to do me as much damage as possible, would not release me from the contract. Without such a distraction I might have been more patient and remembered at the outset I had hoped Russel Wren would enter into a romance with a desirable young woman in San Sebastian and thus provide some relief from the prevailing didacticism. I should also say that *Nowhere* as it stands displays some of the things I do best, though again I leave it up to others to say just what they might be.

DM: One critic of your work has argued that a reader can deduce *you* from evidence in the fictions. How do you feel about such a proposition?

TB: Since receiving a photocopy of the essay to which you refer, sent me five or six years ago by someone who unaccountably admired it, I have made almost annual efforts to penetrate the ungodly jargon in which it is couched, but have failed to the degree that I cannot so much as recognize the *Muttersprache* from which it is derived—except to rule out English. As I therefore have been unable to identify the answer this practitioner gives to the question he asks of himself (surely the ultimate authority), "Who Is Thomas Berger?" it may well be that I lack the credentials that would empower me to dismiss him out of hand when, for all I know, the mystery may well have been solved, only to be concealed anew, this time under a compost pile of critical gibberish. . . . But given his example, why should I be restrained by ignorance?

Borrowing from Pound and then Proust (*Contre Sainte-Beuve*), I might say my Penelope is Flaubert, with whom I agree that the "writer's life is centered in his work, and that the remainder exists only 'to provide an illusion to describe.' " This statement might be taken by our commentator to justify his effort, which would be okay by me could I recognize anything of myself in the trivialities accessible to translation: for example, the "fear of Otherness" that he ascribes to the puppet he scissors from the whole cloth, stuffs with his own delusions, and calls "Berger."

DM: More specifically, I'm interested in this man's conclusion that evidence in your novels suggests homophobia on your part. Would you care to address this contention?

TB: Obviously I cannot comment on the sexual preoccupations of our critic, but I can aver, with the authority of experience, that American young men

of the working and lower-middle classes (from which I take my own origin), in military and civilian life, consistently manifested, during the eras in which the earlier Reinhart books were set, what might seem to the sheltered spirit an obsession with heterosexual virility. Now, this might be seen as fustian (concealing a latent attraction to sexual inversion), fascist (lording it over those who, like the rest of us, had no alternative to being what we are), or farcical (and often unfunnily cruel)—or as having no significance whatever—but that's the way it was. The most popular form of jocular spoken abuse in every Army outfit with which I ever served, from Denver to Berlin, heard incessantly, was "queer" or one of its variants. That this is still the case half a century later, at least with the civilian equivalents of my wartime comrades, was confirmed for me by the banter exchanged by the score of carpenters, plumbers, electricians, et al., who renovated my house last fall. Indeed, it was sometimes even true of the homosexual man (and his visiting friends) with whom my wife and I shared a home during the period in which I wrote one of the novels desperately ransacked by our scholar for evidence that I hysterically fear homosexuals. Perhaps the hysteria, if such there be, is not mine. It might be stretching a point (despite my admiration for Balzac, Gissing, Norris, and Dreiser) to call me a realist, but I do strive for sociological authenticity.

Now, in a passage in *Vital Parts*, Reinhart in his own fashion makes much the same point as I do above, and our *Besserwisser* even quotes it on one of his endless pages—only, as usual, to provide an interpretation that is at once fatuous and laden.

DM: Elsewhere in that article, in discussing your style, the writer comments, "whatever else Berger's fiction achieves, it is rarely delicate inflections. Indeed, as an instrument of discrimination and nuance, Berger's style often seems remarkably blunt, even awkward." Would you care to comment on this assessment?

TB: It is axiomatic that one cannot speak of one's own delicacy with a straight face, and it should be apparent to anybody who is guided by reason that I would wear a smirk when I predicted to the *New York Times Book Review* that the "tin-eared will fail to hear the delicate inflections" of the language of *The Feud*. To which our ponderously disingenuous commentator responds, "At the risk of joining the ranks of the tin-eared, I have to say . . . ," etc., and proceeds to display a pair of the very metallic auricular organs of which I spoke, legitimizing the jest.

Yet I would myself be less than candid were I to say, that late in the game, I was surprised to see the trap close on his foot: by then I had long since understood that this disquisition had very little to do with either my work or me, both of which are simply (or elaborately) used as pretexts for an extended exercise in self-regard.

