

INVENTIONS AND IMITATIONS: TRADITION AND THE
ADVANCED GUARD IN THE WORK OF EDOUARD RODITI

Edouard Roditi

Interviewed by Richard Candida Smith

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: June 6, 1910, in Paris, France.

Education: Elstree School, Hertfordshire, England; Oxford University; University of Chicago; University of California, Berkeley.

BOOKS:

Poems For F. Editions de Sagittaire, Paris, 1934.

Mon piaffeur noir (translation), Ronald Firbank. Gallimard, Paris, 1938.

Prison within Prison: Three Hebrew Elegies. The Press of James A. Decker, Prairie City, Illinois, 1941.

Pieces of Three. The 5x8 Press, Harrington Park, New Jersey, 1942.

Young Cherry Trees Secured against Hares (translation), André Breton. View Editions, New York, 1946; reprinted by University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1969.

Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study. New Directions, New York, 1947.

Poems 1928-1948. New Directions, New York, 1949.

Dialogues on Art. Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.

Selbstanalyse eines Sammlers. Verlag Galerie der Spéégel, Cologne, 1960.

Memed, My Hawk (translation), Yashar Kemal. Pantheon Books, New York, 1961.

De L'Homosexualité. Sedimo, Paris, 1962.

Pillar of Salt (translation), Albert Memmi. Orion Press, New York, 1962.

Les plus belles lettres d'Eugène Delacroix. Calmann Lévy, Paris, 1963.

Mein Lieblings Mord und andere Erzählungen (translation),

Ambrose Bierce. Insel Verlag, Frankfurt, 1963.

Propos sur l'art recueillis par Edouard Roditi. Sedimo, Paris, 1967.

New Hieroglyphic Tales: Prose Poems. Kayak Press, San Francisco, 1968.

Magellan of the Pacific. Faber & Faber, London, 1972.

Emperor of Midnight. Black Sparrow Press, Los Angeles, 1974.

The Disorderly Poet. Capra Press, Santa Barbara, 1975.

Meetings with Conrad. The Press of the Pegacycle Lady, Los Angeles, 1977.

The Delights of Turkey. New Directions, New York, 1977.

In a Lost World. Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1978.

Dialogues on Art, Revised Edition. Ross-Erikson, Santa Barbara, 1980.

The Temptations of a Saint. Ettan Press, Rancho Santa Fe, 1980.

Thrice Chosen. Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1981.

Etre un autre. Lisbon, illustrated by Manuel Cargaleiro, 1982.

New Old & New Testaments. Red Ozier Press, New York, 1983.

More Dialogues on Art. Ross-Erikson, Santa Barbara, 1984.

Hieroglyphic Tales (translation), Horace Walpole. Librairie Jose Corti, Paris, 1985.

The Wandering Fool, poems of Yunus Emre (translation). Cadmus Editions, Tiburon, 1985.

PERIODICAL AND PUBLISHING ASSOCIATIONS:

Accord: co-editor with Alain Bosquet.

Antaeus: contributing editor.

L'Arche: art critic.

Arts: Paris correspondent.

Conjunctions: contributing editor.

Editions de Sagittaire: partner and editor.

Frank: advisor, contributing editor.

Das Lot: co-founder and co-editor with Alain Bosquet and Alexander Koval.

Perspectives, USA: translation supervisor.

Pictures on Exhibit: art critic.

Present Tense: member of editorial board.

HONORS:

Marjorie Peabody Waite Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, May 1982.

Served on panel of Neustadt International Prize for Literature, 1984.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY:

Interpreting: United States Department of Army: Office of War Information, French short-wave broadcasting, 1941; Voice of America, 1942; Nuremberg War Crimes Trial, 1946; Allied Control Council, Berlin, Germany, legal directorate, 1946-1950.

United States Department of State: San Francisco United Nations Charter Conference, 1945.

Free-lance positions, 1950-1984, including World Health Organization (WHO); United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); European Economic Community (EEC, "Common Market"); International Labor Organization (ILO); and numerous labor union conferences;

personal interpreting for Federal German Republic
President Theodor Heuss, West Berlin Bürgomeister Ernst
Reuter.

Teaching: University of Missouri at Kansas City, 1940;
San Francisco State University, 1966; Brown University,
1968; University of California, Santa Cruz, 1970; State
University of New York at Binghamton, 1982.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Richard Cândida Smith, principal editor, Oral History Program, UCLA. B.A., Theater Arts, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: The Bradford A. Booth Room in the Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, UCLA.

Dates: May 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 1985.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: Sessions began at three in the afternoon and ended around five-thirty. A total of twelve hours and fifteen minutes of conversation was recorded.

Persons present during interview: Smith and Roditi.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

Plans for the interview were finalized in February 1985. The interviewer began research knowing that the interview would have to be conducted during a period of one week in May, when Mr. Roditi would be visiting Los Angeles, and that, due to the tight schedule, all research would have to be completed prior to the first session.

Smith concentrated his research on the Roditi Collection in the Department of Special Collections in the UCLA Library. He reviewed eighteen document boxes of correspondence, twenty boxes of manuscripts, a box of photographs, a box of autobiographical manuscripts, as well as Roditi's publications and previous interviews, critical literature on Roditi's career, and background readings on the broad range of topics which would be important subjects for discussion in the interview.

The interviewer decided to avoid as much as possible areas already covered in previous interviews and in autobiographical manuscripts. Thus Roditi's early childhood and family history were not the starting point of the interview, since this period of his life is described in detail and with eloquence in several hundred pages of draft for an autobiography. Other manuscripts in the Roditi Collection discuss at length Roditi's battle with epilepsy. Other documents, including two lengthy

interviews, discuss love and the evolution of Roditi's homosexual identity. The interviewer decided to limit discussion of family life, health, and love by focusing on the ways these aspects of Roditi's personal history were treated in Roditi's poetry and books.

The interview followed a chronological format starting with Roditi's nascent adolescent interests in art and literature. The interview traces the development of Roditi's career as writer, translator, interpreter, and publisher, while eliciting personal memories of notable figures and events. At the beginning of each session, Roditi suggested the topic with which he wanted to begin the day's discussion.

EDITING:

David P. Gist, assistant editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings and edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Roditi reviewed and approved the edited transcript. He made only occasional minor changes for clarity of meaning or for accuracy.

The interviewer prepared the table of contents and interview history; the editor, the biographical summary and index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

The interview relates to Collection 644 in the Department of Special Collections. The Roditi Collection contains correspondence, manuscripts by Roditi and others, ephemera, books from Roditi's library, photographs, and documents relating to personal and family history referred to in the course of the interview.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

MAY 13, 1985

SMITH: I thought we would start this afternoon with the meeting that you had with Joseph Conrad when you were a child of twelve and how that may have helped put you on the road to becoming a writer.

RODITI: I don't think it was very important as far as my consciousness goes, because I was at school in England and, at the time, I had no ambition whatsoever as far as writing goes. If anything, I was more interested in art, and up to the age of 16, I think, I spent a great deal of time drawing.

SMITH: How old were you when you met Conrad?

RODITI: I was twelve, and the only writing I did at that age was what I had to do in school; that's to say I had to translate English poems into Latin poetry, English prose into Latin prose, and just about that time too, I began having to translate into ancient Greek. It was around the age of fifteen or sixteen that I started writing some extremely bad poetry in English, because I suddenly discovered it was much easier to write poetry in English than to translate the poems from English into Latin or into Greek. I had to translate so much poetry--Byron, and Shelley, and Macaulay--the kind of stuff that was being taught in school at the time--that I had a fairly general notion, although our English classes were not very good, a

fairly general notion of what traditional English or American poetry was. We had to learn by heart such things as Longfellow's "Excelsior," which I think nobody learns any longer in any school in America. But in England we were still learning that.

SMITH: What school were you sent to?

RODITI: It was called Elstree School, and I was sent there because, although my parents were Americans, in those days crossing the Atlantic to send me to school would have abridged my vacations by fifteen days at least with the two trips by ship. So I was sent to school in England, as my father [Oscar Roditi] represented American firms in Paris. I went to this school at the age of nine.

The headmaster of the school was a former naval officer in the British navy called Edward Lancelot Sanderson. He was a friend of Conrad's. As a matter of fact, I discovered much later that Conrad dedicated one of his novels, **The Outcast of the Isles**, to Edward Lancelot Sanderson. Conrad used to come and see him sometimes. One Saturday, when Conrad turned up, the headmaster was busy discussing some problem with the parents of some other boy, and, as he knew that Conrad spoke French and enjoyed being able to chat in French from time to time, he sent for me, and I spent the next half hour walking around the garden--it was a fine summer day--chatting in French with Conrad.

This happened twice, if I remember right. It was then that Conrad said to me that with my facility with languages, I should become a writer. Well, this didn't sink in very deep at the time, and I had never read a book of Conrad's yet. I read a couple of his books only about two years later, when I mentioned quite by chance to one of my older cousins that I had met Conrad, and my older cousin was absolutely dumbfounded that I had met such a great writer already at that age. And she insisted on my reading him. And I began to be a great admirer of Conrad, and I still am.

SMITH: I understand your father was opposed to any kind of artistic career for you?

RODITI: Oh, yes. My father was absolutely convinced that all artists die of starvation, and that their works are worth money and sell for a decent sum only after their death.

SMITH: But at that time, you were intent on becoming a painter--

RODITI: Oh, yes.

SMITH: --a graphic artist.

RODITI: At the age of sixteen, certainly.

SMITH: But at the age of sixteen, you also started writing poetry.

RODITI: Yeah. At the age of seventeen, I began to take it

more seriously, and that's when I submitted a couple of things to magazines, advanced-guard magazines, and one of them was published before I was eighteen, and the other one was accepted while I was still seventeen, but came in print only when I was eighteen.

SMITH: Now at home, did you speak French, English?

RODITI: Both languages.

SMITH: Just back and forth.

RODITI: Yeah.

SMITH: Any pattern?

RODITI: No. I spoke more French with my father, more English with my mother [Violet Roditi], and then, of course, we had domestic servants, and I spoke French with them and with the neighbors.

SMITH: So you probably spoke French more than English until you went away to school?

RODITI: Yeah, certainly. And when I went to school--I'd never associated with many English-speaking kids, so that I had absolutely no knowledge of slang and no-- I'd never known any English children. I was very unhappy at first.

SMITH: Who were the writers that were influencing you when you started out, let's say when you were sixteen? William Blake, for example, was he an influence?

RODITI: Yes. William Blake; briefly the Sitwells [Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell]; certainly some French advanced-

guard writers, [Arthur] Rimbaud, certainly; and, well, Eliot, but the early Eliot, *Prufrock*, [*and Other Observations*] 'cause I hadn't-- He hadn't yet published anything beyond the *Ariel* poems. Pound, in *Persona*. But a great number of French writers.

SMITH: Now, when you were living in Paris, you used to go to Shakespeare and Company, the bookstore. Did meeting Pound there, how much, how did that influence you? Being around writers such as Pound, or Joyce?

RODITI: Well, I met Pound only once, and he was so unpleasant that I don't think he influenced me at all. He was in the bookstore, holding forth on the subject of the Homeric odes as if only he knew them. And, well of course, I'd read them--in Greek. And he was being so loud on the subject and authoritarian. I didn't like the sound of his voice. Many years later, reading about Gertrude Stein, I found the exact description of the way he was behaving: he was being what she called a "village explainer."

SMITH: Which means?

RODITI: Well, there he was in the middle of Paris and in Shakespeare and Co., which certainly wasn't a village, explaining with this Idaho accent of his, as he might have explained Homer to a bunch of cowboys. And we just weren't cowboys. He assumed such ignorance in his listeners that he was rather offensive.

