Please Use Other Door: Literary Creativity and the Publishing Industry. A Round Table

Since the late Seventies, the book publishing business in the United States has undergone profound structural transformations that have deeply affected both the production and the distribution processes. Trade publishers such as Lippincott and Fawcett, with a time-honored record in the promotion of good literature, have gone out of business completely. Others have been bought by conglomerates and been forced by merger to take on the size, complexity of organization and entrepreneurial mentality of the big corporations. Dell, Doubleday, Bantam Books, Random House, Knopf, Pantheon, among others, are at present very different from the publishing houses they were only twenty years ago. For the most part, as components of larger complexes, they have lost their identity, the specific philosophy that had made each of them unique.

While these changes took place in the book publishing industry, the book selling business was drastically altered by the aggressive growth of nationwide bookstore chains like Waldenbooks and B. Dalton. These chains have radically modified the book market by subverting the interaction of its three essential components—the buyer, the seller, and the producer. To begin with, the bookstore as a vehicle of cultural exchange is a concept that has been seriously undermined. The sales logic of these chains has determined the rigid narrowing of the range of titles available on the shelves, the minimalizing of the books' shelf life, and the downgrading of the salesperson's role to that of a supermarket employee whose only function is to keep the aisles well stocked. By selling their merchandise at substantially reduced prices made possible by bulk orders, these behemoths have increasingly come to exercise a strangle hold on the market, forcing the independent booksellers to either cut their profits or go out of business—and often both. So powerful is the clout wielded by the bookstore chains that nowadays such eminently editorial matters as the size, the jacket, the

title and even the subject of certain books are decided upon with an eye—and a very respectful eye at that—to the preferences and priorities of the chains. Large scale commercial considerations can thus influence directly the editorial choices and, ultimately, the policy of the publishing corporations.

These developments must have had significant effects on the very production of literature. Precisely what these effects have been, how far reaching they are and how long-lasting they may prove to be, are queries that elicit conflicting responses from commentators of the literary scene in America. As might be expected, within the trade optimism tends to reign. Ill effects are downplayed when not denied. Nonetheless, as confirmed in the course of our round table, even from within the publishing world dissenting voices are heard. "Publishing is under commercial and corporate pressures that can have harmful effects on people's lives, careers, and books," Marc Aronson, editor at Harper Collins, wrote in 1991 (26). *The critical view was perhaps most cogently put forth in* 1987 *by Ted Solotaroff, a now retired, prominent editor at Harper and Row:*

> *the conglomerates that bought publishing houses, the "procurement executives,"... the bookstore chains, and the new breed of American book consumers... have worked like a pincers movement to narrow the scope and prospects of literary and intellectual publishing in the book trade; then again, they have worked like a flanking movement to capture and exploit the new mass market at the age of consumerism and the culture of narcissism.* (267)

From outside the publishing world come words as sharply critical. "In the mid-century heyday of American publishing," wrote Jacob Weisberg in 1991," a firm like Random House would publish a bit of flimflam to underwrite its worthier efforts. Except at a few independent-minded houses, of which Farrar Straus is the most prominent example, the situation is now reversed: the literature is an afterthought to the schlock, a garnishing of literary prestige to soothe the conscience and placate the ghosts "(17). *The overall cultural import of this situation was trenchantly assessed by Charles Newman already in 1985:*

> *If a book deserves to be printed and is refused because it won't sell 10,000, that is censorship. If a novel is denied its potential audience because it is not reviewed, promoted, or in stock, that is censorship. It hardly matters whether this is due to ideological opposition, official ignorance, a conspiracy of*

> *indifference or the exigencies of a "free" market, it has the same effect—the denial of a rightful audience and the loss of community.* (158)

Our purpose in organizing the round table on "Literary Creativity and the Publishing Industry" was to gather testimony from a group of highly qualified and respected individuals who as writers, editors or publishers—and in some cases, in all of these capacities—are in the front line of the production of literature. We did not expect that in the few hours at our disposal the panel could cover the topic from all possible angles. In fact, we did not expect any final words on the subject. Therefore, we opted for an open format. There would be no set questions to be answered in turn by each panelist. Rather, the discussion was to flow freely, igniting itself as a result of the participants's own interests and concerns as they reacted to each other's views.

Accordingly, the panel engaged in an animated exchange that roamed freely within the wide compass of the theme, going off on anecdotal—but always relevant—tangent after tangent, coming back to a previous point to explore its further implications, leaving it again, vehemently taking sides, switching alliances, agreeing, disagreeing, scoffing at or, in turn, ardently subscribing to each other's arguments and positions—literally modeling themselves after the "noisemakers" (i.e., the opinion makers in the New York publishing world) against whom they all, at one time or another and often at the same time, vociferously pointed their fingers.

All this made for a very exciting and provocative debate. The differences of opinion, the at times diametrically opposed views, reflect the great complexity of the problems discussed as well as the sundry nuances and approaches to the questions the panelists sought to answer. In the end, the prevailing feeling among the participants was that we should meet again ("Possibly a year from now," as Cynthia Ozick said) so that a number of questions left untouched could be addressed.

One aspect that was not investigated is the role of literary agents in channeling creativity toward "productive" avenues or, depending on the individual agent's commitment to good literature, in promoting the work of "difficult" writers. Also not discussed was the cannibalizing of the book market on the part of the bookstore chains. Nor was any mention made of the effect that the opening up of the literary canon, with its attendant expansion of the market to often unsophisticated readers, may have had on

the production of literature. The selection mechanisms on the part of trade publishers would also need further inquiry, as would the contention that publishers favor voices which conform to standards not necessarily literary or not primarily literary.

Further questions abound: do commercial publishers implement market strategies to orient the expectations of a mass reading public toward low-level literary products? To what extent are the media responsible for the shaping of consumerist literary taste? What is the human and intellectual cost of the "waste" of creative potential among those writers excluded from the selection process? And where can this potential turn to?

These latter questions are uppermost in the mind of Roberta Kalechofsky, who brought to the round table discussion her experience of twenty years as a small press publisher and author. She lucidly asserts:

> *There is a "covenantal" relationship between writer (and artist: actor, painter, sculptor, composer, etc.) and the public, that art is the most enduring, complicated, all encompassing form of communication, and that communication does not make sense unless an audience is implicit. From this flow all kinds of problems for the writer or artist, for the search for audience makes the work of the writer and/or artist contingent upon worldly circumstances. This doesn't mean that the writer or artist is invariably corrupted by such contingent forces, but that s/he is invariably and inextricably concerned about the world as audience.* [1]

Are the small presses the answer? As Kalechofsky knows all too well, the alternative press is just that—an alternative, a second choice, a retrenching of aspirations, an admission of defeat on the main front. It is, however, also a second chance at recognition, the only hope available to worthy writers who, for reasons too numerous to be mentioned here, have been unable to attract the attention of the trade publishers or to retain it.

Warm appreciation of the meritorious role of the alternative press is voiced by Ted Solotaroff in the conclusion to his critique:

> *And there is, thank God, the alternative press... May all the publishers and editors of the alternative press... continue to think small and ambitiously, to believe that a good book is an opportunity rather than a problem, and to welcome the fine pens that need and confirm their work.* (292, 293)

Still, the alternative press cannot constitute the primary—let alone

the only—answer to the daunting problems facing American writers at the end of the twentieth century. In a culture increasingly dependent upon visual rather than written communication, the size and importance of the literary audience continues alarmingly to shrink. What new defence strategies can writers jealous of their independence devise against the possibility of massive encroachment upon their intellectual and artistic integrity? Even more broadly: what is the role of literature in such a culture?

