



A CONVERSATION WITH BARNEY ROSSET

Win McCormack

In bestowing on Barney Rosset the honorific of *Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 1999, the French Ministry of Culture said: "You brought writers considered marginal into the mainstream. We are still reaping the fruits of your relentless efforts and achievements, and such is your legacy that the American public is indebted to you for many of the most interesting books it reads."

The recipient of this accolade was raised in Chicago, Illinois, where his left-leaning political views were shaped in part by attendance at the progressive Francis Parker School. His later education was at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and the New School for Social Research in New York. He served in the Army Signal Corps during World War II, as an officer in a photographic company stationed in China.

In 1951 Rosset purchased a small publishing company called Grove Press and proceeded to turn it into what was arguably, during

its heyday, the most influential alternative book press in the history of American publishing. Grove—and Grove's magazine, the *Evergreen Review*, launched in 1957—published, among other writers, most of the French avant-garde of the era, including Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean Genet, and Eugene Ionesco; most of the American Beats of the fifties, including Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg; and most of the key radical political thinkers of the sixties, including Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and Regis Debray. He published Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* after it had been scorned by more mainstream publishers—and sold two million copies of it in the bargain. He made a specialty of Japanese literature, and introduced the future Nobel Prize winner Kenzaburo Oe to an American public. He published the first unexpurgated edition of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the first edition of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in America, partly to deliberately provoke the censors. Through his legal victories in the resulting obscenity cases, as well as in one brought on by *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, a sexually explicit Swedish documentary film he distributed, he was probably more responsible than any other single individual for ending the censorship of literature and film in the United States.

Grove Press was sold in 1985; its backlist is now part of Grove/Atlantic Inc. This interview was conducted in the East Village loft where Rosset and his companion Astrid Myers live and operate *Evergreen Review, Inc.*, a nonprofit company that manages the *Evergreen Review* Web site and the publishing company Foxrock. The long room is dominated by a pool table at its center that is surrounded by a myriad of bookshelves crammed with Grove publications, files, and memorabilia.

Win McCormack: Barney, what *Tin House* would like to discuss is your uncanny ability to spot the great writers of your era.

Let me read you something you once said: "You might not know what's going to fly into your web, but you put it where you think there

might be flies. If you leave your web out long enough, you might have the option to pick only those flies that please you, and eventually you can discern a pattern or similarity in the flies that you choose, and finally you accidentally learn to choose wisely.”

What was the web that you put out, and where did you put it? And who were the first to fly into it?

Barney Rosset: I don't think you can go at it quite that way. I had done a lot of reading prior to Grove Press, in high school, in college, in the army, and I had developed my own taste, for good or for bad. For example, Henry Miller's work had entered my life in 1940, in full force. There were also people like Hemingway and Malraux, and others, whom I had read and admired.

If you have a small publishing company, or a large one for that matter, many people whom you admire are published by somebody else—for example, Hemingway, or Faulkner, or Malraux. So already you're circumscribed to a degree. Your web can't catch them; they're caught. So if you, let's say, find that somebody like Miller, whom you liked, is available, you start doing something about it.

WM: When you started Grove Press, Henry James was one of the first authors you published.

BR: He certainly was, the very first.

WM: How did that happen?

BR: That happened through my first wife, Joan Mitchell, later a very famous artist. Joan's mother was the editor of *Poetry* magazine. She was the editor of it for many, many years and a poet herself. Joan was a very astute person, with very good taste for writing, just as good as for painting. She was the one who really directly got me into Grove. John Balcomb and Robert Phelps had started Grove Press and Grove Street. They published three books and quit. They really had quit. They had wanted to do *The Monk*, a gothic novel by Matthew G. Lewis. They had it almost ready. I loved *The Monk*. That was the first book we physically published. It had been published several times

with changes, so we did a variorum edition, and I went to Princeton and got John Berryman, a very well-known poet at that time, to do an introduction.