SMITH: Did you encounter Joyce?

RODITI: Yes, several times. He was never very communicative, and, I mean, I'm not the only one to say so. He became communicative, I understand, only after drinking. And as I was too young to drink much, and was never up that late at night, I never found him very communicative when I met him in the afternoon. He was communicative on one subject once. And he-- I've forgotten what the occasion was. I think he-- He started talking about his eye doctor in Zürich and about the years he'd spent in Zürich. I had been reading this strange, nineteenth century English poet, [Thomas Lovell] Beddoes, who committed suicide, or who died a mysterious and very bloody death in Zürich. I asked Joyce whether he'd ever read Beddoes, and he said that he certainly had. And as a consequence of this, Allannah Harper, an English woman who edited a magazine called **Echange**, in Paris, which was part English, part French, decided to run a translation of a selection from Beddoes in the next issue. Many, many years later, I had a correspondence with Umberto Eco, the Italian semiologist who had published an extremely abstruse paper on Joyce's sources for a character who appears in **Finnegan's Wake** briefly, and who is called, if I remember right, Minucius Mandrake. And Eco, in the sources for the name Minucius Mandrake, had never thought of looking up Beddoes, because in **Death's Jest-Book**, there's a jester called Homunculus Mandrake.

Since I knew that Joyce had read Beddoes, I know this is at least one of the sources for that name. I was not able to convince Eco, because he had already published his paper. And what is published can no longer be changed, I understand, especially if you're a noted semiologist.

SMITH: Now in 1926, you were sixteen years old, you met Georgette Camille--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: --who is a French poet.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And she began to introduce you into the surrealist circles. Had you been familiar with the surrealists at that--

RODITI: I'd read them a bit.

SMITH: *Littérature*? And--

RODITI: Yes. Especially some of the early books of [Paul] Eluard and [Antonin] Artaud. I remember my father once seeing that I was reading a book of Artaud's--a first edition which would be worth a great deal of money today-- and he took it away from me, and he saw a couple of obscene words in it, and threw it into the fire. Yes. Where rare books end.

SMITH: Right. Could you describe Georgette Camille a little bit.

RODITI: She was a rather good-looking woman of a very

wealthy family of the Paris upper bourgeoisie, and she had completely scandalized her family by becoming a surrealist poet and by refusing to marry the young men who'd been selected in turn as suitable matches for her and who all belonged to the Paris upper bourgeoisie. She's now eighty-four years old, and I still see her very often and regularly. She's still unmarried, and she's glad that she never married. But she gave up writing a long time ago, about forty years ago. She gave up for a very peculiar reason: she had a couple of books ready for publication when the war broke out, the last war. And in the course of the occupation of France, her home in Normandy was occupied by the Germans as an officers' billet, and they burnt up all her papers, just lighting fires with them. And she was so discouraged that she's never written a book since then. But recently I managed to convince her to write a piece on Virginia Woolf (because she'd known Virginia Woolf) for a Paris magazine which is doing a special issue on Virginia Woolf. And they were very excited to find a French writer who'd actually known Virginia Woolf as far back as about 1930.

SMITH: How did a sixteen year old boy come to meet a twenty-five year old daughter of the upper bourgeoisie?

RODITI: Well, her family were friends of mine. Her uncle was a society portrait painter, and a very successful one;

he was a friend of my mother's and my father. That's how I met her.

SMITH: And she introduced you to Robert Desnos and René Crevel?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And at that time, you began to do what the surrealists refer to as automatic writing. What did you understand automatic writing to be when you began to do it? What did it connote to you?

RODITI: Well, that one just wrote in a kind of trance-like state without allowing one's reason or one's critical sense to intervene until one had finished.

SMITH: And did you leave it at that, or did you revise?

RODITI: Well, slight revision, very slight, minimal.

SMITH: Which of your poems that are published are products of automatic writing?

RODITI: Some of the poems in the beginning of **Emperor of Midnight**.

SMITH: Such as?

RODITI: Well, "Oracles" to a certain extent, and certainly, "The Prophet Delivered," and "Letters to a Murderer," and "Sea Lost Soul"; then after that I gave it up. And this is only a selection of what I produced, because I very soon became aware of the fact that too much of my readings came out in automatic writing: unconscious memory of

readings. I decided that a more systematic exploration of the unconscious was likely to give better results.

SMITH: Now, both Desnos and Crevel were famous for their writing in trances. Did you witness any of that?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Apparently there were séances.

RODITI: Yes, Desnos was extraordinary. He wrote some poems in these trances which were so much like those of Rimbaud that the surrealists believed for a while that Rimbaud's spirit was dictating them to him.

SMITH: Did they really believe that, or was this a fiction that they chose to believe?

RODITI: It's difficult for me to say now. I think some really believed and some just thought that the fiction was good to propagate.

SMITH: What about Desnos?

RODITI: Well, Desnos was a very sweet and very unintellectual person, and he would just accept whatever one said about it. He was extraordinarily gifted. He had terrific facility, and he could write anything he wanted in no time. But he was also someone very good-hearted. He was about the only surrealist who was caught by the Gestapo and who died in a concentration camp. He was caught because of his activities in the Resistance saving the lives of Jewish children. He was not fighting in the Resistance; he was

doing charitable work in it. An admirable character, in every respect, a great-hearted man.

SMITH: Now, the person who first published you was Carlo Suarès?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And he published "Hands of Desire," or "Prayers at Dawn." Could you talk about him and **Cahiers de l'Etoile**?

RODITI: Well, he was a very strange and very gifted man. He was Egyptian Jewish, the son of a banker, and he had a degree as an architect. But he didn't have to earn a living, and he became converted to Theosophy and was a close friend of Krishnamurti. **Cahiers de l'Etoile** was originally the official periodical of the Krishnamurti Theosophists in French. And as time went by, Suarès became increasingly involved in more and more complex and mystical notions and ultimately in the Cabala. He's now had several of his Cabalistic books, or neo-Cabalistic books translated and published in Berkeley by a firm called Shambala, which goes in for very weird and mystical publications. And he was published in America, in a magazine called **Tree**, by David Meltzer.

SMITH: You're talking now in the sixties and seventies.

RODITI: Yes. He died in his eighties a few years ago. He also became a painter, but not a very good one, unfortunately.

SMITH: He mentions in discussing the poem that you dedicated to him, "The Prophet Delivered," the prophetic tone, which seems to develop very early in your work.

RODITI: Yes, well, I guess it's developed partly because I've always been a great Bible reader, and partly too, because more than the French surrealists, I was well acquainted with the writings of Blake and of the Metaphysical poets before Blake. So this religious streak which comes in my poetry goes really back to the Bible, the Metaphysical poets, Milton, Blake, and my Jewish background. I've tried to reintegrate all this Anglican religious tradition in literature into my Jewish background.

SMITH: Now you have written elsewhere that you weren't terribly aware of your Jewish background--

RODITI: Until the thirties, until the early thirties.

SMITH: Was it Suarès who introduced you to the Cabala?

RODITI: Yes, to some extent. I think I drifted into it myself, by myself through the Metaphysical poets. Because I hit upon a very strange Metaphysical poet called Edward Benlowes, who's been very little read and studied because sometimes [he's] almost incomprehensible. He was a friend of another Metaphysical poet called Francis Quarles. They had both read a little book which was published in England in that time on the Cabala called, I think, **The Mysteries**

of the Rabbins, or something like that, which is derived from Pico della Mirandola and Knorr von Rosenroth and the continental Cabalists, Christian Cabalists. So I actually became interested in it more through my own readings, which were much more extensive than those of Suarês. And then just about that time, an English publisher whom I knew published an edition of the **Zohar** in English, which I purchased and read. So that I think that by 1936, I certainly was more deeply involved in it and better versed in it than Suarês.

SMITH: Now, in the "The Prophet Delivered," there's the theme of "I have come," which of course is an appropriate theme for a young poet of seventeen about to establish himself on the literary stage. What were your perceptions of the career that you would have as a literary man? What kind of goals did you set for yourself?

RODITI: It's very difficult to say, because those were very chaotic years in which I was hesitating between continuing to be a wild surrealist and following the advice of Eliot and becoming a much more structured poet. I finally plumped in the mid-thirties for the second, partly too because I was reading so much and discovering that it takes more than just inspiration, or **flatus** or whatever you want to call it, to be a good poet.

SMITH: More than **flatus**?

RODITI: That's right. It takes-- Meaning just "wind."
And I became more and more involved in reading philosophy. When I went to the University of Chicago in '37, I took up my readings of Plato and Aristotle again, and Kant and Spinoza, and I have continued throughout my life to read philosophy.

SMITH: Well, let's pick up the thread with Eliot. You met him because the two of you were both translating **Anabase** by Saint-John Perse.

RODITI: Yes, I did that when I was-- I started it when I was sixteen, finished it when I was seventeen. Then, I was seventeen when my translation was shown by Sylvia Beach to Archibald MacLeish, and he asked me if he could mail it to Eliot, which he did. And then Eliot wrote me sometime later that if I came to London, he would like to meet me to discuss certain interpretations of some passages which were not quite the same as his. And then he showed me his translation. I was very frank, I mean, there were some things there which obviously were wrong. Then he was not getting any response from Perse, and then finally he got a letter from Perse, in which Perse made the same objections as I had, and so he then revised the whole translation, and it was published.

As for me, my relations with Perse continued to be most frustrating. 'Cause Eliot assured me that he didn't

want to translate anymore of Perse. Until well in the forties, I kept on writing to Perse asking him for authorization to translate this or that and getting no reply. Then when Archibald MacLeish was in the Library of Congress, I asked him to intervene with Perse, and I got a letter from Archibald MacLeish saying that Perse wouldn't authorize me to translate any of his work. I subsequently discovered what Perse's objection was. If you look at the later editions of Perse, in translation or in French, there is always a vast bibliography at the end, in which are listed all his translations--translations of his works into Estonian or Hungarian or Romanian and so on, and only those which were undertaken by people whom he believes to be important writers. Sometimes he was wrong; he had this kind of snobbery that he would only be translated by someone whom he knew to be important. Now he considered Archibald MacLeish more important than Eliot, which was very strange.

SMITH: He did?

RODITI: Yes. Why? Because he had met Archibald MacLeish through Marguerite Caetani di Bassiano, the princess; he had not met Eliot through her. He was a very, very curious character.

SMITH: But you never actually met Perse?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: I find it rather remarkable that both MacLeish and Eliot would want to spend so much time and show such concern for the work of such a young poet with very little published work at the time. How do you explain that, what was your reaction at that time, how did you explain that to yourself? Were you cowed by them?

RODITI: I was utterly cowed by MacLeish, I mean I could scarcely utter a word when I met him. I think that MacLeish had seen through [Eugene] Jolas the poems that Jolas had accepted for **transition** (they hadn't come out yet). He'd seen my translation of *Perse*, and he saw that, for my age, I was, I suppose, rather remarkable. And Eliot, who didn't expect to see a kid of eighteen enter his office at all, he became very sweet and paternal and so on. My first poems that I sent him, "The Oracles," which are in **Emperor of Midnight**, the first poem included in it.

SMITH: [referring to Eliot's hand-written comments on the margins of original Roditi manuscripts] You see these suggested corrections are his. He went through some dozen pages of your poems and changed words and made comments. How did you respond? What was the tenor of his comments and how did you respond to them?

RODITI: My thought was that this was miraculous. It was more than I'd ever expected. It hasn't happened to anybody else that I know of!