DM: I'm curious about something you just mentioned about writers you

admire, and you include Norris. What do you like about him? Today his standing among academics is not especially high, though I have always admired and taught *McTeague*.

TB: *McTeague* is of course Norris's masterpiece, to which, by the way, I pay tribute in *Little Big Man*: at one point when McTeague is boarding a train at some remote railway station, an Indian comes up to him and hands him a "filthy, crumpled letter . . . to the effect that the buck Big Jim was a good Indian and deserving of charity; the signature was illegible." McTeague returns the letter without a vocal response, and neither does the Indian speak. The latter "did not move from his position, and fully five minutes afterward, when the slow-moving freight was miles away, the dentist looked back and saw him still standing motionless between the rails, a forlorn and solitary point of red, lost in the immensity of the surrounding white blur of the desert." The book would be great if only for that brief passage. In any event, Old Lodge Skins presents such a letter to the wagon train at the beginning of *Little Big Man*, a moment stolen from Norris. But *McTeague* is not his only triumph. Anyone living in the Bay Area should know the excellent portrait of San Francisco as given in *Vandover and the Brute*, space for which on one's shelf should be made by discarding Kerouac's drivel. And every Californian should know *The Octopus*, and any American *The Pit*, a rare example in serious fiction of dealing with finance, in this case the commodities market in Chicago: scarcely an attractive subject on the face of it, but Norris is an artist of the Balzacian breed. He was also, as this alas all too short list displays, remarkably versatile. His death was a great loss to American literature. Californians, so often the object of Eastern cultural scorn, can show in Norris a writer who can hold his own in any company. He is by the way somewhat less melodramatic than Dickens and less sentimental, but the great ones like Norris and Dickens sometimes employ such effects for their own good reasons, which in both cases are good enough for me.

DM: I'm also curious about your remarks about Goethe. What significance does *Wilhelm Meister* have for you?

TB: My particular memories of *Wilhelm Meister* are very vague indeed after forty-three years: I have never returned to it since reading Thomas Carlyle's translation, except for looking up from time to time, the New Melusina episode in the *Wanderjahre* in which incidentally is to be found one of my favorite passages in literature, the tale of the so-called New Melusina, in which a chap marries a beautiful girl who is secretly one of the tiny people but can magically transform herself at times into a person of normal size. When she in effect runs out of steam, however, she becomes minuscule, a state in which her husband first discovers her when, taking a nighttime journey in a stagecoach, he sees a little shaft of light issuing from a valise she has packed, applies his eye to it, and sees within a tiny drawing room containing a even smaller wife, sitting before a blazing fireplace! The memory

of this scene has so delighted me throughout the forty years since I first read Goethe's novel that I conclude, but only now, that I should do an updated version thereof.

From the *Lehrjahre*, the mysterious circus child Mignon also comes to mind, and of course the marvelous lyrics, famous in German literature but like so much of Goethe altogether ineloquent in English and therefore to be sought out in the original: "Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn" (Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom); "Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen aß" (Who has never eaten his bread with tears); "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" (Only those who know what longing is), and others. By the way, the melody to which that third one has been put is, or was, well known. As to my general feeling about the novel, it was and is much like yours, that here is something unique. Goethe always contains multitudes, and one is enriched by every exposure to him, but he is perhaps the most mysterious of the Olympians, at least to those outside German language and culture. He is by the way, like Nietzsche and so many of the greatest German cultural figures, nothing at all like what non-Germans believe Germans to be.

DM: Could you explain how you see the theme of time in *Killing Time*?

TB: My memory of the novel is confused with that of the real-life case which it follows quite closely—or rather I should say it follows the accounts I read of the murders—and, as I recall, the human killer, the predecessor of the fictional creation, had a theory of time to which I helped myself and perhaps subsequently elaborated upon. To answer your question responsibly, I should have to reread both my version and the source material, and while the latter task would merely be tiresome by now, the former would be unbearable. I never return to the scene of any of my own crimes.

DM: Yes, but the theme of time is a persistent concern of yours, and in *Meeting Evil* references to time abound. How conscious is your treatment of this theme and could you comment on your treatment of the theme in this novel.