The Golden Bowl was a novel by Henry James that Joan particularly liked, and she asked me to do that. I went to Princeton again and got R. P. Blackmur, who was at that time the leading writer on James, to do an introduction. It wasn't accidental that we did James, it was a direct result of being pushed by Joan. Then I went right on, did six or seven more of him.

WM: Was he out of print at the time?

BR: Not everything of his, but most. We did about eight volumes, and I got Leon Edel, a professor at NYU who was on his way to writing the famous five-volume biography of James, to do introductions to two of the books. I bought *The Golden Bowl* from Scribner's. Scribner's sent a wonderful, elderly gentleman along with Whitney Darrow, a famous editor, to my apartment on Ninth Street to see if I really existed. He walked up the four flights, and he was satisfied we were real, and we paid his small advance, and then paid the royalties to Scribner's.

WM: So you were responsible for reviving the great traditionalist Henry James.

BR: Yes. We also did other American writers such as Sherwood Anderson, who seemed to have gotten lost somewhere along the way.

WM: Was he out of print as well?

BR: Yes. I thought he was a very important writer. To me, these were the basics of American left-wing idealism, or liberalism: Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and Lincoln Steffens, whom I didn't publish but I certainly would have if he had been out of print.

WM: You famously published *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

BR: Yes. The only book of D. H. Lawrence we did.

WM: All of us who were boys in the fifties owe you a great deal of gratitude for that.

BR: Personally, I didn't like it that much at first. As time went on I got to like it more. I had a lot of feeling about Lawrence—to me he was, no matter what he claimed to be, a rather aristocratic Englishman, and my Irish background made me rebel against him, even though he was doing exactly what he should have been doing—trying to prevail against the industrialization of society and the sterilization of modern life. I thought he was very heavy-handed.

WM: He did not have a light touch.

BR: He didn't have a light touch at all. His descriptions of sex, I think, are ridiculous.

WM: As a publisher, did you have a strategy? I read that you said you published D. H. Lawrence so that someday you could publish someone like Henry Miller.

BR: Somebody *like* him? No, *him*, and very specifically *Tropic of Cancer*. The minute I got into publishing, that became my goal—now I can do it!

I don't know if we would have gotten away with publishing *Chatterley* or not if it hadn't been for Mark Schorer, a professor of English at Berkeley, who came up with the idea in the first place. Not for Miller, but for *Chatterley*. To him that was not a means to an end, it was the beginning *and* the end. He was a wonderful defender of *Chatterley* and of Lawrence, and I admired that and I liked it, but to me it was really a way to get to Miller. And in my correspondence with Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press I talk about how to get to Burroughs through Miller. To me, the direct line of descent was—you know, like a lineup in baseball—Lawrence to Miller to Burroughs.

WM: Henry James to Lawrence to Miller to Burroughs—how about that?

BR: I would accept that. Publishing James created a foundation to show that we were not doing what we were accused of doing by a lot of people: publishing *Lady Chatterley* as just a sensational trick. I didn't publish James for that reason. I hadn't thought about that ulterior purpose at the time, but it did not hurt. It was a good backdrop to have.

WM: Your relationship with Henry Miller goes back to your freshman year at Swarthmore College.

BR: My relationship with his writing.

WM: Did you discover *Tropic of Cancer* that year?

BR: I hardly discovered it. Somebody led me to it. Why, I don't know. It would be interesting to ask that person. He must have seen something in me that was a little different than the other students at Swarthmore. He told me exactly where to go. To a famous bookstore, the Gotham Book Mart on Forty-seventh Street.

WM: Why do you think the book had such an impact on you?

BR: I've been thinking about that a lot. First of all, it's certainly disrespectful to most of what were thought of as bourgeois American values. Two other books of Miller I read at the time were *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and *The Cosmological Eye*, both published by New Directions, I think. *Tropic of Cancer* actually fits right in with them. *Tropic of Cancer* isn't that different except in its overt sexual terms, which seemed to me at the time very surrealistic. Miller himself struck me as being a very unlikable person. The personality that came through, his arrogance, his foisting himself upon other people to feed him. He would plan a whole week ahead of time: "I'm having dinner at such and such a place this night, and dinner at someone else's the following night," et cetera. None of these people really wanted him, but they couldn't avoid him. That didn't endear him to me.