SMITH: A unique case. Now Eliot is the counterpoise to the surrealists, in your career.

RODITI: Certainly.

SMITH: You had two choices, two models, in a sense, to follow.

RODITI: I think that I ended up by achieving a synthesis of the two; it's a sort of Hegelian set-up: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

SMITH: Now I noticed, in one of the suggestions, he says, "It's always as well to have some particular bird in mind and consider its habits rather than to write about birds in general." Then you have a line where you say, "My lips are frozen"; he says, "But it's raining, it's not cold enough for your lips to be frozen." Another one where you talk about time being frozen, he says, "I've never seen a clock frozen."

RODITI: Yeah, that's because he, Eliot, had very little sympathy for surrealism.

SMITH: That struck me; I mean, these are images that are surrealist combinations. So do you think he was consciously critiquing the surrealist element in your poetry or was that something that he just objected to as shoddy craftsmanship?

RODITI: I think he objected to it as shoddy craftsmanship from his point of view. He was, he had very little

knowledge of surrealist poetry then. Later he had a bit more, and he was deeply suspicious of it. His appreciation of French poetry was very strange. He was a great admirer of [Jules] Laforgue. And Laforgue is a witty, skillful poet, but nobody in France considers Laforgue a great poet. He's a fine minor poet. Eliot's tastes in French literature of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were very peculiar.

SMITH: Can you recall any of the specific conversations you had with Eliot about poetry?

RODITI: Yes, he certainly admired [Paul] Valéry. Perse, certainly. He seemed to have some admiration for [Paul] Claudel. And Valery Larbaud. But these were all poets who had achieved their style and so on by 1920. I never heard him mention [Guillaume] Apollinaire. And as for contemporary American poets, he never mentioned many to me. Of course, when I met him in '28, he was very much involved in his work as a partner in Faber and Faber, and editor of **The Criterion**. The young poets whom he published with Faber and Faber, very few: [W. H.] Auden's first book of poems, [Stephen] Spender's first book of poems, a book of poems of Horace Gregory, a book by a friend of mine who died very young, called Clere Parsons. That's about all that I can remember.

SMITH: What were the criteria that you think he followed

in selecting the poems and the poets that he liked and wanted to develop? What was it in your poetry that he admired most?

RODITI: Well, the few poems that he published in **The Criterion** in '34, that poem on "Trafalgar Square" and a couple of the love poems.

SMITH: **Poems for F.?** From **Poems for F.?**

RODITI: Yes. The stricter the form of my poems, and I'm not talking strictly or exclusively in terms of rhyme or rhythm, but ideological structure too. I think what he liked about the "Trafalgar Square" poem, which is one which does not have a very traditional form either of scansion, and certainly no rhyme, but it has a structure of ideas, and that's what he liked. The structure of ideas that you get in a Metaphysical poem, but with entirely different ideas, and the kind of rhetorical structure to it too. I think that's what he liked in Horace Gregory, certainly what he liked in Auden. In the case of Spender, well, Spender was introduced to him on the crest of such a wave of admiration all around, as the "young Shelley," "Shelley **redivivus**." It's really rather pathetic when one considers that, as the decades went by, instead of being like Shelley, he turns out more and more to be like Edward Carpenter.

SMITH: Now, you were going to Oxford, you had just started

Oxford. Did Eliot say to you, "Look up Spender, look up Auden"?

RODITI: Auden was no longer there. I looked up Spender, and in those days, Stephen was extremely withdrawn and neurotic and, I mean-- As Wyndham Lewis describes him in, I've forgotten which one of his books, I think it's in **The Apes of God**, he'd have terrible nose bleeds whenever he got too tense. There [was] some absolutely impossibly bad poet in Oxford who wanted to set up a poetry society. He approached me and [Louis] MacNeice and Clere Parsons. And he wanted Spender. So Clere and MacNeice and I went on a delegation to convince Spender that he should join the poetry society and attend its first meeting. This was too funny, because we went to University College and to reach his room, we had to go past a Shelley monument. [laughter]

SMITH: Was that on purpose?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: What kind of poetry was this poetry society interested in?

RODITI: Well, actually, the young man who started it was interested in [Algernon Charles] Swinburne and things like Wilde's "Charmides," I mean the kind of stuff that we were not interested in at all.

SMITH: While you were at Oxford, you wrote "The New Reality," which--

RODITI: Which shocked this young man terribly.

SMITH: Who was this young man?

RODITI: I can't remember his name.

SMITH: Perhaps it will come. Now "The New Reality" is the first English-language surrealist manifesto?

RODITI: Yeah, except the things which appeared in **transition**. What was it called? "Revolution Of The Word."

SMITH: Now, did you write that by yourself?

RODITI: Yes, all by myself, yes.

SMITH: What did you mean by "the revolt against precision"?

RODITI: That was a crack at Eliot. [laughter]

SMITH: You single out Eliot, you single out Stein, you single out [E. E.] Cummings, you single out Joyce as the people against whom one must revolt.

RODITI: Because they were being imposed on us as very young people. Everybody was telling us we should admire them; they were to be our masters. This was a moment when I suddenly felt I didn't want any masters at all. I mean, I was being a silly young man. Why not? I was only eighteen.

SMITH: You said it was hurriedly written, what does that mean? One night?

RODITI: At most an hour and a half.

SMITH: And then it went to **The Oxford Outlook**?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And were they excited about it? Did it cause any stir at Oxford?

RODITI: Oh, certainly, certainly. They thought this was the funniest thing they'd had in a long while.

SMITH: Really? In what sense?

RODITI: They couldn't make head or tail of it.

SMITH: Now what did Jolas think of "The New Reality"?

RODITI: Oh, he thought it was fine.

SMITH: Let's talk about Eugene Jolas and **transition** magazine and "The Revolution of the Word."

RODITI: Well, Jolas was a very serious and solemn man who earned his living as a journalist. He worked for one of the press agencies.

SMITH: He was American or British?

RODITI: He was American.

SMITH: American. Living in Paris?

RODITI: Living in Paris, working for United Press or something like that, and making enough money to pursue his hobby, which was advanced-guard literature. He wrote in three languages, English, French and German--like Yvan Goll. But instead of writing one poem in English, one in French and one in German, he'd sometimes write in all three. That was "The Revolution of the Word"; as far as he was concerned, it was to write in what I would call a macaronic language.

SMITH: Could you explain that?

RODITI: Well, macaronic is a kind of poetry that was written in the late renaissance, mainly in Italy in imaginary Latin. There's a long poem by, what's his name, [Teofilo] Folengo, "Matteo Cocai," [Macaronea di Merlin Cocai] it's called, which is very funny. It started a fashion for writing in false Latin. And it's very witty sometimes. Jolas was not intending to be funny. He was intending to be prophetic or apocalyptic. Most of it was very verbose. And then there were other people in the **transition** group who were all hepped up on "The Revolution of the Word." There was this poor unfortunate character called Lincoln Gillespie, who had been hit by a truck.

SMITH: Literally?

RODITI: Literally. And who just [became] sort of totally dyslexic. Even when he spoke it made very little sense. And then his poems would be published in **transition**, and all that was taken very seriously at the time. There's even some press now which is reviving all this. I saw it announced about a year ago that they were publishing the complete writings of Lincoln Gillespie.

SMITH: Now did you sit down and have discussions with Jolas about literary theory and writers?

RODITI: No, it was very difficult because he was much older than I. When I saw much more of him later during the

war in New York we both worked for the Voice of America.

I was leading on the whole a very isolated life then, because the only writers whom I saw much of in 1932 on, American writers, were Paul Bowles and Charles Henri Ford. Because we were the youngest ones in Paris, and people like Djuna Barnes didn't take us very seriously yet.

SMITH: But both Ford and Bowles had started magazines in America.

RODITI: Ford had, not Bowles. Bowles was more of a composer still. He wrote only occasionally.

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SMITH: We were talking about Bowles and Ford.

RODITI: Yeah, Ford had already started in Columbus [Mississippi] his magazine, *Blues*, which had the most remarkable set of contributors. I looked through a few copies, old copies of *Blues* recently and discovered that James Farrell had contributed, and Erskine Caldwell; and the idea of James Farrell and Erskine Caldwell as advanced-guard writers--I suppose everybody has been at some time.

SMITH: Perhaps we should define what you viewed at the time as advanced-guard writing, advanced-guard literature, painting.

RODITI: Well, it's very, very difficult to describe it now because the notion of what is advanced guard has become totally vague now. If you go through all the art galleries in Soho, in New York, you see offered as advanced guard a lot of stuff which is basically old hat; it would have been advanced-guard dadaist art in 1917-1920, but it isn't any longer. And when you look at these students' sculptures here [on UCLA campus, referring to M.A./M.F.A. exhibit in progress at time of interview], that would have been advanced guard fifty years ago, forty years ago, but now it's totally derivative.

SMITH: Is it something to do with the "revolt against precision"?

RODITI: No, no, because romanticism was advanced guard around 1830. I would consider that advanced guard is the search for either new areas of subject matter--that happened with certain realists towards the end of the nineteenth century and also now in the twentieth century with some of America's gay writers--new areas of subject matter, or new ways of communicating, but communicating material which is not so very novel. For instance, in some of the later Henry James novels, what he's communicating is not so very novel, but the way he's doing it certainly is.

SMITH: Now, getting back to this dichotomy of communicating and style--Jolas does not appear to be too much concerned with communication.

RODITI: Communication, no, and I'm deeply suspicious of people who are only concerned with what they call self-expression. Because, I mean, basically, it boils down to just unloading whatever you've got on your mind. I mean, it's practically as bad as taking a good crap. [laughter] You feel better after it, but what you've produced may be totally meaningless or valueless to anybody else. Communication is the most important thing, I feel, for a writer.

SMITH: This was something that both the surrealists and Eliot shared, the concern for communication.

RODITI: Not all the surrealists. I don't think [Antonin]

Artaud. Well, of course Artaud was psychopathic. I think that very often he was much more concerned with self-expression. I'm deeply suspicious of an aesthetics which is based too exclusively on self-expression, because it presupposes that one knows what one's self is. I think that everyone of us has great problems in defining his own identity. I just had a spot of lunch with this lady who's doing research on Henry Miller. Well, I knew Henry, and we were discussing, 'cause that's what her theme is, Miller's self-image in his own writings. Well, this self-image changes from one book to the next. I'm quite sure that if I describe myself, whether physically, or intellectually, or spiritually, my definition will vary, my description will vary very much according to the mood I'm in to begin with. I can have narcissistic moods of self-admiration in which I describe myself as a veritable adonis and the greatest intellectual genius of the age, and some other days when I feel that I look lousy and that everything I've written is crap and so on. Self-expression depends on having a fairly stable notion of one's self and a fairly valid one. And that is something almost impossible.

SMITH: How long did you stay at Oxford?

RODITI: Only a few months, I hated it.

SMITH: What were you supposed to be studying while you were there?

RODITI: Greek and Latin. But then I suffered terribly from asthma there, I just couldn't stand the Thames Valley climate. The smog that they had there; [I was] constantly ill from asthma.

SMITH: So after a few months you dropped out and returned to Paris?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: We've talked somewhat about your connections with the "Olympians" of English and American poetry. What about "Olympians" of French poetry at this time?