Analogous questions were asked last April in Jerusalem at a conference on "The Writer and Consciousness." Predictably, the answers were as varied as they were at our round table. If, in the future, RSA Journal *will be able to organize a second round table on the subject, there will be no lack of questions to address.*

A final observation concerning the concluding words of our transcript. At the end of the second of our one-hour long tapes, Gordon Lish launches into one of his delightfully paradoxical tirades, pleading to pursue Kalechofsky's policy of self publication to its extreme consequences. The tape ends abruptly on Hugh Nissenson crying out, "Talk to the trees, we have to talk to the trees..." Nissenson was suggesting that the trees be co-opted into Lish's plot to rescue printing and publishing from the trade companies and put it back into the hands of the individual printer. Although obviously a conversational dangling thread, we felt that these words by the author of The Tree of Life *are too rich in metaphorical suggestions to be excised. What these suggestions may be, we leave to the reader to unravel.*

M.M.

[1] From a letter to the editor, dated December 24, 1992.

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Nissenson: I'll just start off by saying this: people who are compulsive, who have to be doing what they do, who *have* to write, are at a disadvantage with the people who are publishing them. It has always made me slightly queasy, because deep down I think you never lose the perhaps infantile notion that you can't believe somebody is actually paying you to do this.

Lish: You have me confused...

Nissenson: I am saying that I find it interesting that whatever my complex relationship with publishers is, changes into or becomes, I am at a disadvantage toward them economically because I am compulsive in what I am doing.

Kalechofsky: Because you'd do it whether you got paid or not.

Nissesson: Yes! I am dealing with the business...

Lish: What do you mean "dealing with the business"? How, in what way, do you deal with them?

Nissesson: Gordon, when I submit a book to publishers, these are people who talk about business.

Lish: You let them talk to you about business?

Nissesson: Sure. It just passes from the realm of creation into the marketplace, and the confrontation with the marketplace is always, I find, extremely strange and discombobulating.

Sifton: As a fellow publisher of Gordon's I support his befuddlement. These are not the terms in which publishers talk to writers. I can quite understand that publishers want to talk to the writers whom they

publish about their audiences and about their readers. And it is up to publishers also to consider the financial and business way of calculating this audience. But to speak to a writer about that is not necessarily to insist upon the values of the marketplace.

Lish: Let me first offer a footnote to Elisabeth's remarks. It's been my experience that questions bearing on the marketplace issue more likely from writers than from editors.

Sifton: Correct. Because many writers rightly care about who's reading them. But I would like to go back to an initial aspect of what Mario said our subject was: "What is the condition of the publishing industry and how has it changed recently?" Publishing has always been an adjunct of bookselling. In many countries of the world it is still simply that: publishers are booksellers who make deals with printers to print and bind and then distribute certain books. In the United States there has been an enormous change in the landscape of book selling in the last five or six years, and it has been entirely beneficial, in my view. There has been an enormous expansion of independent bookstores who are devoted to writers big and small, to varied and diverse readerships and cultures. The booksellers are also capable business people who know how to use computers, who know what's in their stores, who know how to manage their inventory as any retail person should. They also, interestingly, have moved into a socio-political cultural vacuum in their communities created by the loss of power in libraries, schools and churches. And many of these bookstores now function as cultural centers attracting writers and thinkers to readings, lectures and general goings-on, all of which they care to develop as a way of developing the culture, developing readership and of course developing their business. They do this in competition with the bookstore chains, which are interested in a very different kind of commerce for the few books that they both sell. All these bookstores are very good for publishers and very good for writers. It is my feeling that publishers have failed to understand just how wonderfully and closely they could work with these booksellers, who I think are transforming American literary culture.

Kalechofsky: Is that observation based on New York City or nationally across the United States?

Sifton: Oh, less in New York City than elsewhere.

Kalechofsky: Because it certainly doesn't exist where I come from, I can tell you.

Lish: Which is where?

Kalechofsky: North of Boston, about a half hour outside of Boston. You might have one or two little stores like that in the Boston-Cambridge area, but you go up to Marblehead, Magnolia, Manchester, Gloucester or up toward Maine, and you find a lot of nice bookstores, but they are filled with How to Backpack through Maine or cooking books or, you know, lobster... I agree, partly, with what you were saying and partly with what Hugh was saying, because I think the market mentality does exist out there, and I, as a writer, have certainly met with it from a lot of agents and a lot of publishers who have made incredibly wonderful statements about my writing and have said, "But it has no commercial value. It won't sell." In fact, it was remarks like that which drove me into publishing, and Mario knows I sit on both sides of the fence, so to speak. I became a small press publisher, never intending to publish anybody but myself. I simply wanted to do and get my own stuff out, because I got a rejection slip from a publisher that said, "This is literary, erudite, and passionate, but has no commercial value." And I said, What do you want? What is it you're looking for? And when I went to publish the book myself and it got very good reviews, I discovered he was right—it had no commercial value: I sold about a hundred copies of that book to a couple of bookstores. But as far as the phenomenon of the small bookstores you're talking about, I only share your enthusiasm partly—and I'll tell you why: because I view a lot of them as Balkanizing the literary world. I mean, they are pushing political agendas...

Sifton: Excuse me, I am not talking about small bookstores, I am talking about very large bookstores. They are all over America. They stock between 100- and 150,000 *titles*, not copies of books. They also fill special orders, they do a huge mail-order business, they're not small and they're not Balkanizing, and they do not have political agendas.

Kalechofsky: Do they stock poetry and fiction by unknown writers who are not reviewed in the *New York Times*?

Sifton: Absolutely.

Kalechofsky: Because I get that response all the time: "If you haven't the review of the *New York Times* don't bother even to approach me!"

Sifton: In Minneapolis, at the Hungry Eye, for example, there is a wall as long as this wall filled with nothing but poetry, spine out.

Materassi: Still, it seems to me you're describing a minority of the bookstores in this country, as important as their function may be.

Sifton: I don't believe they are a minority any more. I know, Gordon knows, anyone who has worked in a small commercial house knows, that these bookstores will take risks on books that are hard to sell, and stock them and even help to make them national mini-best sellers long before more conventional, lemming-like salespersons will.

Kalechofsky: I know what you are saying. I constantly get statements from agents and publishers about the market. I find writers also very concerned with it because, as you say, they want to sell. But I often think that it channels writers into fields they would not necessarily go into, and it isn't the best thing for them to do.

Boyers: This, I think, is something that we can't not agree on, that market factors do play some role in the decisions that publishing houses make.

Lish: I think we can agree on that.

Boyers: Whether or not market considerations are in themselves bad for publishing, for the health of the literary marketplace, is another question—and of course whether there are all sorts of outlets and opportunities for people to publish their work even when the work is not commercially viable, is a separate issue. We know that some writers want to make a living on writing and find that, because of the writing they do, they can't make a living, and are therefore forced out of the writing business. My sense is that this is not a typical occurrence. I'm in touch with people from every walk of life who find ways, if they are obsessed, to write and to make it.

Kalechofsky: Yes they do, but not to support themselves.

Lish: I find it obnoxious to consider writers in respect of bookstores and agents and so on.

Kalechofsky: I don't quite understand that. When you say you find it obnoxious...

Lish: I am really unwilling to grant the honorific "writer" to anyone concerned with anything beyond the boundary of his text. Text is all that should concern the writer. If I am not concerned with what my brother thinks about what I write, it follows that I would not be concerned about what a bookstore or an agent thinks about such matters.

Kalechofsky: Because you can't afford not to!

Nissenson: Because one craves approbation and fame, and you have to make a living!

Lish: I don't grant this. If you want to bellyache about something, let's bellyache about the *New York Times.*

Nissenson: I'm not bellyaching. I'm simply saying that this is the *donnée* of the condition.

Lish: What is the *donnée?* That you have to make a living?

Nissenson: No. That you also would like to see...

Kalechofsky: You'd like to be read!

Lish: Hugh, aren't you supposed to be so busy with simply managing the making of a sentence that you have no space in you for other considerations, whether they are chain bookstores, independent or...?

Ozick: I agree completely.

Kalechofsky: I have to disagree with you thoroughly! I can be consumed with the notion of the making of a sentence, and never can I shake from me that terrible feeling all the time—What is the use of making this sentence if nobody will read it?