What I realize is this. He had an affair with a woman—I think her name is Mona in the book. She is modeled very closely, I think, on

a real person. It's a terrible affair, an apparent disaster, but he's very much in love with her, and he loses her, totally. I think now, looking back at that loss, it was so catastrophic it set him free. Something like that happened to me at Swarthmore. I went to Swarthmore very much in love with a girl at Vassar, and I felt very strongly and, ultimately, correctly, that I had lost her. There was nothing to replace her. It was like Miller, who when he really lost Mona, he's free. A catastrophe that sets him free to go out and be himself, whatever "himself" is. Very obnoxious, perhaps, but free to do what he wanted to do. I think that that was what I was looking for, a way out of my own dilemma.

When I've written about *Tropic of Cancer* I've used it as a sort of an anti-American-middle-class weapon, but I think deeper down what was important to me was this catastrophic loss that you suffer and then you decide to go on living. Very existential, although I didn't know that word then.

WM: When you met the real Miller, how did he match the image you'd formed of him from reading his works?

BR: He matched up pretty well: not too friendly, very involved in his own affairs. I got to like him more each time I saw him. In the beginning he was very suspicious. I immediately coined a name for him, "The Hooded Cobra," because he had very narrow, Asian-like eyes, typically Japanese. He looked out from very little space between his eyelids, and I thought he was always being very appraising of the situation, and not really open.

At one point I had Norman Mailer write a book about him. Henry just could not understand why he was doing that. He kept figuring there was something there that wasn't there. Mailer was simply a great admirer of his writing and his life. I don't think Henry could accept that. He thought Mailer was after something that he couldn't put his finger on.

WM: You had a great deal of trouble getting Miller to let you publish *Tropic of Cancer* in America.

BR: I did for a long time have trouble. I went to Big Sur to try to convince him. I was terrified by the place. He had a couch on the edge of a cliff. I got vertigo when I looked over the side. He was living like somebody in the Albanian mountains. It was very hard to get to him. A dirt road up a steep hill, with somebody at the bottom of the hill checking you in. His wife, Eve, who was very charming, said, "When Henry arrives I'm going to pretend I don't want you to do the book, because anything I say he disagrees with." She tried playing that role, but it didn't work. It didn't work at that time, but at least he'd met me, so he knew I was interested, and that I was for real. Later his publishers in Europe convinced him to let me do it.

WM: What was his reluctance?

BR: I don't know. I can only surmise. I have the feeling he was enjoying his lifestyle. He was quite famous in certain quite large circles, among people who might read New Directions books or books from the Olympia Press in Paris. He said if this book were published in the United States, the next thing you know, it would be read in colleges as a textbook.

WM: He didn't want to be mainstream.

BR: He did not. I loved that idea, and proceeded to try to fulfill it, I might add, and did to a degree. He did not seem to understand. He liked being an outlaw, is my strong feeling. We were trying to take away his right to be an outlaw. And we did: *Tropic of Cancer* became accepted.

WM: How did Beckett fly into your web?

BR: I had actually read a little bit of Beckett in *Transition* magazine and a couple of other places. I was going to the New School. My New School life and the beginnings of Grove crossed over. At the New School I had professors like Wallace Fowley, Alfred Kazin, Stanley Kunitz, and others who were very, very important to me. I was reading and writing papers for them, and one day I read in the *New York*

Times about a play called *Waiting for Godot* that was going on in Paris. It was a small clip, but it made me very interested. I got ahold of it and read it. It had something to say to me. Oddly enough, it had a kind of desolation of scene, like Miller, though in its language, its lack of verbiage, it was the opposite of Miller. Still, the sense of a very contemporary lost soul—very interesting. I got Wallace Fowley to read it. His specialty was French literature. His judgment meant a lot to me because he was so different from me. He was a convert to Catholicism, he was gay, and incredibly intelligent. He read the play and told me that he thought—and this before anybody had really heard about it much—that it would be one of the most important works of the twentieth century. And Sylvia Beach got involved in it somehow; she was a fan of Beckett.