RODITI: Well, the only two whom I knew at all well were Valery Larbaud, who's a very good novelist, also a good poet. He wrote **The Poems of A. O. Barnabooth**, which are very witty, but he wrote those before 1914. He was a man of considerable erudition, and who encouraged me to undertake a certain number of translations. He encouraged me to read the Italian novelist Italo Svevo, who was a friend of his. But then the one whom I saw most of was Léon-Paul Fargue, and I translated one of his poems in **transition**, "Exile." He was a delightful man and loads of fun. Whenever he saw me--he always sat in the same café in St.-Germain-des-Prés, the Brasserie Lipp. He went there always because they have the most beautiful, turn-of-the-century **art nouveau** panels of ceramics on the wall, which had been made by his father who had been a master craftsman. Fargue

had terrible guilt feelings because his father had always wanted him to be a master craftsman and go on making this kind of ceramic and what used to be known as fabrile glass, because the father did the same kind of glass as Tiffany. But instead of that, Fargue became a bohemian poet, and he had very grave guilt feelings about his father, and these come out in his poems. He always used to sit there and ask me to join him, and he'd talk by the hour about literature and what I should read. He wanted me, he even encouraged me to write in French rather than in English. I did write some poetry in French, and he and Jean Cassou, who's still alive, a rather important French writer in his day, managed to get me published as a French poet.

SMITH: Was that "Le poème perpetuel"?

RODITI: Yes, and a lot of other things in the **Cahiers du Sud**, and **La Revue Nouvelle**. I guess that if I had stuck to writing French poetry, I'd now be, whoof, well known. Yes.

SMITH: That's something I want to pursue, but first I'd like to get more on the environment in which you were operating. Now you were participating in surrealist activities at this time, going to--

RODITI: Yes, but in a very marginal way. You mustn't forget that my health was lousy: I suffered from very bad asthma. In addition, I didn't yet know that I was epileptic and was having petit mal seizures constantly,

which were not being recognized as such. So that I was really in--I spent a great deal of time in and out of clinics at one time.

SMITH: Were you considered to be a "neurasthenic" type?

RODITI: Yes, you see, they hadn't invented yet what is known as the electroencephalogram, and if you don't foam at the mouth and don't have certain spasms, they didn't recognize it as epilepsy. All that happened was that I just passed out, without any of the other symptoms. And I was passing out sometimes twice in a week.

SMITH: So your parents must have been very concerned about your state of health.

RODITI: Oh, they weren't, they weren't.

SMITH: They weren't?

RODITI: No, I had very peculiar parents, very peculiar. I was just being neurasthenic, and I was sent to a psychotherapist who insisted that all this was psychosomatic, which of course it wasn't.

SMITH: Now, you did run with the **Le Grand Jeu** group--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: --which were the surrealist dissidents.

RODITI: Yes. But they're all so-- It was difficult for me to get on with them, because, you see, they were--

SMITH: Who in that group were you most on with? Was it [Roger] Gilbert-Lecomte?

RODITI: [René] Daumal. Gilbert-Lecomte too. But you see, they were very much hommes **revoltés** in this sort of Camus sense. But they were revolting against something quite dissimilar from what I was revolting against. See, their background was provincial French. They came from sort of bourgeois families of Reims and I've forgotten what other city. It was their provincial French background they were revolting against. I came from an entirely different background, and I was an homme **revolté** against English public school education, which is something quite different. We had the same passion but against different things. So it was very difficult for us to get on.

SMITH: How did you feel about their endorsement of [Roger] Vailland's eulogy to [Jean] Chiappe, the rather reactionary prefect of police in Paris who was sacked? They came out with a long article extolling Chiappe.

RODITI: I think that was tongue in cheek.

SMITH: Oh, OK.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: One's not sure from reading Marcel Jean whether he considers it to be tongue in cheek.

RODITI: Yeah, I think it was tongue in cheek. Chiappe was a very curious character. At one time he was shocked by the fact that Max Jacob, the poet, looked so much like him and was constantly seen going around and being mistaken for

him, but not wearing the Legion of Honor. So the Legion of Honor was given to Max Jacob so that people who mistook him for Chiappe would not be surprised that he didn't have it. Max immediately celebrated this by going with the Legion of Honor that night to a gay bar, where he was mistaken for Chiappe. [laughter]

SMITH: That's wonderful.

RODITI: They were always being mistaken for each other after that.

SMITH: Now, your closest friends were your age, people like Ford, like Bowles--

RODITI: And a few, a Greek poet, Nico Calamaris, now called Nicolas Calas, the art critic in New York.

SMITH: One of the things that struck me is how young so many people were in the advanced-guard movement. That particular generation there was, besides the names we've mentioned, Harold Salemsen with his magazine **Tambour**, and Sonja Prins in the Netherlands with **Front**.

RODITI: I think that Harold Salemsen must still be around here, somewhere.

SMITH: Oh, he came to Hollywood, that's right.

RODITI: He was for many years the Hollywood correspondent of some French newspapers.

SMITH: That would be interesting to look up. What was it about that time that seemed to cause so many journals to be

started by teenagers, people sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, people like yourself? You didn't start a journal, but you were talking about starting a journal.

RODITI: I think it was a consequence of the First World War. So many of those who were older than we had been killed in Europe, and there was this generation gap. When we were between eighteen and twenty-five, there was a terrible shortage of men between thirty and forty.

SMITH: In France in particular.

RODITI: France and Germany.

SMITH: What about the magazine that you were discussing starting in 1929?

RODITI: Well, that was not a serious project.

SMITH: But you were talking about it for a year or thereabouts.

RODITI: I wasn't talking about it; it was somebody called Samuel Putnam I had a conversation with about some sort of-- Somebody was starting a magazine and I said, "Well, there are so many magazines, one should really start one," and I gave a description of who and what the contributors should be. And Putnam then, who was writing a column I think for some newspaper-- No, Putnam passed this on to Paul Bowles, who wrote a letter to a columnist, and the columnist then published this in New York. Then before I knew where I was, I was getting all sorts of contributions

sent to me and I never intended to. This was a crack I'd made in the course of a café conversation about somebody else's magazine. There I was receiving all these contributions, and I had no intention of doing it.

SMITH: So, the life you were leading in Paris, you were not working at this time.

RODITI: No.

SMITH: You went to the café?

RODITI: Yeah, but this didn't last very long because in '31 I was sent to Germany.

SMITH: By your father?

RODITI: Yeah, to learn German, and I worked in a bank there. In '32 I was in-- No, '30 I was in Germany, '31 I was in London working in a bank, and it was only from '33 on that I was on my own; I was only twenty-three. But between, let's say, '28 and '31, that's the only time--it was '28 and '30--that was the only time when I was--two years--when I was knocking around in Paris.

SMITH: What were the kind of activities you were engaged in?

RODITI: What were rather hectic and despairing--writing and quarreling with my family--not very happy years, very bad health.

SMITH: And your father decided to pack you up and send you off to Hamburg to learn a trade, and perhaps hoping that would straighten you out.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Well, what were your experiences with banking? Did you learn banking?

RODITI: Well, I learned a great deal about business. In fact, my host at the moment is a young banker, and he's always surprised by how much I know about it. But I discovered that it was easy but boring. I couldn't see myself doing that for life.

SMITH: While you were in Germany, you met Walter Benjamin.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Could you talk about that a little bit? How did you meet him, and what--

RODITI: Well, that's a very strange story. When in Berlin, I saw Christopher Isherwood, and I saw a lot of a girl called Jean Ross, who ultimately became Sally Bowles in Christopher's **Berlin Stories**, the name Bowles being derived from Paul, whom I'd sent to look up Christopher when Paul went to Berlin. This Jane, who's a very bright girl--Jean Ross--she was a very bright girl who spoke very good French; she'd been brought up in Egypt where her father had been stationed, and had picked up German, and she had a lot of friends. One day I was in her apartment with her and a German girl who was a friend of hers and whose name I remember, Hippie Seckel--was a good looking girl--who earned her living doing typing jobs for various

German writers. Jean and I were talking about Proust, and this girl suddenly said, "Oh, I work sometimes for a writer called Walter Benjamin, and he is passionately interested in Proust and he certainly would like to meet you." So she arranged for us to meet, and we met, and Christopher was present. Christopher's never been able to read Proust. All his life he's always said that Proust bores him. He was utterly bored by Walter Benjamin and decided that he was a bore and never saw him again.

SMITH: What did you decide?

RODITI: Well, I must admit the kind of questions he asked, he was-- He was being a bit pedantic, and in any case I didn't stay very long in Berlin, didn't have occasion to see him again. But I did see him again when he was in exile in Paris, and then I saw him twice and spent a whole afternoon with him. I met him in the home of Léon Pierre-Quint, who was the authority on Proust still (he wasn't a few years later, no longer). In the course of this meeting, Benjamin said that he was collecting material for a book on Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century. He was very interested in all sorts of things like the writings of the revolutionary [Louis] Auguste Blanqui on the theory of barricades fighting; on the writings of the period of Napoleon III when the broad boulevards had been built in order to prevent barricade fighting; on all sorts

of developments of [the] city; and he was particularly interested in the vast number of arcades which had been built, shopping arcades, in the nineteenth century in Paris. I think there were over two hundred of them built--you know, glass-roofed. And I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I've been writing a few articles for Paris newspapers on some of these old arcades which are, you know, some of them in a very dilapidated condition." So I made an appointment with Benjamin to meet him on the Saturday when I would be free and we went for a long, sort of, exploration of these areas of nineteenth century Paris and these arcades. He subsequently published only a very short thing called--almost an article--called "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," German title it had. Now they've published, Suhrkamp [Verlag] in Frankfurt have published that in a two-volume edition with all the notes for what he planned to do and didn't write because of his suicide. And in these notes I find masses of notes which obviously were taken after our walk. It's quite fascinating because there were places which I pointed out to him and he'd never been to. And there you see a little note saying, passage-du Saumon, this; passage-de-Choiseul, and so on. He was a strange man, very pedantic and pessimistic, and so very German, so very German-Jewish, that it was difficult for him to make friendships with people who were not of his own

background. I mean, even his childhood friend Gershom Scholem found him difficult.

SMITH: Scholem told you this?

RODITI: No, it comes out in the correspondence. I didn't know Scholem, but there's published correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem. I think that his very peculiar brand of Marxism is something which very few people could accept, neither the out-and-out communists, nor the people who are not Marxists.

SMITH: Until the sixties.

RODITI: Yes, well, now, when all these trendy ladies like Susan Sontag-- [laughter] I don't think that Susan can understand a single page of Benjamin, but she [will] write on him. She wrote utter crap on Artaud once in the **New York Review of Books** or the **New Yorker**--I've forgotten which.

SMITH: Now, getting back to Germany.

RODITI: I hope this isn't published during her lifetime. [laughter]

SMITH: That can be sealed. You first encountered anti-Semitism you said in Germany. I find that somewhat hard to believe.

RODITI: Well, I'd encountered a different kind of it among school boys in England.

SMITH: And never in France?

RODITI: Never political anti-Semitism, never people marching in the streets with anti-Semitic banners and things like that. And this was something-- I don't think anybody in Western Europe had encountered anything like that.

SMITH: Since the Dreyfus Affair.

RODITI: Yes. It was rather frightening.

SMITH: What kind of personal experiences did you have?

RODITI: Well, just watching these people marching in the streets and hearing them singing their songs and seeing what they scrawled on walls, and so on.