Nissenson: Oh my God!

Lish: Let's discuss that for a moment.

Kalechofsky: Yes, let's discuss precisely that!

Lish: You are saying that if you're convinced no one would look at the sentence you wouldn't create the sentence?

Kalechofsky: I'm not at all sure and I'd have to think about that if I would. Because for me writing is communication, and if there is nobody there to hear, what you are communicating...

Lish: If Orpheus discovered that he had no ears to hear, he should stop playing his lyre?

Kalechofsky: I think Orpheus expected to be heard.

Lish: He expected to be heard, but in the event of not being heard, he should stop? I do not see this as a problem of the writer's craft, but as a problem of the writer's world, the literary community of readers, writers, editors et cetera: the rigor and integrity of communication, whether in music or language.

Ozick: I agree, Roberta, that print is really the finish, the consummation of writing. But print is different from market and bookstores. Writing is a very secret, private thing. You do it only for intrinsic reasons, and it seems to me that the minute anything extrinsic begins to touch it, then you are in the world of power. And once you are in the world of power, the world of crowd and power, then you are really instrumentalizing writing, then you've left the intrinsic behind. I agree with you, a piece is not finished until it's published, and the attempt to get published sometimes brings grief, and in my own life took years, so I don't take this lightly. I have friends with long track records who are my age, who have suffered enormously and still have trouble getting published, never mind getting recognition. But I don't think recognition can possibly be the point.

Kalechofsky: I'm not talking about recognition, I'm not talking about power. I am talking about communication. Writers write to be read! We write to be read!

Lish: No, no, no... We understand what you are saying, Roberta... No, no. Literary artistry is the efflorescence of a kind of inwardness,

and that posits an absolute, alien relation with all things outward. Your bookstores...

Kalechofsky: I don't believe that.

Lish: ...and your reviewers and all the rest of that crap is all outward, and should not concern you at all.

Sifton: No, it should. You say it should not, but writers are a varied tribe. There are writers who, like actors in a theatre, respond to the loop of energy that is established between writer and reader and then back to writer again, and who gain some sense of themselves from feeling that circle of energy going back and forth. There's an enormous variety amongst writers, in the need for that loop. Some writers don't need it at all, but other writers do. I agree with you and Cynthia that writing is an intensely private business, but Cynthia too is acknowledging that whether or not one gets published has some deep effect upon one's sense of oneself as a writer.

Lish: The book. The book. Reification of what she does. She is talking—wait, wait, wait—she is talking about print, just the creation of the object she can put her hand on and then put on her shelf at the end of her labors, yes? Just the book.

Ozick: Yes. I am always amazed to find somebody who has actually read the book.

Nissenson: May I say something. When I have received intelligent praise at crucial moments of my life, when somebody who is really my peer has seen what I'm doing and has been moved by it, the energy given by this has given me a man's courage to take another step.

Kalechofsky: That's what I'm talking about!

Nissenson: I think the fantasy of Franz Kafka writing for himself is nonsense. He had a small, extraordinary, pulling group of people who fed him the kind of thing that he needed to continue. I think that as a writer, as an artist, he was alone and isolated—but there comes a time when you must enter into congress with the human race.

Lish: No. Kafka didn't give a shit about what Max Brod said, Kafka cared not at all for what anybody said.

Nissenson: Oh, I disagree! Read the journals!

Kalechofsky: One of the things that I've always found very interesting is this myth that writers like Emily Dickinson and Kafka wrote solely for themselves, and all the rest. I know this: none of them ever destroyed their manuscripts. They didn't want them destroyed. Something may have inhibited them from taking that step actively to seek for publication, but they made sure...

Ozick: But Kafka asked Max Brod.

Nissenson: But he could have done it himself.

Kalechofsky: He could have done it himself! He did not! He knew that Max Brod would not destroy his manuscripts.

Nissenson: I mean, come on—he was asking to be judged by Brod: "You tell me whether I'm going to live or die."

Boyers: Even if it could be demonstrated that Emily Dickinson and Kafka wrote for no one but themselves, we still find out by speaking to lots of different writers that it matters to many of them whether or not they reach an audience of a certain size, of a certain kind, at a certain time. There's no question that for some writers the size of the audience, the kind of the audience, is not tremendously important—certainly not as important as it is to other writers. We can all name very good writers who have tiny readerships, who write one book after another, fairly good books, sometimes better than fairly good books, know that they are never going to reach a larger audience, and are in no way concerned about that, would never for a moment think of tailoring their next book to the demands of that larger audience.

Nissenson: But they need some feedback.

Sifton: May I say that many of those writers are viewed by publishers as "commercially viable." "Commercially viable" doesn't mean "likely to be a best seller" or "certain to be a big public success." It means that the publisher's cost of producing and distributing the book will not exceed the income from the sales. Gordon and I have published many books that sold no more than 1,500 copies and were commercially viable. I have also published books that sold 300,000 copies which were

not really commercially viable because given what they were and what the publisher paid for them, they should have worked better than they did. For a book commercially viable means that its publisher has the wherewithal, has the staff, has the distribution network, has the knowledge of the readership that makes him believe he can get this book to an adequate number of readers. It does not mean reaching a given figure and it doesn't mean a given type of brow—low, middle or high—and it doesn't mean pandering to the marketplace.

Lish: Might we profitably address ourselves, then, directly to Mario's subject, which is, "Is something happening in publishing" quite irrespective of writers? Is something happening that we need to know about? Can we describe it? And where is it going?

Sifton: As the big national publishing houses in America become more and more like each other, at the same time there is an enormous resurgence in the small presses and regional presses, and very healthy signs of life in university presses. So there's a lot of very good stuff going on in America today, most of it outside New York City. A month or so ago, in the *New Republic,* Jed Perl had a big article on the state of the art world in America today, and one of the points he made was this: that amongst painters and sculptors and artists there had always been a great deal of talk and review, views about each other's work, talk about how each other was doing.

Lish: A community.

Sifton: A community. Critical attention being paid to your fellow artists. That is still going on, is still very much there, there are lots and lots of artists who do this. But, he pointed out, there was a time when dealers and art critics hung out with that group and listened, kept their ear to the ground, were close to artists not in the corrupt sense but in the sense of liking to know what they were doing and listening to them. Now, he said, the critics and dealers do not live in that world, and instead they're a part of what in New York would be called "the Uptown" crowd. Now and again, for arbitrary and fashionable reasons, they'll pluck an artist out of the Downtown scene and overblow his reputation, and make all the other painters and artists nervous.

Was there an analogy, I asked myself, in the literary world? And I

think there is. There was a time when even the big, middle-brow or mainstream, middle-of-the-road publishing houses did hang out with writers, or their editors and publishers did. They kept their ear to the ground, they were more or less in the same world with, and took their cues from writers and from critics. There was a common cultural matrix. Alfred Knopf, when he retired from his own company, was asked how the business was different from what it had been when he started in 1923 or whenever it was. And one thing he said was that he couldn't understand where all this nonsense about editors had come from. When he started in the business, there were publishers who knew writers, who read the books, liked the writers, published them; writers liked their publishers, who were their friends. And now, he said, "publishers never read and have to hire editors to read for them; the writers don't know how to write and need the editors to write their books." He was totally scornful. Well, that is what I am saying: there has been a growth in companies where more and more people are actually not connected to the activities of writing and reading and getting books around in the culture. They are not staying close to the writers and they're not staying close to the bookstores, to the readers. They're not staying close to either their source of supply or their customers. The people who are running these big houses in New York are not readers, they don't know writers, they are kind of untouched, and therefore become fearful.

Kalechofsky: They are out of touch, and it has a very depressing effect upon the writer.

Nissenson: Everything has a depressing effect upon the writers — are you kidding?

Kalechofsky: No, no, let me go beyond that. I have always said there's no such a thing as a closet writer...