Waiting for Godot just hit something in me. I got what Beckett was available and published it. He flew into the web and got trapped. He had been turned down by Simon and Schuster, I found out, much earlier, on an earlier novel.

WM: In choosing writers over the course of your career, to what extent did you rely on the judgment of people you trusted and respected, like Wallace Fowley or Dick Seaver or whomever, rather than just on your own sense of things?

BR: A lot! A lot. At Grove it would have been mainly three people, Don Allen, Fred Jordan, and Dick Seaver. Each of us had different interests, but once you have a feel for the other person's mind, what they are thinking—if Fred, for example, brought up a German writer and said, "This is really good, something we should publish," I would not have been very inclined to say no. I found out after a few years that he had a very strong sense of what he was saying and feeling. Not necessarily that I always agreed with him, but a certain sensibility echoed.

WM: When you first met him, how did Beckett match the image you'd formed of him?

BR: I liked him immediately. Unlike Henry, he was very warm. I know some people thought he wasn't. He made me think, ultimately, of a great psychoanalyst, in the way he treated people. If you were Freud's patient, I would imagine Freud listened to you very carefully, with great intensity, and made you feel, while you were with him, that you were the most important thing. Beckett had that same facility, which some people would misinterpret as meaning he was cold. Because he just listened. He was very sympathetic to whatever you had to say, was very warm, but it could be with very few words. I never discussed it with him, but I think he knew a lot about analysis. He was very irascible and unhappy in the younger journals of his that I've read. I introduced him, reintroduced him, to Miller. They had known each other slightly in Paris in the thirties. We three had lunch together, and afterward both of them said more or less the same thing to me, separately: "My, how he's changed! He's so much nicer than he used to be."

WM: Maybe it was true. In both cases.

BR: I think it's true. My feeling is it was true in both cases.

WM: You said somewhere that Miller was intriguing but not as lovable as Beckett, and that as a person Beckett meant a lot to you. It seems to me that he was the greatest of the writers you published.

BR: Absolutely.

WM: It also sounds as if he was the greatest human being among your writers. Do you think there's any connection there?

BR: I hope so! I certainly think that was true. Also, there is an odd connection between Miller and Beckett, something that may be common to most human beings, I don't know. In Beckett's writing it seems to me there's an echo that keeps coming back of a terrible, catastrophic love that he had.

WM: *Krapp's Last Tape*.

BR: *Krapp's Last Tape*. And in many other things as well. He told me about it a little. He was very, very much in love with the girl. She was English. Her father was a teacher, a professor, and they were living in Germany, on the Baltic. He talks about that in *Krapp's Last Tape*, you see elements of the Baltic, the North Sea.

When he wrote *Krapp's Last Tape*, whether I had anything to do with it or not, I don't know, but I had asked him, "Why don't you write in English?" Why wouldn't he type his letters and why wouldn't he write in English? And the first thing that came out, right after that discussion with me, was *Krapp's Last Tape*, written in English.

WM: Why do you think he wrote almost all his later works in French?

BR: My feeling is that it had partly to do with what had happened to him as a very young man being published in England. Although he wasn't anti-British anywhere near to the degree of, say, O'Casey or some of the other Irish writers, nevertheless he was anti-British. He had a real grudge against his British publisher, Chatto and Windus, who took him on and then abandoned him. The British had proved themselves to him by their treatment of him.

More than that, I think of French as being a much calmer language than English. I think English is a very emotional language, and writing in French would be a way for Beckett to put himself in a straitjacket, to a degree. I really, really do. I think maybe it got him away from that sadness that he felt.

WM: He made statements to the effect that English was too beautiful, too poetic a language for the things he wanted to say.