I was very friendly with Wilfrid Israel, who owned a department store (his family did in Berlin), and his biography has now been published by, I think it's either Random House or Pantheon books. It's a book called **Escape From Darkness**, or something like that. He was a great philanthropist. He stayed on in Berlin until he was totally dispossessed and spent millions buying people out of concentration camps and paying for their tickets to get away. As early as '31, Wilfrid was very much aware of what was happening and going to happen. We'd have very long conversations about it. Wilfrid is the [Bernhard] Landauer in the Isherwood stories. Now, Christopher never understood Wilfrid. Chris was very strange: he never understood Jean Ross. He made her out to be a very immoral

girl. She wasn't; she ultimately made a perfectly respectable marriage. But Christopher, with his very provincial English background, when he met an English girl who could speak fluent French and who was at her ease with foreigners, he was shocked. [laughter] And he had very little-- He could only see the funny side of people who were not of his own background.

SMITH: So then you went to England in '31, and you worked in a bank there. This is where you met Eric Blair [George Orwell] and Dylan Thomas.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Now your poem "Trafalgar Square"--

RODITI: That was written then in '32, and published in '34.

SMITH: And that is your interpretation, your creation based on a counterpart to something that is in one of [George] Orwell's novels. Which novel is that?

RODITI: **The Clergyman's Daughter.**

SMITH: Did the three of you spend a lot of time together?

RODITI: Not the three of us together. I spent time with Orwell (Blair), or with Dylan, though not much with Dylan because he was not much in London. He was still living in South Wales most of the time. He came to London only once or twice.

SMITH: Now, I came across a passing reference that he was

somewhat influenced by "The New Reality."

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: So, did you two discuss that? He searched you out as the author of "The New Reality"?

RODITI: It's a very amusing thing. I was one night-- This was a period when I was not particularly well and suffering from sleeplessness, and I just couldn't sleep. I used to go to an all-night café in Soho called the Blue Café. One night I was seated alone at a table reading a book of poetry, and it was rather crowded. This young man came in alone and, as my table had two free chairs, he asked if he could sit at my table. I said OK, and went on reading. And then he looked at me and looked at me, and suddenly he said, "You're reading poetry." I said, "Yes." "What are you reading?" I've forgotten what it was, and I showed him the book. It seemed to interest him. Then he says, "I'm a poet." I said, "So am I." [laughter] And then it turned out that he'd read my work in **transition** and elsewhere, and he'd not published anything yet, except in newspapers in South Wales. Then we agreed to meet again, and he brought me some of his manuscripts, and I then told him to go and see Sir Richard Rees, the editor of **The Adelphi**. **The Adelphi** was the first London magazine to accept one of his poems, but not the first one to print one, because it was monthly and he got a poem accepted by **Time and Tide**, if I

remember right, which was a weekly. So the weekly came out ahead of **The Adelphi**. Then he went back to Wales and I didn't see him again until I saw him in New York. But we remained very good friends because-- Then I saw him also in London, after the war.

SMITH: What were the sorts of things that you would discuss? What were the--

RODITI: We had no discussions, we were just very good friends and always very glad to see each other. There was a sort of no-need-to-talk. He was fond of me because I'd done him a good turn at a time when nobody else did, and we'd sort of immediately clicked, and that's all there was to it. There was no need to talk much.

SMITH: Later on, when his drinking problems became so severe, did you ever have to baby-sit with him?

RODITI: No, no. I remember in the end of '46 in London going out with him and James Laughlin one night, and he drank a terrific amount. I didn't quite know what to do about it because I didn't know where he was living.

Finally about two in the morning, I brought him back to the apartment which I shared at the time with my mother. I was in London working for UN for a few weeks, and my mother had an apartment. I put Dylan to bed on the living room couch and had to go off to work in the morning to interpret for UN. Dylan was still fast asleep, and mother asked me,

"Who's that?" I said, "Oh, he's a very well known poet."
She had never read a word of his. When I came back from
work that evening, I found Dylan and mother tippling in the
kitchen while she was cooking a meal and putting sherry in
everything she cooked. [laughter] I thought [it] rather
amusing.

SMITH: Did your parents read your poems?

RODITI: My father, never. My mother practically never.

SMITH: Did you ever discuss your writing with them?

RODITI: Much later. My mother survived my father. My
father died in '37; my mother died twelve years ago.

Sometimes, yes. She wasn't much interested in it.

SMITH: It sounds like it might have been a mystification
to them.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Now, at this time, also, you come to the United
States for the first time.

RODITI: In 1929.

SMITH: I find this curious: here you are, born in Paris,
a European by identity, I would suppose, but an American by
ID. How did the United States strike you?

RODITI: In 1929, just before the Wall Street crash, it was
heaven, it was hilariously funny.

SMITH: In what sense?

RODITI: The wildest speakeasys. It was the era of Jimmy

Walker as mayor of New York, and the Gin Age.

SMITH: Is this when you met Max Ewing?

RODITI: No, I met him in '33. But '29, it was loads of fun. And everybody had plenty of money. They were just throwing it out.

SMITH: In the circles you ran in.

RODITI: Yes, but on the whole, you have no idea how many people had money then. There was practically full employment. Money was easy, and then suddenly it stopped. It was a very optimistic nation. It was very strange.

SMITH: Were you there during the crash, or--

RODITI: Yes. It was in twenty-four hours there was total panic.

SMITH: Were any of your friends personally affected?

RODITI: Oh, yes.

SMITH: What about your father?

RODITI: My father lost everything.

SMITH: In the--

RODITI: Yeah.

SMITH: Even though the Depression didn't hit France until a couple of years later.

RODITI: Well, he'd been speculating on Wall Street very unwisely, I subsequently found out.

SMITH: Now, this affected much of your later outlook. Not only your outlook, but your practical chances in life.

RODITI: Oh, certainly. That's why my first volume of memoirs has the charming title, since it ends with the Wall Street Crash, the title is, "The Age of Improvidence," because my father had not foreseen a damn thing, taken no precautions.

SMITH: Even though you had your health problems, money was never something you considered you would have to deal with and--

RODITI: In fact, on several occasions I'd suggested that I would be interested in learning certain trades. My father had sort of pooh-poohed the idea. I had at one point wanted-- Well, at first I wanted to go to art school, yes. Then I'd suggested, "Well, why don't I go to work for an art dealer and learn that since I am interested in art." "You will never need to earn a living."

SMITH: So you were to be a gentleman?

RODITI: Yes, I was to be a gentleman and go into my father's firm.

SMITH: Your father was a buyer for American department stores.

RODITI: Yes, but he had his own firm; it was under contract with one department store in each city, including here: the Broadway department store--that's how I met Will Rogers.

SMITH: Let's hear about that.

RODITI: Well, in 1917, or was it '18, I can't remember exactly, Will Rogers came over to entertain the troops. The owners of the Broadway department store, who knew him well, told him to look up my father, and my father invited him to our home. I heard that this character was coming, and I was a kid, and Will Rogers caught me peeping around the corner of half a door to see him. And he gave us tickets to go and see him perform at what was the equivalent of a USO. I was absolutely dazzled by his performance, but I couldn't understand a word that he said.

SMITH: Because of his accent?

RODITI: Because of his accent.

SMITH: Terms of reference?

RODITI: Terms of reference, and so on. I'd never heard all that. But he was very pleasant and jovial; sort of-- I found him lots of fun when he came to our home.

SMITH: Did he come often?

RODITI: Only once that I can remember.

SMITH: And you were about nine years old?

RODITI: Not yet. Seven or eight.

SMITH: Two other people that are of interest to me are Countee Cullen and Harold Jackman, how you came to meet them.

RODITI: Well, Countee had a Guggenheim [Fellowship] and was in Paris. He was reading a lot of French poetry, and

he told Sylvia Beach that he had difficulty understanding some of the poetry that he wanted to read, and he'd like to find someone who knew English and French and would explain and help him understand these poets. And as I was more or less at a loose end, Sylvia suggested to me that I do it, so I said OK. So I met Countee, and he was traveling with Harold Jackman. I became very friendly with both of them and that continued. When I was in New York later in '29, I saw them and again in '33, and then when I moved to New York in 1941, I think it was, I saw a lot of Harold Jackman. Countee by that time had died, or died soon after that, I've forgotten the exact date of his death. But I remained a close friend of Harold's until his death.

SMITH: Later, I think we'll get into a discussion of your relationship with the Jackman Collection at Atlanta. Now, let's get back to Orwell. What was your impression of Orwell at the time? In 1931.

SMITH: He was extremely poor; I mean that was a time when he was writing **Down And Out In Paris And London**, and he was living in doss houses in London. He had about him this none-too-pleasant odor of someone who sleeps in lousy beds and who doesn't change his linen often enough. He looked as if he didn't have, as if he lived off cheap sandwiches and so on. Richard Rees and Jack Commor and I, whenever we'd meet him, we'd take him out for a meal. And it was

after one of these meals--I'd taken him to some Italian restaurant in Soho--that we went into Trafalgar Square because it was not too far and he wanted to take notes for an article. We sat there and listened to the conversation of these unfortunate homeless people who were spending the night there. In those days, he was writing articles. He'd written a couple of novels, which had been rejected everywhere and which are lost. He was writing articles and placing them with luck in a couple of London publications--**The Adelphi** was one of them--but they weren't paying him much. He was really pathetic, but obviously a man of great gifts.

SMITH: What did he think of your poem?

RODITI: I don't think he saw it. I don't think he saw it because, you see, when it was published I was living in Paris again, and I sort of lost sight of him, I wasn't corresponding with him. Actually, I never saw him again after that one year in London when I saw him quite often. And I was quite surprised when, I later discovered that one or another book published under the name of George Orwell was written by Eric Blair, whom I knew.

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SMITH: So it seems that you had several years of rousting about in Germany, England, the United States, France; all the time you're writing in French and in English.

RODITI: Yes. I stopped writing in French when I came to live in America in 1937, and I didn't take it up again until the fifties.

SMITH: But you had actually stopped writing poetry in French earlier, hadn't you?

RODITI: Yes, I stopped writing poetry in French around 1934, '35.

SMITH: What led you to make the decision to focus more and more on English?

RODITI: Well, I had to make a living, and it was very difficult to make a living in the Depression. I made a living in Paris until I left in '37--'36. I made a living writing French captions for MGM films and also doing free-lance journalism for French newspapers. And that left me very little time or energy for writing anything of my own. I also translated into French a novel by Ronald Firbank [**Mon piaffeur noir**, translated from **Prancing Nigger**].

SMITH: Were you able to sell that translation?

RODITI: Oh, no, it was commissioned.

SMITH: Commissioned for which publisher?

RODITI: Gallimard.

SMITH: But at this time you did [**Prison within Prison:**] **Three Hebrew Elegies**, and you did the **Poems for F.** and the social poems that "Trafalgar Square" is a part of. Let's talk about **Three Hebrew Elegies**. You were studying the Zohar.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And I understand that you and [T. S.] Eliot were in a sense working parallel: he was writing "Ash Wednesday" at the time, and you were writing ["The Complaint of] Jehuda Abravanel."

RODITI: I was in London and reading a lot; I had a lot of time to read, to spend in the British museum. I was seeing Eliot quite frequently, and we sort of exchanged ideas, and I think I put him on to Philo Judaeus; I think he hadn't read him yet.

SMITH: Anything else you put him on to?

RODITI: Well, he put me on to plenty too, so-- [laughter]

SMITH: Such as?

RODITI: Some of the Metaphysical poets. I can't remember exactly which.

SMITH: What led you to write those three poems, in particular the historical content, the Jewish theme which seems new in your work?