Materassi: Don't start Gordon on this...

Kalechofsky: O.K. At any rate, as a small press publisher I get manuscripts from a lot of people. Over the years — I've been in this now since 1975 — manuscripts have gotten consistently better. I only do about two, three books a year — and one of these has got to be mine. So there you are: there's just not enough money to go round for the others.

The manuscripts have improved enormously, and they come from people who have been to twenty and thirty and forty publishers and they've gotten a run-around. That's what hurts.

Sifton: Their manuscripts probably haven't been read, actually.

Kalechofsky: That's right. But they don't know that, you see. I have been on panels with agents or editors, and people in the audience will raise their hands frantically and say, "How can we get published?" And I will say, "Chances are you can't, not in the way you think you can. If you go my route—there are other routes you can take—there are backdoors you can open; but I doubt you can open front doors anymore." And the people who sit on those panels with me get terribly upset because they don't want to say that, in fact, all these rejection slips don't amount to a row of beans. And I don't know why they don't want to come out and tell the truth.

Ozick: Are you saying that their manuscripts are actually not read?

Kalechofsky: About three lines are read. Publishers have a catch phrase which they use, editors have a catch phrase—they say, "We look at everything." And they mean it literally: they look at it.

Lish: I am certainly guiltier, guiltier of this claim, than anybody I know of. I read as little as I'm able to get away with reading, just as I would make the quickest contact with anything thrust at me in life. If I were made to attend to all of...

Kalechofsky: I understand, Gordon. I'm not saying you're not justified. I'm just saying that the writer doesn't understand the problem.

Lish: What the writer ought to do then is make his sentences as pungent as he can possibly make them, so that those two or three sentences that one looks at evolve into five or six or ten or fifteen...

Sifton: I want to answer Cynthia's factual inquiry very precisely. Many publishing houses have announced in writers' magazines that they do not have the staff to read everything that comes in.

Ozick: Over the transom?

Sifton: Yes.

Kalechofsky: Very few take them over the transom anymore.

Sifton: But most of what we are sent comes over the transom anyway. Don't you find that's the case?

Boyers: Absolutely. This last year Salmagundi, which does not pay for unsolicited material, received 3,600 unsolicited manuscripts.

Kalechofsky: And you can't deal with it. It's impossible.

Boyers: There's absolutely no staff to deal with it. So, the catch phrase of course is precisely the one that we use: we look at every manuscript that comes in. We looked at every one of the approximately 1,800 poetry manuscripts that came in, many of which contained six, eight, ten poems, and we published perhaps sixty poems in the course of the year. In most cases you read a few lines of the first poem on the sheaf. There's no other way to do it; we would have to hire readers.

Lish: And in so doing, Bob, you're not doing wrong.

Boyers: No. Because I have no alternatives.

Lish: What I am suggesting is that the judgment you are likely to arrive at would be just as accurate on the basis of a couple of lines as it would be on the basis of the whole work.

Boyers: In most cases..

Kalechofsky: But not in every case.

Boyers: I'll give you an example. As director of the Summer Writers Institute I had occasion about three years ago to call Richard Ford to talk about his coming up for a day to give a reading. I had read a few things by Ford over the last few years that I liked—I had read a collection of his stories, and I told him so on the phone. And he said, "Well, actually I submitted two of those stories to Salmagundi and they were turned back." I didn't remember receiving them—I mean, of course they were given short shrift...

Lish: By you! By you! Rejected by you!

Boyers: Yes, by me. And I had to think at that moment, Well, perhaps I did, actually, look fairly carefully at those stories, perhaps I

read two pages rather than three sentences and decided I didn't like them, and perhaps if I looked at them now and read them all the way through I wouldn't like them still and, you know, I'd reject them; but maybe not. Maybe, in fact, I had made a mistake.

Lish: Maybe what colored your judgment the second time around was the growing attention paid to Richard Ford.

Boyers: Maybe. Or maybe not.

Ozick: I was just reflecting that from the writer's point of view maybe everything that's been said so far about the state of publishing should be regarded like the weather: it's inevitable, you can't help it, and so what must the writer do? And I think what the writer has to do is understand that this is the climate and persist and persist and persist. But once the work is accepted for publication, the writer has to have a sense of conscience and not regard a publishing house as a philanthropic organization. I know that I've felt terribly uneasy when I don't... what's that word of art... "earn out." But perhaps what Gordon was saying, and what I was agreeing with—and what you, Hugh and Roberta, were not agreeing with—points to a more private or conscientious sense in the writer, concerning both the making of sentences and the encounter with the publisher. When a house takes on your work, you don't want it to suffer for it financially any more than if you borrowed money and were under the obligation of returning it.

Sifton: That brings up another matter which Mr. Knopf talked about as a signal difference between publishing in the 1920s and publishing now, which is the current expectation that a writer should be paid in advance of publication. He said that if he had offered Willa Cather an advance against future earning on her books she would have left the house because she would have thought it unethical. Now he did not mean that writers who now accept advances are being unethical. He was suggesting that the whole business ethos has changed, and he knew that the sources of income for writers have changed, and that writers depend more and more on book contracts, whereas they had more diverse sources of publishing income fifty and sixty years ago.

I have observed that advances can be dangerously oppressive to writers. I have seen as many writers blocked by the money they

received in advance as liberated by it. Cynthia is scrupulous and conscientious, and she expresses concern that perhaps one of her books might not eventually earn what she had been paid in advance. But I would never worry about it: Cynthia's books will always earn out. But for every Cynthia there are ten writers who have received considerable advances against likely income, have not earned that income, and do not have any concern about it whatsoever, blame it entirely on the publisher for publishing the book badly, believe that they actually have a kind of hyper-public out there that the publisher failed to get to and it's the publisher's fault if the book didn't earn out. This is impossible to prove one way or the other, just as it is impossible to prove that you printed and distributed the right number of copies. If the first printing matches your actual sales, you can never prove you did it right—but the problem deforms and confuses the discourse between writers and publishers.

Lish: Would Boyers, speaking as a social critic, care to comment on the altered conditions at the *New York Times Book Review?* Has something not shifted rather horribly in that regard?

Boyers: Well, yes, I would say so. I have a special interest for example in the publication of poetry, which is not a marketable commodity. What I mean is that one doesn't write poetry in order to make a living.

Lish: Please God!

Boyers: We know that there are many writers of fiction who believe that what they're doing is of the greatest importance to them and of importance to others, but who also regard what they do as a way of making a living and staying afloat. Most poets can't begin to think of what they do in that kind of way.

Sifton: John Ashbery said that he became an art critic to support his poetry habit.

Boyers: Yes, and Auden became a reviewer. But there's no question that in my lifetime the *New York Times* has moved further and further away from noticing poetry in the way that is was noticed when I was young. This is a fact in terms of the numbers of reviews, the numbers of pages devoted to poetry. I know that many of us who have been

reading *The New York Revue of Books* since it began in the early 1960s have been disappointed in its treatment of literature, have wondered at the failure of *The New York Revue of Books* to devote attention to different kinds of writing. But apart from that, of course, if you take seriously the existence of the alternative press, of the quarterlies and other publications, you see that books do get — eventually, late — do get reviewed. More important is the fact that literary magazines will take notice of certain books that will never be looked at in the *New York Times.*

Materassi: But in respect to the leading poets?

Boyers: Yes, even in respect to the leading poets.

Materassi: Their instructions are not taken from...