TB: My treatment of time is rarely conscious—I cannot remember any example of it except for a sentence in *Crazy in Berlin*, where (if memory serves) a twenty-one-year-old Reinhart speculates briefly on where *his* time has gone. But it is true that in life I am obsessed with time, and all the more so when I reflect that as each year ends I have one less.

DM: If you could stand back for a moment and take a somewhat Olympian view, how would you describe the development of your career as a writer? What changes, developments, emphases do you detect over time?

TB: Over the decades my style has become leaner than it was at the outset. Not leaner and meaner, however, for with age my authorial voice has grown sweeter—while as a person I have become less generous with the years. As to what other changes have taken place, I could not say without resorting to the kind of fakery I deplore. I write not as I wish but as I must.

DM: Since I've got you taking the long view, can you comment on who or what provoked you to write fiction?

TB: As a child I always loved to read and exercise my imagination. I have a vague memory of wanting to grow up to be a foreign correspondent, but that had to do almost entirely with wearing a trenchcoat, and I think that before I got too old I understood the difference between journalism and fiction and came to prefer the latter as being more likely to serve the truth: I mean of course, using Pascal's distinction, the truth of the heart and not that of the reason, which is to say the serious truth as opposed to that of expediency and vulgarity. I regard myself as a teller of tales that are intended primarily to enchant or at least entertain myself. Only by living in the imagination can I successfully pretend I am a human being.

DM: I'm also struck by a rather consistent technique in your novels—plots develop quietly around a small mystery (which the reader may not initially see as mysterious) that is solved in a surprise or twist revelation later. For instance, Naomi Sandifer's surreptitious career as writer of erotica, Bobby Beeler's affair with Harvey Yelton, the question of Peggy Tumulty's virginity, Amelia's exact relationship with Jack Crabb, etc.

TB: Yes, and those things are as mysterious to me as they are to my characters. Almost all the principal personae in a novel of mine—with the exception of *Arthur Rex*—have appeared by accident. I generally, though not always, have my hero at the start. I climb into his skin as if it were a suit of clothes, and from there on, what occurs is revealed to me, particular by particular, by what is said. But you protest, *"What is said? Aren't you doing the saying?"* Perhaps that is true (for there is no Muse of fiction), but when things are going well, my imagination performs so independently of my self that I can seldom get a word in edgewise. When things go badly it is because my imagination refuses to proceed on its own and I am forced consciously to manipulate matters: the result lacks spirit, life, art, and, to me, sense. I have written and subsequently discarded perhaps a thousand such pages.

DM: It seems to me the sense of mystery extends even further. In almost every novel, the protagonist is someone not only on the outs with the world about him but someone who feels that he's alone in this condition, that others know how things work and where everything is headed (young Ralph Sandifer and Tony Beeler, Jack Crabb, Russel Wren [in each book], Walter Hunsicker, Earl Keese, et al.). Could you comment on this?

TB: I see, with the greatest discomfort, that you have violated the cardinal rule of the critic and arrived at a truth to which the author of the work under examination could honestly assent. This is so rare a phenomenon that

I need a moment in which to compose myself. . . . To resume, in saying that my typical "protagonist is someone not only on the outs with the world about him but someone who feels that he's alone in this condition, that others know how things work and where everything is headed," you have not only hit the nail on the head with respect to Reinhart, Jack Crabb, Earl Keese, Russel Wren, and all the others, but you have identified my own secret as well. In that sense, and that sense only, I can borrow Goethe's statement to the effect that each of his works is a fragment of a great confession.

DM: Ken Phipps in the short story "Gibberish" would appear to be an exception to this rule. He begins in confusion and isolation, is unexpectedly catapulted into a position of esteem, apparent honor and comradeship, only to be undone by the very powers that have launched him just a few hours before. How do you see Phipps and his relationship to other of your protagonists?

TB: Ken Phipps is an example of what happens when my typical protagonist does finally acquire "esteem, apparent honor and comradeship": he displays what Zeus sees as hubris and is soon struck down by a divine emissary.

DM: In one interview you comment that "I write each novel in a trance that is peculiar to that book alone." Could you expand on that statement; for instance, is there anything in particular that can provoke or stimulate that trance? Does music, another artistic medium, in short anything act as a stimulus?