RODITI: The "Jehuda Abravanel" is actually inspired by an elegy written by him in Hebrew, after he'd been exiled from Spain. I had read it in its Italian translation, and I thought it very fine, and I've borrowed from it only at most four or five lines. But the general theme--I sort of reintegrated more elements from his biography into it than there are in the original Hebrew elegy. The second one, ["The Night-prayer of] Glückel of Hameln"--after I'd written the first elegy, I read Marvin Lowenthal's translation of selected passages from her diaries and I thought this would make a good theme for a poem. As for the "Habakkuk" one, I read in the English translation of the Zohar this extraordinary passage which explains who Habakkuk was, and I thought that I'd write a poem interpreting it in this way.

SMITH: Did that way have any special meaning to you?

RODITI: Yes, because I immediately saw how, in terms of Jewish metaphysics, a man who has been both alive and dead, is the man who knows most; whereas in Greek metaphysics, it's been the one who has been both man and woman, so Tiresias. So basically, this had a kind of relationship to Eliot's poetry, because Tiresias comes in Eliot's poetry.

SMITH: Right.

RODITI: This was a sort of little joke between Eliot and me, because we had a discussion about that.

SMITH: About Habakkuk and--

RODITI: Tiresias.

SMITH: So this, in a sense, was your response.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Did Eliot respond in turn to your poems?

RODITI: Oh, yes, by that time he had realized that I'd grown out of what he objected to there. As a matter of fact, he liked the Abravanel poem very much.

SMITH: And published that.

RODITI: No, no. He was very frank with me; he said that he'd accepted too much poetry for the next few issues of **The Criterion**, and I'd have to wait two years. So meanwhile I managed to get one section in **The Spectator**, another section in **The Jewish Review**, and so on. And that satisfied me, since I was in no hurry to publish the shorter poems.

SMITH: How would you contrast his approach to the Zohar and the Cabala to yours?

RODITI: Well, his approach is not to Zohar or Cabala. His approach is to Christian neo-Platonism as one finds it in some of the church fathers, especially in the Protestant divines. There is a strong element of Christology in him.

SMITH: Which is lacking in you.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Now were you consciously seeking out Jewish roots?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Was this in response to anti-Semitism and fascism--

RODITI: And also in response to the failure of my parents to provide me with any roots.

SMITH: Paul Goodman refers to them as religious poems.

Did you consider them to be religious poems?

RODITI: Not when I was writing them; after they'd been written, certainly. As the years went by and I wrote more, and especially those that I've written in recent years where there's far less imagery, then it becomes much more devotional poetry because it's strictly a question of faith without any flowers, so to speak.

SMITH: At the time, they were not religious poems. Did you have any kind of religious beliefs?

RODITI: Well, as I was writing them, it never occurred to me--they were a little unusual, I was writing on religious themes--but it's very difficult to define the growth of faith in one's self.

SMITH: Right. But these three poems represent an important step in the birth and an important step in your writing, a solidification.

RODITI: Yes. But a solidification of something that I've not wanted to exploit. I could have written much more of that kind of poetry; I mean, I could have become a professional poet of that kind, but I wouldn't want to be.

Later I wanted the few other poems of this nature, which come in **Thrice Chosen** towards the end of the book, [to] correspond very definitely to a personal experience in much the same way as **Four Quartets** correspond to a personal experience in Eliot's life.

SMITH: Can you talk about that experience?

RODITI: Well, it's very difficult. I was not in Europe at the time of the Holocaust. I was in America. I was very safe. Did I deserve it? Were there not many more people more worthy than I who were victims? That is the basic problem; not one of guilt feelings, no, but a feeling that chance plays a terrific role, chance and choice--choices which are made without realizing what the consequences are going to be. Constantly in the later poems, you have these references to chances and choices and it's not simply because of the alliteration. You see what I mean?

SMITH: Yes. I'd like to move on to **Poems for F.**, which was your first published book that Editions de Sagittaire put out. I had made a note to myself: "Metaphysical poets?" Were you influenced by the love poetry of the Metaphysical poets when you wrote those?

RODITI: Yes, beginning to be influenced by it. I was still very young--when did I write those? 1933, '33, '34--twenty-three, twenty-four [years old]. I hadn't read much of the Metaphysical poets yet, I was only just beginning to.

SMITH: Were the poems written during or after your relationship with F.?

RODITI: During. Except the last ones.

SMITH: Who was F?

RODITI: That remains a secret.

SMITH: OK. Except that he was a painter.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And--

RODITI: He has children and grandchildren.

SMITH: There are several things to discuss with these poems--

RODITI: Actually, he was still alive last year at 96.

SMITH: The image painted in the poems of the object of the love affair, how did you create that image? Was it a faithful reflection of F, or did you begin to create a character?

RODITI: It was a faithful reflection of what I thought he was at the time.

SMITH: There's a whole--

RODITI: And it's the faithful reflection of what I thought he was, what I hoped he was and also what he might have been. He was somebody of great talent, but who wasted it.

SMITH: Did you sense that from the beginning?

RODITI: No, no, no.

SMITH: There is a strong feeling even from the very, very first poem that this is a relationship that's doomed.

RODITI: Yes, because when it started I didn't know he was married, and I discovered that about two weeks later; it was too late.

SMITH: For you or for him?

RODITI: For both of us; we'd become too deeply involved. He actually had a son who was two years younger than I.

SMITH: Well, there's that line in the penultimate poem, "We live so fast, we die so slowly"--the parallel that you create struck me as being symbolic not only of the whole sequence, but actually speaking to much of your poetry.

RODITI: Yes. Actually, I feel that it's a good series. I won't say that they're all equally good, but I certainly feel that among them there are two or three which are perfectly valid love poems today, fifty years later.

SMITH: Now the use of rhyme which occurs in there, how did that come about? Just happened?

RODITI: Just happened. I never try to rhyme, but every once and a while I write something which does rhyme, and I'm generally surprised.

SMITH: They also seemed to scan in a very traditional manner. Now, you have mentioned that when you wrote these poems and other love poems that you have written that the English language gives you, because of the ambiguity of

gender, gives you an advantage--

RODITI: You've been reading **Gay Sunshine**.

SMITH: Well, I did read that.

RODITI: That's where I said it. [laughter] No, as I said, the English language does give one this ambiguity, and that is why the idiots who compile anthologies of what they call "gay poetry" have missed these, because there's nothing obscene in them, there's nothing about penises and what have you. The ambiguity of language is such that these idiots haven't seen that they're poems to a man. [laughter] That's why I reprinted them in **Gay Sunshine**, because I thought that this showed up the idiocy of some of these people.

SMITH: Was this something that at the time you were writing that was important to you to--

RODITI: The ambiguity?

SMITH: The ambiguity, to objectify, to idealize the--

RODITI: Well, I think that it is important, because I don't think that a love poem should be something which is meaningful only to homosexuals or only to heterosexuals. A love poem's got to be a poem about love. Being in love, profoundly in love, is something extremely human which is sort of independent of the sex of the person that you love. Of course, more current is "Cupid, my Campaspe plays her cards for kisses, Cupid pays"-- You know, that kind of

thing when one knows that it's a woman. But so what, because that's more traditional, but it's not necessary.

SMITH: But also by retaining the ambiguity, you seem to go in the same direction as the Metaphysical poets, you come to a broader end than simply the love for the person--

RODITI: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: You start talking about art as the form of preserving that fleeting moment, and a very long process of things dying away.

RODITI: Well, I'm very interested in all my poetry in ambiguity, whether it's that ambiguity or other ambiguities; I play constantly with paradoxes and ambiguities in my poetry and in my prose--the Heraclitean at heart.

SMITH: But while you're writing these very serious poems in the English language--I guess you're writing serious poems in French also--you're also writing a novel in French, "Les autres," or "Le mauvais sang," which is quite funny.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: What were you writing in French in a creative way? Was the novel your primary focus at the time?

RODITI: A novel which I never finished. I think the whole problem of my writing in French is that I've never had any serious ambition as a French writer. Every once in a while, I read something and say to myself, "Well, this is

considered to be so good; I can do it too." And I go and do it. Some of my stories which I've published recently in a little magazine called *L'Ingénu*, which is published by a friend of mine-- That's why I give it to her; it's not a very good magazine; practically nobody ever reads it, but she's so short of material that I give it to her. Then I publish a story there; suddenly I get letters from the most unlikely people asking me to send them stories to their magazines, because these stories that I write (and I don't write many of them) are as good as any that other French writers are doing in that particular vein. But I have no ambition.

SMITH: But you did write the first draft of a novel.

RODITI: Yes, but that was before the war.

SMITH: Now, could you tell me how "Les autres" came to be written? What was it that perked you to do it? Was it reading all these novels and saying, "Hey, I can do that"?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Simple as that. [laughter] Now, what was Maurice Sachs's role in getting you to start writing this novel?

RODITI: Well, Maurice was a wonderful person, an absolute crook, but he was loads of fun, and he was a close friend of the first husband of my cousin--they'd known each other as kids. I saw a lot of him, and when I was terribly short of money, he would give me translations to do for getting

by. Most of them I didn't even sign. The only one I signed was the Ronald Firbank one, because the others were just whodunits which weren't signed and which had to be done so fast, you were so underpaid. I didn't even bother to correct the proofs, they were so awful. Anyhow, one day, he said, "Why don't you write a novel? I've just written one. You'd make so much more money with a novel." So I started writing it, and then--

SMITH: Where did the idea come from?

RODITI: I can't remember, it was so long ago.

SMITH: It's about a French boy who goes to live in London--

RODITI: Yes, yes, yes. It was sort of autobiographical, yes. Then the novel was accepted by [Jean] Paulhan. Then I left for America, and with the usual publication delays of Gallimard, the war came along: it hadn't been published yet. Then the German occupation--it couldn't be published. Then after the war I just didn't feel like publishing it any longer.

SMITH: What were you trying to do in this novel as an artist?

RODITI: Well, I was trying to do something which would be halfway between the novels of [René] Crevel--**La mort difficile** and **Mon corps et moi**--with a little bit of [Raymond] Queneau--the early Queneau--and [Antonin] Artaud, because I was very--

SMITH: Had Queneau written *Zazie [dans le métro]* yet?

RODITI: No, good god no! No. That was very post-war. But it was a kind of surrealism, but made more accessible to the public.

SMITH: In what way?

RODITI: Well, it had its dream sequences in it, but it also had its straight narrative. I must say I haven't looked at that manuscript for at least twenty years.

[laughter]

SMITH: Perhaps I'm asking unfair questions.

RODITI: No.

SMITH: At the time, also, you became involved with [Léon] Pierre-Quint at Editions de Sagittaire. Now this must have been a labor of love.

RODITI: Well, yes and no. Originally it wasn't, because Pierre-Quint was a very devious character, and I never quite figured out why and how he involved me in that.

SMITH: How you came to be the chosen one?

RODITI: Yes. I didn't realize until many years later that he was a drug addict and that many of his decisions were made at moments when he was so drugged that he didn't know what he was up to.

SMITH: How had he met you?

RODITI: Oh, I knew him and his family, his parents knew

mine, he was a well-known writer and came of a very wealthy family of bankers. He suggested that I enter this firm to do a job there, and I was supposed to invest a very small amount of money in it, which I had from my grandfather. He had the reputation of being a serious businessman. It turned out that the firm was constantly on the verge of bankruptcy, and we could never get him to decide on anything important. We'd have a manuscript submitted to us on which a decision had to be taken, and he'd delay and delay and delay, mainly because he was drugged and so sick that he didn't know what he was up to. For instance, we had [Louis Ferdinand] Céline's first book submitted to us, and I read it and recommended it.

SMITH: Which one was this?

RODITI: **Voyage au bout de la nuit.** Pierre-Quint kept the typescript for I don't know how long. Suddenly, one day we heard that Céline had submitted another typescript to another firm which had accepted it.