Boyers: From the *New York Times?* Certainly not. In fact I would say quite the contrary. Precisely because such books, even by a fairly prominent writer, will not get reviewed in the *New York Times,* these other publications may well commission reviews of them. But I want to bring this around to another and, I think, related matter. About ten years ago *Salmagundi* published a book as an issue of the magazine — a book which to my astonishment, and to the astonishment of its author, became quite famous, a book called *The Post-Modern Aura* by Charles Newman, a small press novelist, formerly the editor of *Tri-Quarterly* magazine. The book attracted a great deal of attention when it appeared in *Salmagundi;* it attracted more attention when it was subsequently published as a book by a university press. The overwhelming preponderance of the writers who wrote to us (I published about ten or twelve letters in *Salmagundi,* but there were hundreds who responded to this work) approved its basic thesis, which was that the state of the literary culture, the state of publishing, the kinds of responses that publishers in America typically made to books submitted for publication, were such as to demoralize writers. It was something I haven't observed in the material that I see coming in to my magazine, but this is what they said: writers were demoralized to the degree that the kinds of works they conceive, the kind of things they imagine, are often adversely affected by the publishing scene, or made to seem irrelevant. This is of course an easy way for people to blame what they

do on the culture, and Newman himself offers no such easy explanation. But that is at least a part of the thesis of his book.

Kalechofsky: One which I would agree with.

Boyers: I know. That's why I bring it up. I've always been very uneasy with that particular thesis.

Ozick: It seems to me that if writers are going to look to the market for... what is the opposite of demoralization?

Boyers: For what is inspiriting?

Ozick: Inspiriting, exactly... then they are looking in the wrong place. You look to literature itself, to the idea of literature, to the writers who have come before you and to the classical writers, to the writers of the past. For a writer, the inspiration and the ground of being can only be literature itself, including the best work of one's contemporaries.

Sifton: And not the attitude of the publisher, which is what also is part of this thesis. I think it is important that Robert has mentioned this because a kind of socio-pathological thing is going on in America culture—this bugaboo notion that the big, important publishers overlook real talent. The school of resentment is a real one.

Materassi: Well, I would like to put in a little anecdote. A few years ago, when Roberta published her last novel, *Bodmin 1349*—a complex and, to my mind, a very important novel—I asked a friend of mine, a prominent critic and a regular contributor to the *New York Times Book Revue* whom you all know, I'm sure: "Do you know this book?" "No." "Do you know Roberta Kalechofsky?" "No, I don't." "May I have her send you the book in case you think it is worthwhile for you to write about it?" This was his answer: "I will be happy to read it, but there is no chance of publishing a review of this book." It was also quite clear, though my friend did not put it in so many words, that the *New York Times Book Review* would not invest, so to say, any of its very expensive, very important space in a book published by the Micah Press. And it was equally clear that he, as a critic and an intellectual, was powerless to steer the magazine's attention toward an obscure, "provincial" writer, as worthy of that attention as he might have

deemed her. Now, do you find this impotence on the part of the critic to be typical? Does this powerlessness extend to the editor himself?

Boyers: I can't give you a definitive answer. In some cases it has to do with the commitment, sentimental or otherwise, of the editors to, for example, poetry. The view that, "Yeah, the *New York Times* should do this." And then of course in later years editors who felt much the same and who were prevented from doing this because of forces...

Lish: Harvey Shapiro.

Boyers: Exactly. That's the person I'm thinking of specifically. He would have done better by poetry if he had been able to.

Lish: The person who now edits this periodical, does he, do you imagine, find himself under pressure from a literary community to conduct his affairs in a different kind of way? Is he decried in *Salmagundi,* for example, for the character of his activities as the editor of this enormously influential periodical? Have you got on your hind legs and done for example an essay, telling your constituency what a wretched...

Boyers: We have run pieces on the wretched state of the arts, but I don't know that the *Times* is so very important.

Sifton: Gordon, I bow to no one in my skepticism about the *New York Times Book Review,* but I think I would answer your question to Robert, "Why they are working like this when they used to be marginally better?" (only *marginally* better) as follows: I believe they are responsive not to the books as written, to the writing, or to their own readers, the *New York Times* Sunday readers, but to what they call the industry.

Lish: The hustle, the hustle, the con...

Sifton: Well, they'd get the advertising anyway. Yet they are *exquisitely* responsive to the publicity material of the companies that you and I have worked for, Gordon. They feel *their* community—from which they draw information to make critical judgments—is the publishing community. I find that absolutely outrageous.
Lish: Right you are. I agree.

Sifton: Another point to ask is why just the *New York Times Book Review* has this disproportionate influence as a national magazine. In fact, there are extremely good book reviewers all over the place in other newspapers—the *Boston Globe, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune,* et cetera. *Their* bestsellers are regional bestsellers, local best sellers, and they don't claim them to be national ones. There is something a little complicated about the *New York Times'* either actuality or pretension to be a national paper, and it gets mixed in with their *Book Review.* But we should ask, why don't American writers and readers respond more affectionately and respectfully to the book review pages of other organs? Why can't alternative sources of comment on books be supported, be encouraged?

Nissenson: Elisabeth, there was a time in my memory in which there were in New York many newspapers and they died, and the tragedy is that the *Times* is there by default, partly, and what you gonna do about it? But I remember when in the pages of the *Herald Tribune* there was a distinguished book review section, and it was as important to get well treated there as it was in the *New York Times.*

Sifton: I think frankly the boredom of the *Times Book Review* could encourage and help book reviews in other newspapers. But there is also some classism here. Betsy Pochoda, who used to be the literary editor of the *Nation,* now does book reviews for *Entertainment Weekly,* a Time-Warner magazine which reaches a million readers a week. "Why," she asked me the other day, "does nobody from the publicity office of Alfred Knopf ever call *me* about Cormac McCarthy?" The book reviews in *Entertainment Weekly* are stuck between reviews of rock-and-roll groups and television shows, but still, she's got one million readers reading them. What's the matter with that? Nothing is the matter with that!

Lish: Oh, I'm sure she's being driven plenty. I don't buy it for an instant that she's not. I'm sure there are people hanging on her neck from morning to night.

Sifton: No, because there's classism here!

Nissenson: Snobbery, incredible snobbery!

Kalechofsky: Snobbery and status are among the biggest movers of people's behavior.

Lish: I must wonder about your willingness to assert a spirit of even-handedness at the *Book Review*.

Sifton: Oh no, no, no. As Stanley Hoffmann said to people who imagined conspiracies in the Pentagon explaining the disasters in the Viet Nam war, "Never propose a malign interpretation when sheer stupidity suffice to explain the evidence."

Kalechofsky: Elisabeth, there has been so much said that it is very hard for me to catch all the strings. I'd like to respond to so many things that have been said. One: some of the reasons that these other review outlets don't get to be known is that, frankly, a lot of us don't even know about them. Sure there are thousands of little magazines throughout the United States. Even with a circulation of five hundred, who doesn't want to be read by five hundred people or have a review? Five hundred is not something to be sneezed at. But you don't know about them. Two: the discourse between writer and publisher has broken down largely because a lot of young writers coming up don't know where else to turn to except to your well known publishing companies from whom they constantly get back your formal rejection slips. I happen to think they are a horror. I understand why they exist. I understand they exist on behalf of the expediency of moving, moving, moving all that terrible, enormous slush pile that you constantly have to get through. I have been tempted myself, on occasion, to make up a formal rejection slip. I do not like to write to a writer, "I am not accepting your manuscript because you are terrible." I don't ever say that, but I always try to communicate. I consider my function as a publisher and as a writer to communicate, and when somebody has sent me a manuscript I cannot send back a formal response that's come out of a Xerox machine.

Sifton: I envy you! Do you have somebody to do all that? I don't.

Kalechofsky: Don't envy me: it kills me. But I just can't do that to a writer.

Nissenson: Sometimes I think the duty of a publisher is to discourage writers, and I mean it.

Sifton: That brings up a very important question, which is, How many books are published?

Nissenson: That's a major question; when you look at the mounds of crap that are turned down—discourage! discourage!

Lish: I think it's important to remember these are not public institutions we're talking about. They are under no obligation to be responsive to writing. They have an obligation to make a profit, and that's an end to it.

Kalechofsky: That's like telling me that a hospital has an obligation to make a profit. I don't go along with that. If you're in the business of making a profit you should be producing pantyhose, not books.