BR: Yes, that fits, that's the way he would put it, but . . . that's putting it very mildly, actually. The first books, *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy*, were written in English. *More Pricks than Kicks* foreshadowed many of the later things. *Waiting for Godot*, though, brought out a lot of things that I believe. More and more, it's obvious to me that a strong element in that play is the reflection of him and Suzanne, his wife-to-be, and their boredom with each other in the Vaucluse during the war,

when they were hiding from the Nazis. Just utter boredom. What can we do? What the hell is going to happen? Hoping that something would happen to excite them, but nothing ever did.

Pozzo, in *Waiting for Godot*, to me, was Joyce. I never got the feeling that Beckett was enamored of Joyce. I mean, as a writer, yes, but as a person, no. Pozzo doesn't treat Lucky very nicely.

WM: Joyce as sadist . . .

BR: Yes. Beckett was Lucky, but he was only one of the models, I think. Lucky was put together from a mélange of several young Irish devotees like himself whom Joyce used very cruelly.

WM: If it was Beckett's time in Provence that led to *Waiting for Godot*, his breakthrough work, that period would be the most crucial of his life, those years of boredom down there.

BR: I think they certainly must have been very important ones, in terms of getting him to write. In terms of emotional involvement, I think that was in the Baltic. *Krapp's Last Tape* is pretty straight-out emotion. It's not like *Waiting for Godot*, or *Endgame*. It's not French! It's far and away my personal favorite.

WM: Did your publishing Beckett lead the Beats to your door?

BR: No, not to my door, to Beckett's door. I thought American Beat writers were very, very good in one sense: they were much more outgoing toward other cultures, toward French, Italian, and German literature. Whereas the Europeans were not very outgoing toward Americans at that particular time. People like Ginsberg and Burroughs recognized Beckett early on. They really did, and they wanted him to accept *them*.

WM: But Beckett was not a Beat.

BR: He was not a Beat. He was not a Beat! I think he was particularly disturbed by Burroughs's cut-up theory. He did not like to do things by accident. If there was going to be an accident, it was going to be

one that he planned. To take a text and cut things out and put them next to each other, that was not his idea of how to write.

WM: There's a story I've read about how Beckett, when he was acting as Joyce's secretary, was taking dictation for *Finnegans Wake* and somebody came to the door and said something and Joyce immediately incorporated it into the book, and Beckett was absolutely appalled at the randomness of that.

BR: Yes, that would be similar to Burroughs. I would personally applaud it. I would disagree with Beckett about that. Maybe when he was much younger he could have been more open to that.

WM: How did he regard his earlier work?

BR: He constantly put it down, all the time. Didn't matter which thing it was. I was reading the other day a letter from him about *More Pricks than Kicks*. He hated it! He wrote to me and said, "I don't know how I ever allowed you to . . . the idea of publishing it is terrible. It's loathsome. I'm sorry I put you in this trouble and, and send back the contract."

However, as the years went by, he would change his mind and insist on publishing the earlier things. And would be giving out ideas on how to do it.

WM: How did you get to the Beats? The second issue of the *Evergreen Review* was devoted to them.

BR: I would say that Don Allen was the leader in that. He was very aware of them, and brought to us the writings of Allen Ginsberg. Allen Ginsberg couldn't have been more different from Don Allen. Burroughs might be a little closer to Don, in his ascetic, Puritan exterior. Don wasn't enthusiastic about anything. The worst thing you could do—if you tried to get him to be enthusiastic, that would turn him off forever. If you just went by what he turned up, however, he was very important to me. Kerouac, for example, whom he brought to us, was to me immediately in line with Whitman and Miller and

Sandburg, a loosening up of those figures, of that tradition. Things from Kerouac that came much later, I did not like too much. I thought he began to lose it. Don was very involved with Zen Buddhism, but not me. When Kerouac seemed to immerse himself completely in Zen Buddhism he lost it, in my opinion.

WM: Did you bring any of the Beats together with Beckett?

BR: I did once. I had a dinner at Maurice Girodias's restaurant in Paris with Beckett and Burroughs. I've told the story so many times I'm beginning to wonder if it was real or if I made it up or somebody else did, but my memory is that Burroughs tried to get Beckett interested in cut-up. And Beckett, who was extremely polite, really polite, said, "That's not writing; that's plumbing." That's my memory. Whether he ever said it or not, that's the way he felt.