TB: I get into the trance only after writing for a while. Indeed, the only way I know that I am serious about a piece of work is when I reach the point that it begins to write itself. This might take a chapter or two. *Neighbors* was an exception. From the first sentence on, it was like automatic writing: I never consciously thought about it at all, but would rush to the typewriter each morning, eager to see what would happen next. Yet I remember a review that called the novel "contrived." This is yet another example of why I take very few reviews seriously—including many that praise my work!

DM: At another point you remark, "real life is unbearable to me unless I can escape from it into fiction." Do you still feel this way (perhaps even more intensely so) fifteen years later?

TB: Indeed I do.

DM: You reveal that you often abandon projects because of their unsuitability. Do you throw whole manuscripts away or store them, like *Nowhere*, to sometime resuscitate them months or years later?

TB: Usually I destroy them altogether.

DM: In speaking of dedication to your art you answer, "devotion to one's work is greatly sustaining, but one must be prepared to become a monster." Could you comment further, especially in what sense(s) one must become a monster?

TB: I think it's monstrous to live most intensely in make-believe. It's probably only one step from the madhouse, two from blowing out one's brains. Except for a handful of sublime moments, my most vivid memories concern that which never happened except in the imagination. But I confess this neither as apology or excuse.

DM: There you also mention that *Neighbors* is your tribute to Kafka; more specifically, in what sense did you mean that (in the novel's unpredictability and constantly fluid shifts in motive and action)?

TB: What has always struck me most forcefully in Kafka is the hero's being not only totally without power but also having not even a vague idea of what's happening to him, yet trying with all his strength to maintain his standards nevertheless: just because the effort is hopeless, utterly doomed, is not an acceptable reason for quitting, even if he knew to quit, which he doesn't, but that doesn't matter, because he wouldn't!

DM: Are you familiar with Samuel Beckett's fiction, and if so, would you comment on your estimation of his art?

TB: Yes, I have read Beckett's major novels, and have seen several of his principal plays, and except for a split-second or two in *Godot*, have been bored to the point of suffocation and could identify nothing of merit anywhere in those of his works to which I have been exposed. In view of the world's regard for him, I can only believe the fault is mine. I also find Whitman unbearable but am willing to concede nevertheless that he is a great poet. I confess that my trouble with Beckett is that he—I should really say not he (since I am in sympathy with what I know of the man)—but rather the authorial voice one hears in his works: to me it has always seemed, simply, demented. Make of that what you will; I think I remember that you admire him greatly.

DM: I'm curious how versed you are in various myths of the trickster figure? There is, of course, Hermes in Greek mythology, but worldwide the trickster is a common figure.

TB: I don't think I'm well versed at all in that area. Aside from the abridged *Golden Bough*, I've read very little in anthropology, except that which concerns American Indians, and not much in mythology beyond the Greek, Roman, and Norse. I have however been interested in the rogue as he appears in European literature.

DM: In all the reading you did about Native Americans, how much concerned itself with Indian mythology? More specifically, are you familiar with trickster cycles in these mythologies? Are you familiar with Paul Radin's classic study of the trickster in Winnebago myths?

TB: Not much, as I remember from almost three decades ago. I don't know Radin's work. My source for Cheyenne ways was principally the work of Grinnell.

DM: If you are familiar with any of these, were you consciously working with them in writing any of these novels? I vaguely remember in Thomas Edwards's review of *Neighbors* his mentioning some Norse or Scandinavian myth; I always thought this was far-fetched, though the figure of Loki is a prominent one in Norse mythology.

TB: I had no such thing in mind when writing the book. Having said which, I remember being fascinated with the milieu of Loki, Thor, Wotan/Odin as a child, which I read about in books written for children, and then reencountering it as a young man in the Wagnerian operas.

DM: At one point in another interview, while discussing *Arthur Rex*, you mention that Merlin's prophecy ("Saturn shall rain malignity upon the earth and destroy all humankind as with a crooked scythe") "was right on the money and that everything we do nowadays is posthumous." Could you expand on the latter statement, especially with regard to the idea that all today is done posthumously?