Sifton: No,no,no. Wait a minute...

Kalechofsky: I refuse to say that a book is a product. You can hammer it on my grave!

Sifton: Of course they have to make a profit! How could they survive?

Kalechofsky: That's the problem. We have to negotiate somewhere between not viewing the book as a product and accepting the fact that the people we are dependent upon are there to make money. But I view that problem as the same one in which a doctor says to a patient, "It's not your health that's my problem, it's my fee that's my problem."

Sifton: I completely reject this analogy.

Nissenson: Yes, I do too. I must say it.

Kalechofsky: I thought you'd be on my side, Hugh.

Nissenson: No, I disagree on that.

Ozick: I don't think it's necessary to go out of your way to discourage anybody. A writer who becomes discouraged is by definition not a writer.

Nissenson: That's it. It's natural selection. There's a Darwinian law operating here.

Sifton: I want to say something else à propos of the number of books published. I completely agree with Cynthia that real writers do not get discouraged.

Kalechofsky: No, they do get discouraged.

Nissenson: But they do not stop!

Materassi: Bad writers don't get discouraged either, sometimes.

Sifton: There, voilà! An enormous number of very bad books are being published: imitative, derivative, dead on arrival; and a lot of publishers are skillful at publishing books as if they were alive, they clog up the arteries in the trade. It's a discouragement, both to publishers who do not wish to be part of this folly, and to the writers who are doing real work, who see the false work taking up the space.

Lish: Robert, can you name ten American poet you feel worthy of having had the attention of the established opinion-makers who have not had that attention?

Boyers: Sure.

Lish: Twenty, thirty, forty such poets?

Boyers: Absolutely. That doesn't mean that these writers have never had any attention, never had a book reviewed.

Lish: That they have not had the attention that Ashbery has had, that Merrill has had?

Sifton: Wait, wait, wait!

Lish: Mr. Ashbery hasn't had such attention?

Sifton: I'm simply telling you I published seven or eight books of John's, of which only three were reviewed in the *New York Times*.

Lish: He will never again write a book that will not be reviewed in the *New York Times*, is this correct?

Sifton: His last one wasn't. Gordon, understand: I'm with Robert, here. A couple of years ago, when I was your colleague at Knopf, our colleague Harry Ford, who publishes many of the most famous and

salient poets in America, was about to go off to some poetry prize-giving ceremony where he had four of the five finalists, and he turned to me and said, "Not one of these four books has been reviewed in the *New York Times*." I'm supporting what Robert said earlier in this conversation: whether the poets are well known, well established, and have been reviewed before, or whether they are little known, the critical discourse about them has been minuscule in both big magazines and small for quite some time.

Boyers: And this is true even for poets whose name everyone would recognize.

Lish: Then, Robert, tell us: you still haven't said why it is that there's been this migration from what was to what is. Why?

Boyers: For one thing, the view is that the poets have their own...

Lish: They look after themselves

Boyers: Exactly. They have their own places. I've heard this from a lot of people—they have the *American Poetry Review*, they'll get reviewed anyway... And suppose they were reviewed, it is said: what would those reviews do? They would not significantly affect the sales of their book. So the major weeklies and monthlies are not going to devote any serious or extended attention to them—and they don't get a paragraph.

Sifton: I mentioned it before and I'll say it again: what this argument neglects is the imaginative life of the ordinary reader. Why not, on Sunday morning, tell these readers something about a poet they've never heard of before? You've got those readers out there; there are certain subjects you know they're going to want to hear about: certain best selling novels, the hotshot new political biographies, and they're going to enjoy a few acid reviews of bad books. But don't you want to push the envelope a little here and there? It makes it more entertaining, it makes it fun, it makes it livelier. There are hundreds of possibilities which you could develop solely out of an interest in entertaining the readers on Sunday morning!

Lish: Are these people called to account publicly by writers' orga-

nizations? I'm not a member of your P.E.N., but I wonder: does it speak for writers into the teeth of the *Book Review*?

Ozick: I am aware of a movement of this kind that was active as a group until just this year, a group of women writers—some novelists, some journalists, a kind of mixture. When Mike Levitas was editing the *Book Review* they sent up a committee to him to insist that women be better represented. He responded with a statistical investigation and found that they were better represented than was the general impression. But he was responsive, and he introduced more women reviewers. I think Becky Sinkler seems quite obviously to go out of her way to do that. I'm not so sure that I would accept any numerical standard as appropriate: I think literary merit should be the only reason for publication, whether for men or women.

Lish: Has there been a panel that would speak for literary merit to the *Book Review*? Wouldn't it be lovely if there were.

Sifton: Well, it would be lovely to boss around all opinion makers!

Nissenson: But not if you have a book coming out. You've got to be careful, let me tell you.

Kalechofsky: So we are back to our original problem.

Lish: Well, it's a question of power or an absence of backbone in writers.

Ozick: Gordon, now you are contradicting yourself. First you say only the sentence counts, and then you say, "Lobby!"

Lish: No, I don't! I'm saying the people who have a legitimate interest in it, if they want to go after somebody...

Ozick: I mean, either you write the right sentence or you are going to be a lobbyist.

Lish: All right. I agree.

Sifton: And it's also true, Gordon, is it not? that most people are not very good at what they do, most people aren't good at their jobs. So most book reviewers aren't very good, just the way most writers are not

very good. I mean, when something turns out to be excellent it's an astonishment, is it not?

Ozick: Elisabeth, I have on the floor of my study now a manuscript that I have halfway finished reading. It's original, it's witty, it's off the wall, it's idiosyncratic, and it really has literary quality—and it's by a totally unknown, obscure, completely discouraged writer who sent this manuscript around once, twice, and was so wounded in his sense of humanity that he quit. And after a year of thinking about it he sent it to me, and I was not very happy about getting a manuscript to read when I want and need to write—it takes so much time. I opened it, and was enchanted. You said that so many rotten books or mediocre books are getting published. Why is it that this happens and that good ones fall through?

Sifton: Well, I'll tell you, there's no one reason. There are thousands of reasons. As I said, much of the bad stuff that is published is derivative and imitative, and derivative and imitative editors and publishers pick up on something that looks like something that was a success, and they love that. Meanwhile, what about the lack of attention to the really good material? It's extremely hard to pinpoint. A great deal of it has to do with junk clogging up the system. But there's another thing which bothered me a lot when I was an editor: my sense that I was maybe only the first or second person to be reading a manuscript that was arriving on my desk at The Viking Press or at Knopf. I ask you as a writer: isn't it better if the new writing isn't sent straight up to the top of what you hope for? If I were a young composer and I wrote a string quartet, would I ask the Juilliard Quartet to play it first before I had played it with my friends? Why are there no intermediate readers?

Nissenson: There are. You have an agent, for example. That's the function of an agent.

Sifton: Even that is quite far down the road. How about other people whom you were in school with, other people whom you talk to? Writers, it seems to me, are not supporting each other enough, reading each other's work, getting intermediate judgments about the goodness or badness of the work. They pin too much on "I'm going to send it to

Elisabeth Sifton I hope she likes it," because they haven't sent it to anybody else. I think that's scary. I'm sure it happens to Gordon too.

Nissenson: I think that what writers are doing with other writers is something as significant. What they are doing is helping each other out of the depression attendant on creation. Cynthia, how many conversations over the years have you and I had in which we feel better afterwards because we're wrestling with the problem that is killing us? Or because we are suffering. We're talking. What we're doing is being a balm to each other's ego. It's a kind of mutual stroking and helping each other through bad times. From an editor you are asking for another response — you're asking for a response contingent on the cold word on the page.

Materassi: I would like to hear Roberta on this.