SMITH: Would Céline's anti-Semitism have been a factor at all?

RODITI: It hadn't surfaced yet. It didn't surface in his first two books. And nobody knew him. He was known to be a doctor who treated clap in an outer suburb.

SMITH: How did the novel arrive on your desk? Through an agent?

RODITI: No, it had been turned down by about eight other publishers, and he was going around to all the publishers.

SMITH: Of course, Sagittaire did publish Crevel and Tristan Tzara--was that because of friendship?

RODITI: Yes. Pierre-Quint, before he'd become such an addict, had been a very prominent critic for the **Revue de France**. He'd written this book on [Marcel] Proust, which had been the first book on Proust. He'd been the first prominent critic to write favorably on the surrealists. So when he became a partner in the firm, the firm published the **Surrealist Manifesto** and became identified as the publishers of the surrealists though we also published a great number of other things. We were the first to publish Thomas Mann in French and [Luigi] Pirandello. But on account of his drug addiction and as he was the major shareholder and sort of chief editor, he just took all final decisions. The firm just petered out. That's why I lost my interest in it in '36. After that, it just ceased to have any activity at all.

SMITH: Until it was resurrected after the war.

RODITI: But only briefly.

SMITH: You were also involved writing a libretto for an opera and developing film scripts.

RODITI: No, I didn't write a libretto for an opera, I started writing a text for an oratorio ["Destiny of

Israel"]. Then that fell through because the composer, Josef Kosma, became very successful doing music for Jean Renoir and putting songs of [Jacques] Prévert to music, and that made him so busy suddenly that he couldn't work on the oratorio as originally planned. And film scripts--well, I worked with Dudow on one.

SMITH: Zlatan Dudow?

RODITI: Yes, but that didn't get anywhere.

SMITH: Did you meet [Bertolt] Brecht at all during this period?

RODITI: I didn't meet him, he wasn't in Paris, but I read him. I was a great admirer of his lyrical poetry, a bit dubious about his theories of drama.

SMITH: Why?

RODITI: Well, I'm not generally such a great admirer of Goethe, but somewhere in his works, Goethe says, "politisches Lied, garstiges Lied," which means a political song is a hideous song. I think that the politics stick out like a sore thumb in most of Brecht's dramas. The one that I really like is **Puntila [und sein Knecht Matti]**, which is a comedy of characters the same way as a Molière comedy. But I mean even in **The Caucasian Chalk Circle** and **The Good Person of Setzuan**, sometimes I feel that the politics stick out like a sore thumb, and then it's easiest to be dramatic.

SMITH: Now, in your own dramatic career, the script that you wrote with Dudow and the projects that you were trying to get going--

RODITI: Well, that was only one thing with Dudow.

SMITH: Were those commercial projects, or avant-garde projects?

RODITI: Well, he thought it was a commercial project, and actually he'd lined up Michel Simon to play the part. It was finally produced after the war in a much more politicized version--

SMITH: As?

RODITI: As *Der Feigling* by an East German studio. Dudow was a Bulgarian communist who'd worked with Brecht on the *Kühle Wampe* movie of Brecht's. He'd done another movie in Nazi Germany, which is a rather extraordinary thing. He'd made this movie--the individual shots had been--he'd done it without any permission or authorization--the individual shots which he took in the streets of Berlin--it looked as if he was just an amateur photographing friends. When he put it all together, the cutting made the whole movie into a very political one, and he fled then and smuggled it out of Germany. It was not a film that could be shown commercially, but it was shown in film clubs and so on, as being an antifascist film produced under the Nazi regime in Germany, which is rather extraordinary.

SMITH: What were your politics during this period?

RODITI: Well, certainly antifascist. In the eyes of many good souls, I was leftist, but I don't think I was in my own eyes.

SMITH: You didn't identify with the politics of any particular group then?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: Of course, your brother was wounded--

RODITI: Oh, well, he was a political idiot.

SMITH: In what sense?

RODITI: Well, I mean to have gotten involved as a Jewish boy in a fascist thing, good god!

SMITH: Was he a member of a group--

RODITI: Solidarité Française, which was a fascist group. As an American and a Jew.

SMITH: How did he get involved in that?

RODITI: Sheer machismo, to show off to his friends. He was a very strange character; you have no idea what peculiar characters I have in my family.

SMITH: Was he wounded at the battle of the Place de la Concorde?

RODITI: Yes, he remained paraplegic for the rest of his days, forty years.

SMITH: Were you in Paris when the fascist leagues surrounded the National Assembly?

RODITI: Yes, but I was not present.

SMITH: No, you were not there.

RODITI: No. All this is going to come out in my memoirs: how much at odds I was with my family, and how totally wrong they all were in terms of what developed ultimately in history. I once said about my father--who was born in Istanbul--that he was more dis-oriented than westernized.

SMITH: But he wasn't aware of it.

RODITI: Actually, I pity him now, 'cause he just didn't know which end was up in any respect, politically or financially.

SMITH: In one of your drafts I came across a quote of you saying that "society has to be studied deductively from subjective premises from the misconceptions concerning social reality that survive in the minds of the individuals who constitute a society and impose upon it their own illusions about its real nature." This certainly applies to your family--it was written about your parents, but it may apply as well to the poets and the surrealists.

RODITI: Well, it applies to a lot of people.

SMITH: What about the response of artists, the friends of yours, the artists that you knew, to the crisis of the thirties? Some of them became communists.

RODITI: Some became communists. Others became anarchists.

SMITH: Who became a communist and who became an anarchist, and what did it really mean in terms of their work?

RODITI: Well, Crevel became a communist. A lot of them-- [André] Breton was a communist at one time, then became a Trotskyist, then became quite unpolitical--certainly a lot of my friends were socialists; most of them were Popular Front socialists in France, my intellectual and artist friends. When I came to America in '37, at the University of Chicago, the only political sympathy that I felt was with Paul Goodman, who was an anarchist, but I mean an anarchist not in an active way, but in that we used to read Thoreau and discuss Thoreau and discuss Henry George--a philosophical anarchist, nonviolent. I guess that's what I still am.

SMITH: Now, were you a supporter of Breton's call for the **Contre-Attaque**?

RODITI: No, I was never a supporter of anything of Breton. Wait till you see what I write about him in my memoirs. [laughter] I very soon realized that he was a complete phony.

SMITH: When was this?

RODITI: By 1936.

SMITH: Had you many personal dealings with him?

RODITI: At Editions de Sagittaire. Seeing how he dealt with [Robert] Desnos, how he dealt with Crevel, how he

dealt with Artaud--he's so authoritarian. He's expelling people from the party. It was veritable papal excommunication; it was absurd.

SMITH: Were you personally affected, through your friends?

RODITI: No, I had never been a member of the surrealist group.

SMITH: In '36, David Gascoyne organized the International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Did you go to that?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Did you participate in it?

RODITI: I didn't participate in it, I went to it. It was-- He and [Roland] Penrose did it. It was loads of fun and it caused a great deal of scandal, but it was already very decadent. I mean, this woman walking around with a bunch of roses--she had a sort of wire thing over her head and roses in it so it was a bunch of flowers instead of a head.

SMITH: Was "The New Reality" referred to at all? Was it acknowledged?

RODITI: No. No, because Breton, you see, Breton was this leading spirit behind it, and Breton couldn't read a word of English so he never read "The New Reality." Even after living a couple of years in America, he still couldn't read English.

SMITH: In your own poetry, how was that affected by the

general social crisis? Certainly it was affected in the subjects.

RODITI: Well, I was immensely discouraged between 1934 and '37 by my brother's absurd wound, by my father's losing his fortune and being totally demoralized by my brother's health condition, then by the storm clouds that were gathering and by my father's death in '37. I was prepared to come to America in '36, but I stayed on because my father was ill, and I stayed there until his death. In '36 I'd already determined that I wanted to live in America. I'd had it.

SMITH: Was it something positive about America?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: What was that?

RODITI: I wanted to live in a country of which I was a citizen. I was sick of European politics; I was sick of everything.

SMITH: You'd reached a crisis in your life.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: In terms of some of the things that the surrealists said they were trying to do to bring about a crisis in human conscience, was that a goal in your writing?

RODITI: Well, certainly to bring about a crisis in my own conscience. I don't think that I ever had their optimism; I don't think that I believed that literature had that

power to bring about a crisis in the conscience of others. Well, perhaps of a few readers--people who read [William] Blake and understand him--yes, there can be a crisis--people who read certain other authors. You have to be St. Paul writing the Epistles to bring about a crisis in the conscience of a great number of people, or Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. It occurs to me rather that I and Breton and others can't expect to promote a Decalogue or the New Testament.

SMITH: But the surrealists talked as if they did.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: But you never shared that.

RODITI: No, I never shared that optimism.

SMITH: Never, not even in a little corner of your soul?

RODITI: Maybe when I was seventeen, but by the time I was twenty-one, certainly no longer. I've been a skeptic. I have my good classical Greek background of reading Plato and Socrates, *meden agan*--"nothing too much."

SMITH: What did you feel about [W. H.] Auden and [Stephen] Spender's turn to the left?

RODITI: I distrusted it. I knew it wouldn't last.

SMITH: Did you discuss politics amongst yourselves?

RODITI: Well, yes, you see, I had known Spender and Auden and Isherwood when they were in Berlin, and I'd known them at a point when they hadn't yet turned to the left. Occa-

sionally one or the other of them would voice some rather
Nazi notions and sentiments because their boyfriends were
little Nazis.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

MAY 13, 1985

SMITH: Let's pursue that. You start getting letters and discussions from Spender and Auden, and they've announced themselves to be communists.

RODITI: Yeah, and I didn't think that they were going to stay communists, certainly not Spender.

SMITH: Why not Spender?

RODITI: On account of his family background. After all, his mother came of this family of bankers, the Schusters, and his father came of a very, very prominent Liberal family.

SMITH: Liberal party?

RODITI: Yes. He was too much of the establishment, and he displayed that a few years later when he became such a respectable citizen and married and all the rest of it, in spite of all his display of communism, homosexuality and what have you. I always felt behind that, lay his home in Frognal, Hampstead, to which he always returned, and that he'd always return to that very respectable upper-middle-class London neighborhood.

SMITH: Now, did you and Eliot discuss the crisis of the time?

RODITI: Oh, yes, yes. I had a couple of conversations with Eliot from which it became clear to me that Eliot,

from about 1932 on, rather regretted what anti-Semitic elements there had been in his earlier poetry. He definitely had changed completely as far as that is concerned. I think that the moment he became a religious writer, he became a much more open-minded and charitable man. He dropped all this nonsense, which is rather petty, of his earlier period and which comes out in this horrible play written about him and his wife, which has been widely read and performed in the past couple of years. Part of it may have come from her.

SMITH: Did you ever meet her?

RODITI: No. By the time I knew Eliot, she was already most of the time under psychiatric treatment. But she obviously was a very difficult woman. He was very loyal to her and looked after her and had no social life any longer. He'd meet people at lunch but never go out in the evening for years. He'd go straight back from Faber and Faber to his home to look after her. But I mean, everything that I've heard about her--and not simply from that play, which I think is a rather vulgar exploitation of gossip about her--whatever I've heard about her from people who knew her--well, she was really schizophrenic and very difficult and bubbling over with hostilities--

SMITH: Did you see any effect upon Eliot?

RODITI: --and yet very fascinating in a way. She was a

sort of less-gifted and very English Zelda Fitzgerald--the same kind of instability.

SMITH: In '34 you translate [Constantine] Cavafy, I guess with Nico Calamaris. Did this represent a turn for you to the study of Mediterranean culture, of Levantine culture?