WM: What about Ionesco? Did you have a relationship with him?

BR: Yes, much less but real, and very amusing. Ionesco lived in the same absurd way as a character out of *The Bald Soprano*. Beckett and Ionesco shared a lot. They admired each other, I might add. They didn't really know each other well but they were very aware of each other. They were both expatriate writers. Really unusual, both took French to be their language to write in, one from English, the other from Romanian. To me they were both refugees living in Paris, but the French liked that so much they adopted them. Beckett is now considered a French writer. Ionesco is considered a French writer. I don't think they are, but a lot of the French literary community obviously thinks they are.

Ionesco was the bourgeois character carried to its ultimate absurdity. He wanted to be accepted as a bourgeois, and of course at the same time he was making fun of it. Not as engaging as Beckett, or Miller, for me. I was a little more at a distance from him. I got closer to Jean Genet.

WM: Talk about Genet.

BR: Jean Genet could have come right out of the slums of Chicago, my home city—a tough city. When the Democratic National Convention was held there in 1968, to my eternal discredit I did not go to it. I was afraid. I literally was afraid. I thought, If I go there, I'm gonna get killed. Since before the convention I had been anticipating, more or less, what happened. But Genet went, and Dick Seaver went, and Burroughs went, and Allen Ginsberg went, and Norman Mailer. A lot of people went. I felt too close to Chicago. I had reserved a room a year in advance, and I turned it over to CBS. My childhood companion Haskell Wexler not only went, he made from it his film *Medium Cool*, a great creative success.

Genet fit right in there. He made a speech in the park, under the hail of the tear gas, which Dick Seaver translated to the crowd. Nationality didn't much matter to him. I don't think he knew where he came from. He was a wanderer by himself. He was a Henry Miller with more overt emotions.

WM: You've said elsewhere that he was quintessentially a thief, a criminal.

BR: He was! He was sentenced to life in prison for various crimes. To the great credit of the French, all these famous writers gathered together in a committee and appealed his sentence and won. There was no point in continuing to arresting him. He was going to steal till the day he died. So what?

When we first met Genet, my second wife, Loly, had beautiful earrings on. He took us to the top of a building in Montmartre and pointed out the window, saying, "Look what's going on down there!" Loly had one hand on her ear, and Genet had his hand out to get the earring. It was beautiful. Nothing happened. He didn't shove her hand away, she didn't take it away. She kept her earring. She liked it.

WM: How did you get your connection with Editions de Minuit in Paris and publish not only Beckett but also the French nouvelle vague writers?

BR: It started with Beckett. Then I met Alain Robbe-Grillet there; he was an editor. I liked him very much, as a person and as a writer. He was the important one to me there, next to Beckett.

I liked Robbe-Grillet so much as a writer that I tried to imitate him. It was the getting rid of overt emotion to me—not showing emotion directly, but by description—cold, flat, you could almost say medical description that conveyed, to me, an enormous amount of emotion . . . by describing objects, the slightest change, the slightest shift of position of a piece of rope, or the way a bicycle wheel was turned, and describing exactly how it was turned—but not telling you anything about a person's emotional reaction to what was going on. But you knew.

WM: Have you read his autobiography, *Le Miroir Qui Revient* [translated as *Ghosts in the Mirror*]?

BR: No.

WM: He says in it that the idea he put forth at the time of objective, neutral writing, of purely objective description of the physical world, was a deception, a ruse, and that what he was really writing was his own subjective fantasies, particularly his sexual fantasies.

BR: Sure! Absolutely! "Ruse"? Call it whatever you want, but that's the way I read it from the beginning—as his sexual fantasies. But by doing it in that way he was able to convey them very powerfully. He is, I think, one of the most sexually charged writers I've ever read. And his wife, too, who is also a writer under the name Jean de Berg.