Kalechofsky: Well, as someone living in a small town, again, with little connection to the world outside, I have belonged to many writers' groups throughout the years, and some have been good and some have been really bad. A lot of them are there for us to sustain our souls, that's true. As far as I'm concerned, if I have to come to writers' group once every two weeks and listen to appalling literature, that does not sustain me in the slightest. A lot of people don't even begin to understand what a writers' group means: we get kids who come and read their diaries. You have to be lucky to strike a good writers' group, to find three or four or five people that are actually caring as much about the polished line as you do. When I come to a writers' group that's what I care about, and I get very antsy, when I'm sitting around listening to people read me their love letters or whatever it is they conceive to be writing.

Ozick: I think it is my responsibility as a writer to make a manuscript as perfect as I can. I am the editor and I've got to polish it, and I won't let go of a single sentence until I've got it nailed down. I have to nail that sentence down before I can permit myself to go on to the next one, and I don't know what another editor... Therefore it has to go into the world: this is its time. Either it is approved or it is denied.

Sifton: I conflated two things, and I wish now to unpack them. One issue is whether writers show each other their work, and I completely

accept Cynthia's judgment. I know that there are times when that's exactly what a writer doesn't want to do. Still, it has happened—and it has been beneficial. The other issue is that matter of intermediate publics, and editorial comments that come between the big jackpot at the end and the initial work. I was thinking of the young writer who's never been published before, and...

Ozick: Who does not go to *Prairie Schooner* but goes to Knopf.

Sifton: Right. It is a vertiginous world for a writer to be living in if the only thing she can think to do with her book is to send it to Knopf.

Kalechofsky: But that's the world the writer lives in, for the most part.

Sifton: No, no. I'm a pluralist about American culture. I believe there are all kinds of knobs and pulleys and levers and openings and closings and shelters from the rain.

Ozick: Yes. You begin in little magazines anyway.

Boyers: If you write short stories. May I respond with this little publishing anecdote, told by Ted Solotaroff? Several summers ago Ted came up to our institute to do a publishing day with a number of classes, and we asked him to send a manuscript ahead that I could have the students work on before he arrived. He sent us a chapter of a novel in progress which he was going to publish the following year; he was working on it, the author was working on it...

Nissenson: Did you have the author's permission to do this?

Boyers: Absolutely. Ted had got clearance, and in fact the author was flattered to have this attention paid. We ran off copies and sent that manuscript around, everyone looked at it and most people in the group said, This is dreadful, this is not a literary manuscript, why in heaven's name did you send us this chapter? Ted's response was, I sent it to you because it is a characteristic example of the kind of work that I have to publish.

Ozick: I *have* to publish?

Boyers: I *have* to publish. He said, I don't say this is bad, I don't

think this is bad, but it is not literature. This is not literature by the standards of an academic, literary community, and please don't mistake it for that. And, he said, you don't seriously believe, do you, that most of the people who enroll in your summer writers' institutes and who have manuscripts well along and have some plausible hope of publishing them are in fact working on literary manuscripts? They are not. I cite this for a reason: namely: that it is very difficult for young writers to suppose that they should not aspire to publish their novel with Knopf or Norton. Why not? Those houses are also publishing novels—by authors young and old—which are destined to be forgotten almost as soon as they are consumed.

Sifton: And they always have.

Boyers: And always have—and they must. These are the facts of life, he was saying, and you must learn how to read these kinds of manuscripts and talk about how to make them better.

Sifton: Correct. It's also true that most editors in publishing houses, big and small, spend most of their time making decisions on books that are "pretty good, not bad, quite... well actually, I like the ice-skating scene, the rest doesn't work but it's O.K., I think"—you know, that kind of thing. There is a difference between the United States and Europe, I believe, in publishers' view of the cultural dynamics. My feeling is that in America, publishers and many writers have believed that high art is nourished by and swims in the same sea with all this other stuff, that American cultural life has strength and vividness and diversity from everything going on all at once, which then allows also the purest and best writing to float at the top, like cream. I don't believe that Europeans view their high culture in relation to their low culture in this way. In fact, when we American publishers present our lists to Germans or Italians or French, and make this argument on behalf of a culturally diverse list, we are frowned upon.

Nissenson: Elisabeth, may I ask you why—for example, American record makers do not say that a new recording of a Liszt concerto equals in sales some rock group, and they don't put them in the same hopper—why do American publishers...

Sifton: They don't. American publishers don't either.

Nissenson: You mean to say that they really differentiate?

Sifton: Absolutely.

Nissenson: God! I must say, over the years watching publishers I've never seen... We were being compared to the best sellers! I will never forget when I was a kid being taken out for lunch by a Scribner editor. I was in my late twenties and I was about to publish a book and, well, it sold, you know, three copies. And this guy, what he was interested in was... he said, "Yeah, that's all very well and good, but boy, we're publishing the autobiography of Diane Cilento—and that's really gonna be the..." That's what happens in the life of a young writer.

Sifton: Here is the answer to this contradiction. I thought you were asking me, "Do publishers put the sales figures of major writers into the same column with their sales figures for their best sellers?" And I said, "No, absolutely they don't." And I vehemently believe that. When I worked at The Viking Press, where we published Stephen King and Frederick Forsyth and D.H. Lawrence and Iris Murdoch and Isiah Berlin, we put these writers in very different columns when it came to expectations and revenue. But if you are talking about the amount of *attention* that is paid to a book, then you are touching on something else. To go back to my perhaps nostalgic memory of how this was done at Viking twenty years ago, my feeling was that we paid just as much attention to Iris Murdoch as we did to Stephen King, if not in actual hours certainly in intensity of devotion, so that she always knew that she mattered to us. All of our authors did. What distresses me now is that the attention paid to the big best sellers, to the rock stars, make the Maurizio Pollinis on the list fear they are being neglected. This is unforgivable, because to convey a sense of attention and respect doesn't cost any money or time. I think the presumption is that the Pollini is supposed to sell by itself—"Don't worry, it will be review-driven, it will go on its own, we know the Pollini market, meanwhile we got this new rap group that we really gotta work on because we laid out six million dollars and it's gonna take a lot of time..." That's the way arguments go now. I find it deeply nauseating.

Matevassi: In other words, you are talking about the direct or indirect

manipulation of the media in order to focus the prospective consumer's attention.

Sifton: That's one aspect.

Lish: Could you, Robert, comment on Solotaroff's time-out from responsibility in respect to this manuscript you were remarking. Do you have a feeling about this, that a person of such wit, such intelligence, such high standards, should have no difficulty in making the claim that he is compelled to publish certain works because he wants to continue in his employment?

Boyers: Ted was initially taken aback by the unanimity of disapproval expressed by the group, because he had presented this manuscript with no thought in his head of the manuscript as anything other than or more than it was, which is to say, publishable, serious, honest, although not perhaps art.

Lish: But why would someone who we understand to be a representative of high culture undertake such an activity?

Boyers: O.K. Because what he was doing was talking to us about the realities of the publishing world.

Lish: But this reality is a reality he creates by acting as he acts.

Sifton: Then he ought to say to the writers, "And most of you will end up writing like this." That would be the logical extension of his...

Boyers: He did! He did say it, quite openly. And in fact, at the very same occasion, just a couple of hours later, Ed Doctorow spoke to the same students and observed, for their interest, that those of them that he had met over the years in writers' institutes, at NYU and so on, had made it quite clear to him that they had very little interest in literature themselves, and in fact not only didn't know much about the difference between literature and what we are calling here commercial fiction but had no way of knowing the difference because they didn't read much literature. In fact they were much more apt, these up-and-coming writers, to read the new novel by the new girl on the block than to read Cynthia Ozick, because the new girl after all is apt to be a young girl

presenting a first book which may well make a considerable splash and represent to up-and-coming young writers a model of how to do it.

Lish: Did Ted tell you so when he submitted this to you? Did he identify the work as to its aims?

Boyers: No.

Lish: Is it possible that he came up with that after the fact?

Boyers: No. He knew exactly what it was.

Nissenson: There is a certain hostility in that act, I have to say.