TB: I'm afraid that any attempt of mine to expatiate on such a wisecrack would vitiate whatever point it has. But I have asked it from time to time in my passage through life: what if this is really death?

DM: With the various uncollected short stories and plays you've written, are there any plans to collect these, shortly or in good time, for book publication? Do you have any desire to do this or see it done?

TB: I have published fewer than a dozen stories (and the two that were not published have been destroyed: they were rejected with good reason). I think I should probably write several more before putting a collection together. As to the plays, I suspect they will be unpublished as all but one have gone unperformed. Scholars and teachers, who work for fixed wages, are sometimes not aware of how the public career of a professional free-lance writer is affected by commercial considerations. Collections of plays, even those that have won prizes and filled theaters, rarely sell well, and thus not many such are published.

DM: I've noticed a trend recently for reviewers to denounce what they regard as your misanthropy. Would you care to respond to this evaluation?

TB: As to my recent reviewers: for some reason several of them have been sour, in what would seem an obeisance to trashy and simpleminded trends that will inevitably be out of fashion within a decade—yet at their worst theirs are superior to many of the reviews my earliest novels received, including *Little Big Man*.

DM: A couple critics have quoted Splendor Mainwaring from *Reinhart in Love* when he says, "The truth of life is that things are exactly as they appear, and symbols are the bunk." Do you agree with Splendor's acceptance that appearances and essences are so easily joined?

TB: I probably agree more with Splendor than I disagree. I think the interpretations of symbols has some validity, and it is usually an amusing exercise, but by sticking to appearances alone you'll be right at least more than half the time: better odds than most available to mortals.

DM: A number of critics have also cited Melville as either an influence or a writer with whom to compare you, and you have occasionally mentioned him in interviews. Would you like to expand on your estimation of him?

TB: I worship Melville and am lighted by his refulgence, of course, as I am by that of Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, and the other greatest masters, but it is difficult to say whether his work has influenced me in a particular way. If it has so done, then the immediately influential works would be some of the tales and shorter novels, "Bartleby," "Benito Cereno," and *Billy Budd*, with their moral complexity and *Israel Potter*, with its amalgam of history and fiction. Frederick Turner, in an early essay, shrewdly discerned the connection between the last-named and *Little Big Man*.

DM: Do you agree with one critic's assertion that Reinhart in *Reinhart in Love* believes that "social life offers a satisfying pattern for working out human destiny." Do you see social life in those terms?

TB: Though I suffer from a distaste for organized religion (while nevertheless finding it preferable to collectivist political movements), I am not an atheist. I do not therefore see social life as being sufficient to determine destiny. If Reinhart does, and he may, then so much the worse for him. But in the last of *Oedipus Rex* we are told that a human life cannot properly be assessed until it is over. When last seen, Reinhart was only in his fifties. Perhaps he has time to widen his horizons.

DM: On the surface Joe Detweiler and Richie in *Meeting Evil* seem to have a great deal in common; how do you see these two; do you see significant similarities or differences between them?

TB: To me, Joe Detweiler and Richie have little in common, their respective moralities being utterly opposed. Detweiler is benevolent in intent, whereas Richie is altogether malignant. Detweiler as I remember is the only character in *Killing Time* who has any values, and his are demented—at any rate, it was my intention so to present him. Richie on the other hand is pestilential, without a redeeming feature. The matter of *Meeting Evil* is concerned almost exclusively with how long it will take John Felton, a decent man of mediocre gifts and few attainments, to recognize, first, that Richie must be destroyed and, second, that the job must be done by him, John, with no help from anyone else. I have no sympathy for Richie as he is presented in this book, and in life I keep a double, twelve-gauge insurance policy against an invasion

by him or his growing tribe. On a Detweiler, however, I should probably trustingly turn my back—and perhaps get zapped when his mood changed without warning. But until then he would be rather likable.

DM: There is a Thomas Berger who has written a British children's book, *Stan Bolivan and the Dragon*; this is not you, I assume.

TB: No, the British children's book author T. Berger is not I. There is also a Canadian Thomas Berger who is an anthropologist. Brooks Landon once sent me a Canadian sci-fi comic book in which the writer of the text said he was influenced by TB. Landon assumed I was the one referred to, and therefore so did I—and was so intrigued I wrote to ask the guy how he had been so influenced. I never received an answer. Only later on did I hear elsewhere of the anthropologist Berger, obviously the one referred to, being himself a Canadian. Very embarrassing. And the worst of it is I do not care at all for science fiction!