WM: Nabokov, you know, was a big fan of Robbe-Grillet, and I read once that the Nabokovs invited Robbe-Grillet and his wife to dinner in Paris, and she came dressed as Lolita. I guess she is quite a bit younger than her husband.

BR: That's her! She looks like Lolita. Very tiny. Very tiny, but very tough, boy, let me tell you, underneath that Lolita appearance.

WM: What other writers whom you've published have been important to you, as writers and as people?

BR: Kenzaburo Oe became very important to me, as a writer and a human being.

WM: Did you tell me a story once about how you flew to Tokyo to meet Oe and decided, based purely on your meeting with him, to publish him?

BR: No, no. We had already decided to publish him. I got interested in Japanese literature because of the war and because of Donald Allen, who knew a great deal about it . . . I saw a sensibility, a taste there, and so we put a web up to catch Japanese writers. They were available. Even though Knopf had made quite a specialty of Japanese literature. Very strong. Most interestingly, when Oe came along, he was going to be published by Knopf, and he switched to us—which said something for him, or for us, or against Knopf, I don't know. I wasn't even aware of it at the time, that he had made a conscious decision to do that.

We'd already made our mind up to publish him when I went to Tokyo and had hired John Nathan, probably the best translator of Japanese in his generation, as his translator. I hadn't met Oe and was very curious to know what he was like.

WM: What was he like?

BR: I'll give you an idea of Oe's character: He greatly admired Norman Mailer. He was asked to come to Harvard, I think by Henry Kissinger, who was holding international seminars there and inviting people like Oe. Oe went. He sent me a letter saying, "I met the great Norman Mailer yesterday, but he didn't meet me." That's Oe, very self-effacing, very. Mailer, whatever else, is pretty filled with himself. Oe said, "Unfortunately for me, he didn't meet me." I believe that was unfortunate for Norman, that he missed something, really lost something there.

Oe came to East Hampton and stayed with us, as had Beckett. I remember watching a film with him about Che Guevara. Oe and I both saw Che as a great hero, the hero who ultimately failed. Oe and I were both taken by Che's heroic persona. This guy from the CIA had chased Che all over the world and finally caught him in Bolivia, and he said, "With these little guys"—meaning Bolivian soldiers—"we caught him," and that was a great triumph because he was a great soldier. His enemy was the one best able to appreciate him. Oe and I were both crying.

WM: What about his writing?

BR: Oe, like Beckett and Miller, wrote beautifully and hauntingly of a romantic disaster in his life. He handled the situation in a different way. It's treated in his book *A Personal Matter*. The protagonist is very, very much in love with a woman and is planning to leave his wife for her. Then the wife gives birth, and the child is born with a faulty head, its brain literally cut diagonally. The child should die, the protagonist thinks. But the child does not die. This was also the case in real life, because I know the child! The protagonist tells the doctors to let the child die, but they don't. The baby keeps on living. It doesn't die. It keeps on living, and then, as the days go by, the character changes his mind; he realizes that the child's going to survive and decides that he's going to go back to his wife. He gives up the big romantic adventure of his life to do that, to return to his wife and help raise the child. To my utter amazement, the real child grew up and became a famous composer! He doesn't speak very well, but he can compose like Bach, and is more famous in Japan than Oe.

Miller and Beckett found themselves by losing someone and going off on their own. Oe found himself by going home and dealing with the situation, in a very existentialist and beautiful way. He reversed it. He reversed the dynamic.

WM: In designating you a Commander in the Order of Arts and Letters, the French Ministry of Culture referred to your "conception of

publishing as an art.” Do you have any final words for us on the practice of that art, on the spinning of your web?

BR: Why do you like one girl better than another? You can make up reasons, you know. You can make them up. But ultimately, you had the answer before you made up the reason.

These things are not done by the numbers. You won't find her, or the great author, or the secrets of a painting, in a mathematical equation or a sociological treatise—but when it happens, you can sometimes say, “Ah, sweet mystery of life at last I've found you.” Then go with it. Don't ask the whys and hows of it. Just go with it. Your very own mystery.