Boyers: It wasn't hostility. I think it was based on Ted's reading of the function he was to serve on this occasion. He was talking about the realities of the publishing world, the ways in which the publishing world intersects with and deviates from the world of literary academia, and he felt that this kind of institute represented a crossing of the two and he wanted to introduce into it certain problems, to help young people to make fundamental distinctions which are very difficult to make.

Sifton: I know Gordon would not agree with me, but I feel a certain agreement with Ted. An awful lot of quite good books get published in America that are neither really first-class literature nor merely "commercial fiction." There is quite good writing that is very hard to categorize one way or the other. Sometimes it's by writers who always write like that, sometimes by writers who go down or up; sometimes the sense of what real literature is changes with the culture. You read a book as merely popular in one decade, and then you realize later that, in fact, this is quite extraordinarily fine work—or vice versa.

Ozick: Or you can get exactly the feeling of that—a sort of time capsule feeling—by going into some little old country second hand bookstore and finding books from the Twenties or the Teens and just saturating yourself in what was run-of-the-mill fiction then.

Sifton: Yes. Sometimes it's quite surprising—better than you expect, right?

Ozick: Yes.

Lish: Oh, it's just a sheen of quaintness. But I want to admire openly Sifton predicting my view on the matter. Yes, she's quite right: I do not agree. I do think it is just those books one wants to make every effort to run out of the system because they crowd up the...

Sifton: The good is the enemy of the best.

Lish: Precisely. My reaction respecting the Solotaroff episode is wrathful and full of condemnation.

Boyers: Let me give you another one just like that. I had another editor of an important New York house. This person brought us a manuscript by a better known writer. We read the whole book—it was a short novel—and we said, "This is not a good piece of work." And this editor said, "I agree with you." I said, "You are the editor: would you tell us a little bit about your relations with your author? This is an author with whom you worked on several books. You agree that this is not only inferior to this author's other works but so far below their level as to be very disappointing. Have you made that clear to the author? Have you tried to talk the author out of this book in some way?"

Lish: Yes, wonderful tale. Let's hear more of this.

Boyers: "Have I tried to talk the author out of his book?" my friend repeated. "I should say not." "Then would you consider," I said, "urging your firm not to publish this book?" Response: "Are you crazy? Our firm is in business to promote the career of this author, we are behind this author, we are associated with this author. We have absolutely no responsibility to do other than what we can for this book." This was a new concept to me—I'm after all not involved in commercial book publishing.

Ozick: I think it's a wonderful concept—the idea of a publisher's continuing loyalty to a writer. I know too many excellent writers who, because they don't have an acceptable financial record, with regards to the last book, are thrown out, and then have to begin from square one and start with a new publisher. Whereas it seems to me that if a publisher will stick with you through thick and thin, or in many cases through thin and thin, it's a marvelous thing to have happen to you.

Lish: Wait, wait, wait! Stay with the writer irrespective of the character of the work?

Ozick: What's wrong with that?

Lish: Oh, my God, everything is wrong with that!

Sifton: Wait a minute. Cynthia and you are closer than you think, I believe. If publishers are devoted to writers and make a commitment to a writer and not just to one book after another, then in fact the kind of conversation you can have with a writer about what to do about this book which is not artistically successful is a different kind of conversation than you can have if you are simply picking strong titles. But it is very rare that publishers can successfully persuade a writer to abandon a book because it really is not good. I know of only one case: I believe Corlies Smith persuaded William Trevor not to publish something—but, you see, Corlies is a very remarkable editor who knew Trevor very well and already could tell that Trevor wasn't entirely happy with his book, so it was a conversation they could have because they'd known each other for eighteen years. And Trevor never left the publishing house. But I want to mention another problem. There are many fine small publishing houses who discover writers and publish one or two books very well, and then the New York agents or publishers swoop down and take them away.

Materassi: That's what's happening with Hugh in Italy.

Sifton: One has to ask oneself, what are the writers thinking about when they decide that they must leave the publishing house that made them famous?

Nissenson: Well, maybe the writer has a tuition to pay. Come on, we don't know what exigencies he's up against here. Let's not laugh or be snide about money as a transaction. Maybe a publisher comes along and says, "Listen, I'll give you..." and the writer has bills to pay and says, "Why, I need the money and I gotta go." And you write a letter of apology and you say, "Gee, I'm terribly sorry..."

Lish: I think this is disgusting. There are concerns that are pertinent to the transaction—there is honor and loyalty, little considerations of that kind...

Nissenson: I must say, honor and loyalty! Baseball players don't worry it, businessmen don't worry about it, editors don't worry about it — editors *never* worry about it. How many times in a lifetime does an editor leave a house and go to another in the middle of your frigging book because more money is being offered? "So sorry, tough stuff, I'm being offered more money, you understand my position, I have my kids in school and I have to leave you and this book in the middle." What is a writer to do? Just say, "Don't take the money, there's a question of honor and loyalty involved"? Nonsense!

Lish: Do you see yourself in the same light as you see editors? You're an artist, not a businessman.

Nissenson: Come on, Gordon, do not obfuscate the issue. An editor is not held, and should not be held, to loyalty and honor when somebody offers him more bucks. Nor should a writer.

Sifton: Wait, wait. The editor is a representative of a publishing house and publishing is a collaborative venture. Your editor couldn't possibly edit or publish this book without the help of copy editors, type designers, publicists, sales reps, distributors. When the editor leaves, the publisher should come to the author and say, "I'm terribly sorry you've lost your editor, but you have not lost your publisher."

Nissenson: But may I say that misconstrues a basic and crucial relationship. When you have a relationship with an editor as a writer, particularly when you are young, the emotional investment that you are making is like an analyst and a patient, or a doctor and a patient.

Sifton: It shouldn't be.

Nissenson: But it is. I know it shouldn't be, but let me tell you, when you are a kid starting out that's the essence of it. You're frightened, you are in your twenties, you don't know what the hell is going on, somebody who is older takes interest in you, publishes you, and you begin to invest emotion, you're doing transference projection, it's human psychology. Then that person comes to you and says, "Look, I'm terribly sorry, I'm getting more money elsewhere."

Lish: So the kid will grow up!

Kalechofsky: When writers come to me with all kinds of problems and ask me, "Would you be interested in publishing me?" I say, "Are you a genius? Because it is very hard to publish and push a book, and I only want to do so if I think it's going to be a really great book." They are taken aback. I often say to these writers: "Why don't you publish yourself if you have that kind of confidence in your work?" And I can prove to them almost within an hour's talk that it would take them less time and money to publish themselves than to try find a publisher, because of the cost of Xeroxing and the cost of postage and the cost of waiting and so forth. But not any of them are ever interested in doing that. What you have involved here is status and snobbery. They want someone else to say, "We love you." If they are self-published, who is saying that to them? Yet, it clearly is a solution to a lot of writers' problems. It is a partial solution, but a solution.

Ozick: Proust did it.

Kalechofsky: In fact, almost every major writer has done that. Mark Twain did it, Hart Crane did it, Stephen Crane did it, James Joyce's friends did it. You can go down the list of people who did it. An enormous amount of great literature has come through these self-published presses. Yet people are horrified when you suggest this. I have given talks on it, I have pleaded with writers to do it. I've said to them, "You're good, but if I publish you I take the money and time away from my book"—I mean, as a writer I am in direct competition with the people who send me their manuscripts. I say to them, "I learned how to do it, you can learn how to do it. If I can learn to write an invoice, you can learn to write an invoice. I can show you how to do a cover in black and white—it won't cost you much, you don't need a four-color cover. I say, at least get it out!"

Lish: A most attractive vision of where publishing might desirably go: not a recrudescence of the small press and a decentralization, but in fact a reduction to individual authorship and entrepreneurial behavior; a remarkable thing—no more publishing houses. I love it! If one could get the paper manufacturers and the binders no longer to play ball with organized enterprises but only with individuals...

Nissenson: Talk to the trees, we have to talk to the trees and say, "Look..."