DM: Do you agree with the critic who says, "Even Berger's most frivolous games are signals to indicate that this wonderfully articulate novelist *does not trust language*"? This is certainly true of Detweiler, but is it of you?

TB: Yes.

DM: Is your lack of trust with others and their uses of language, with its cavalier use in the world and our quotidian experiences, or with your own uses as a writer whose primary and cherished medium is language?

TB: Language is untrustworthy by its very nature. The names for an apple (*apple, Apfel, mela, manzana,* etc.) are not the fruit itself, and the difference must always be remembered, even when eating one's own words.

DM: Still another critic states that you are a writer of "stringent moral parables." We've discussed your concern with moral issues, but do you see yourself as a writer of parables?

TB: I think I could reasonably be called such.

DM: Would you characterize yourself in that way; how strongly do you feel about that label?

TB: I am happy to be called a moralist, which by the way does not conflict at all with my stated intention of writing only to amuse myself. What amuses me are tales of moral significance: my own are always personal inventions, even when I use history or established legend, but hardly ever self-regarding.

DM: Could you give me a chronology of composition for the plays. *Other People* was begun in 1969, and, I take it, worked on for some time. What about the other two; I assume the early 1970s, and then *The Burglars* sometime around 1986 or 1987? When did the last appear in *New Letters*?

TB: *Other People* was written in 1969 and revised, during rehearsals and in between performances and then once again during the months after the Stockbridge run, in 1970. *Rex, Rita, and Roger* was written in 1970, and *The Siamese Twins* in 1971, as I remember. Throughout some of 1971 I also worked on certain plays that were never completed. One of these concerned a restaurant that began as a beanery in Act I and, through the succeeding acts and generations of characters, rose to be a temple of gastronomy frequented by epicures. Another was to be about a famous showman, but while writing the early scenes I realized that what it needed was music. I have no such talent myself and was not quite sure how to get hold of the right kind of composer, so put it aside. So somebody else (who really knew what he was doing) later brought Barnum to Broadway. *The Burglars* was written, probably, in 1987 and was published in *New Letters*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Fall 1988.

DM: Written some ten years or so before novels like *Neighbors*, *The Houseguest*, and *Meeting Evil*, your plays seem clearly prophetic of the turn your fiction would later take. As you look at them now, were the plays in the 1970s warm-up exercises for later novels; did you feel freer to let your imagination run wild in ways that it might not in fiction?

TB: Perhaps the plays were forerunners of the novels to come, now that you mention it, but to me they were primarily an opportunity to write entirely in dialogue, then my favorite of the modes of narrative expression. No doubt I could, following the examples of Thomas Love Peacock, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and one of my favorite novelists, Henry Green, have written some mostly- or all-dialogue fiction, but I wanted to set up a proper stage in my imagination, with exits and entrances in rooms of three walls and a curtain to drop from a proscenium arch. Which is to say I doted on the stylizations and mechanics of playmaking.

DM: Brooks Landon concludes his book on you by discussing the influence of Nietzsche, and we've touched on him in this interview. Could you comment on what his works have meant to you?

TB: I have not joined Landon in looking for Nietzsche's influence on my novels, though that doesn't mean it is not there: it means only that the matter is the critic's business and not mine. In life, my life, on which I am the sole authority, I can say that Nietzsche has given me a sense of what intellectual courage, probity, honor, and nobility are. If I can seldom, if ever, attain to any of those virtues, I can at least aspire to them, defying my instinctive urge to be cowardly and lazy, and to resist a natural tendency to let existence be a "thoughtless accident."

DM: Name a writer of the second half of the twentieth century whom you admire without qualification.

TB: Barbara Pym, whose masterpiece is *Quartet in Autumn*.

DM: You have commented frequently on what writing and language mean

to you; could you please comment on what fiction, or the novel in particular, means to you?

TB: As Henry James said of himself, I am an "inveterate proser," and therefore it is fiction that has been the means by which I can see myself as a wizard, ebulliently making things from the void.

PLAY

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