RODITI: I'd studied classical Greek in school, and my grandmother, who spoke Modern Greek, when her eyesight began to fail her around 1920 used to make me read the Modern Greek newspaper to her from time to time. She'd correct my accent, and so I did understand some Modern Greek, and when I discovered the poetry of Cavafy, I was absolutely bowled over by it. It had never occurred to me that such magnificent poetry was being written in the twentieth century in Greek, and I started trying to translate it. Then I gave it up because there were all sorts of difficulties in getting the authorization to publish it. [John] Mavrogordato had published these lousy translations of the Hogarth Press. It's taken years before we've had decent translations in English. Meanwhile I've helped Marguerite Yourcenar on her French translations, and I was responsible for publishing some German translations of him [Cavafy]. But I've got about four or five poems that I've translated which some day I'll publish.

SMITH: Did Cavafy lead you then to Arabic, Turkish, the whole--

RODITI: That came much later.

SMITH: That much later. So at this point you're still very Western European in your perspective.

RODITI: I consider Greece as being Western European in its own way.

SMITH: You mentioned that **The Young and the Evil**, [Charles Henri] Ford's novel, touches a very deep emotional cord in you. Could you explain what it is in that book specifically that works for you in that way?

RODITI: Oh, it doesn't. I mean, it's not the book; it's Ford and the context of the book. I knew Charles Henri when he first turned up in Paris. Charles Henri dramatizes everything so beautifully; he was so conscious of being young and of being evil. How evil can you be when you come out of Columbus, Mississippi, to Paris?

In Paris, there was this wonderful episode which I'm going to recount in full detail in my memoirs--in fact, it's already been published in Paris **Exiles** magazine. Charles heard in Paris that there was such a thing as homosexual Turkish baths. Being young and evil, he had to go to one, but he didn't know which ones to go to. So as his French was not up to inquiring, I was delegated to inquire which one one should go to. So the three of us, Charles Henri Ford, Paul Bowles, and I went to this place on--I've forgotten what day--in the afternoon. We arrived

there and we were greeted by this very unattractive masseur. Obviously, not one of us was interested in this unattractive masseur. We went into the Turkish baths, steam baths and so on, and there there were also a number of older customers who were very interested in us; and obviously we were not interested in them. Then there entered a perfectly beautiful, little, charming Arab boy, who was about our age and who cottoned up to us. Charles was terrified of him, and so was Paul.

SMITH: Why?

RODITI: I don't know. Finally I was left alone with him, and we got on very well. He was perfectly charming, he was. The young and evil--I realized that young they were, but not as evil as they thought. Now, this of course will have to be, I won't say censored, but--

SMITH: We can seal certain things.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

MAY 15, 1985

SMITH: You were talking about your encounter with Hart Crane in France in 1929.

RODITI: Yes, when I met him, I had no idea that I was going to meet him. I had dropped by to see this painter Eugene McCown, whom I'd met several times in the gallery which exhibited him, and Eugene had suggested that I drop by his studio and see some of his other work. So I dropped by one evening, and there was this rather disheveled and ruffled-looking man there, already a bit drunk, who turned out to be Hart Crane. Crane had apparently been living--staying with Harry Crosby and had had a row with Harry Crosby and Caresse [Crosby] and had moved in with Eugene McCown. Eugene had a dinner date that evening and didn't like the idea of leaving Hart Crane alone and suggested that I go out and have dinner in a bistro with him and keep him out of trouble, because Hart Crane didn't speak much French.

SMITH: Did you know his poetry?

RODITI: Oh, certainly. I'd read his poetry; I'd read, I think it was **White Buildings** I'd read. I hadn't read all his work yet. I had a very high opinion of his poetry, and when I was introduced to him, I just couldn't believe my ears, because it never occurred to me that a poet whose

work I admired so much could be this rather, how should I say, disreputable-looking individual who's already half drunk and who looked as if he never undressed in the evening and just threw himself on the nearest sofa, fully dressed. That's the way he looked: like a relatively--I won't say relatively, a bum who hadn't quite yet hit the bottom. So we went out, and we had dinner in this bistro. He practically didn't eat anything and went on drinking. Then after that, he said that he wanted to go to a bar in the rue de Lappe. Well, I had vague notions of what the rue de Lappe was, very vague; I'd never been there. So we took the métro to go there, and we had to change lines at Châtelet.

SMITH: What part of town is the rue de Lappe in?

RODITI: It's near the Bastille. It's a very tiny, slummy street behind the Bastille, which oddly enough in the past couple of years has become very chic for art galleries, which is rather surprising. Anyhow, while we were changing from one line to another, we had to go through a whole labyrinth of passages. Hart Crane suddenly felt the need to piss and started cursing the Paris métro lines because they didn't have toilets like those of the stations in New York. And he suddenly stopped in front of everybody and pissed against the wall, which caused a certain--

SMITH: In the subway station?

RODITI: Yes, in the passageway between the two lines like, let's say, the transfer thing in Forty-second Street--which caused a certain disturbance and nasty remarks and so on, but everyone was in a hurry and went on and left him.

SMITH: Were you mortified?

RODITI: Well, I was horrified, not mortified. It didn't belong to me, this métro, but I'd never seen anybody do that before. I hope I never see it again. Finally, we reached the Bastille station and I didn't know how to get to the rue de Lappe, nor did Hart, for that matter. So I went up to a traffic cop, who gave me one look and in a very paternal manner told me how to get there, but warned me that I should be careful when I got there.

SMITH: Now why did he tell you that?

RODITI: I then discovered when I got there that it was, that these were sort of very, apache-type dance halls where men dance together, men dance with women, I mean it was a sort of free for all. One side of the dance floor there was a long bar, and we stood at this bar, and Hart ordered more drinks. Suddenly, he saw that there were a couple of French sailors further on along the bar, and he gestured for them to come over-- He wanted to buy them drinks. But they were accompanied by a couple of very tough-looking civilians, and Hart had no intention of inviting all four, only the sailors. A sort of discussion of sorts started

and Hart became vituperative, and I got scared and fled, and I never saw him again. It was only many years later, when I read his biography, that I came across the story of how he'd been expelled from France not very long after this evening. Last year when I read Kay Boyle's and Robert McAlmon's **Being Geniuses Together**, I got more details of how he'd been expelled from France. He'd gotten into a fight in a bar in Montparnasse, and the owner of the bar had called the cops. He'd struck a cop and been arrested, and then a few of his American friends got him out of jail on the condition that he leave the country immediately as an undesirable alien. And apparently during all those weeks in the course of which I met him only once, he'd been getting into trouble constantly. Now, this had some effect on me in that the only American poet I'd met apart from very young ones, who had not yet produced much that impressed me--the only ones I'd met at that date were [Archibald] MacLeish and Eliot, both of whom were very distinguished-looking gentlemen who behaved admirably. Suddenly meeting this poet who behaved so oddly, who really shocked me--I'm still very innocent, in many ways--this sort of scared me off what I would call the extreme American bohemia for a while. I was horrified by the drunkenness. I guess that drunkenness is something which was so rare in European intellectual and artistic circles

and much less widespread than it was in America in those days of prohibition.

SMITH: So he was looking for a fight.

RODITI: I had the impression that he enjoyed getting beat up. He seemed to be deliberately provoking it, asking for it. Of course, I was not as sophisticated in terms of psychoanalysis as I am now. I'm quite sure that if I were to get involved in the same kind of situation now, I would be able to give a much more profound psychoanalytical explanation of his behavior. I would note certain details of his behavior which would seem to me significant now, but which escaped me then. Looking back, I'm convinced that he was deliberately provoking.

SMITH: You normally did not go to that kind of establishment.

RODITI: Oh, no, I'd never been to it before.

SMITH: What kind of cafés and nightclubs did you go to while you were living in Paris?

RODITI: Well, I had very little pocket money in '29. I was only nineteen. I used to go to a couple of cafés in Montparnasse: the Select, which was where a great number of expatriate Americans used to hang out. In the evening, a number of peculiar characters like the novelist Richard Murphy, who's been completely forgotten, and Lillian Fisk, an American painter who's been completely forgotten (not

that they deserved to be remembered), and a certain number of French artists, writers who were known to be homosexuals--but it was not a specifically homosexual café. It was rather smaller than the other big cafés in Montparnasse, and pleasant. Maybe we used to go there because it was less noisy than the Coupole, which for some unknown reason has terrible acoustics so that you can scarcely hear anyone speak there because of the row. The Dôme had a much older crowd. The artists who'd been--

SMITH: The Dôme? Is that the--

RODITI: The Dôme. That was where the older artists had been going since about 1910 or '12. One still used to see people like [Marc] Chagall and [Ossip] Zadkine there, but they were an older generation, whereas the Select was a much younger crowd, writers up to about thirty-five or forty.

SMITH: Now, what was it about the Select that appealed to you?

RODITI: Well, I met friends there, French and American friends, and later people like Klaus Mann.

SMITH: One thing we didn't discuss terribly much the other day was your relationship with the American expatriate community: Hemingway, Fitzgerald.

RODITI: I had none--only with the younger ones.

SMITH: Were you even aware that they were there?

RODITI: Yes, I was aware of their presence, but somehow-- well, they didn't pay much attention to us younger ones. I mean, Paul Bowles later had very little contact with them. In any case, by 1932, most of them had left.

SMITH: Now, when the policeman talked to you, if he was surprised you were in that neighborhood, it must have been because of your appearance. You didn't look like the sort of person who normally would be in a slummy kind of neighborhood. How did you dress at that time?

RODITI: Well, I was dressed like any young man of a well-to-do family of the better neighborhoods of Paris.

SMITH: Did you wear a suit and tie?

RODITI: Yes, well, everybody did in those days. The mere fact that I didn't know my way there proved that I'd never been there. Now, I looked so obviously young that he thought that he'd better warn me.

SMITH: Another question that comes up in relationship to this is your identification as a homosexual.

RODITI: Well, that was very slow. I think that the identification came only after the failure of my relationship with F. Up till that point I was bisexual, yes. In my later psychoanalysis, it became clear that I'd been so shattered by the failure of this relationship, that for a long while I tried to sort of reconstitute it more happily with others. It was a kind of cussedness on my

part. Having failed there, I simply felt compelled to make a success of another relationship. Now, looking back over all those that I've had, I can see that they've all been failures--but in different ways.

SMITH: I noticed in your correspondence with Carlo Suares, a back and forth of which I only saw the forth, the question of homosexuality was something he felt that he had to talk to you about.

RODITI: Yes, and I was aware of being attracted to men very early--from the age of eighteen, I guess, on, but not exclusively. Of course, when I was nineteen I had this extraordinary one-night affair with [Federico] Garcia-Lorca, which was rather like a flash of lightning in my life. I didn't realize what a great poet he was. Who did in 1929? He was only passing through Paris. But there I suddenly found myself having a relationship with somebody who was totally in tune with me, totally, in a way which no girl had been, no other man--totally.

SMITH: Did you have any contact with Lorca through the years until his death?

RODITI: No, no. He was passing through Paris, and we met quite by chance and lost sight of each other. Well, he was moving around a great deal. He came to New York shortly after that. It was his period of greatest literary activity. Although he was convinced that we were predestined

to meet, because he was born on June 5 and I on June 6 under the same stars, but only eleven years difference--we met, if I remember right, in June. It was an extremely poetic and dramatic--I wish it didn't leave any bitter taste, because we both of us knew that it was just chance that we'd met, and that he was leaving in any case and there was no possibility of continuing it.

SMITH: You later wrote a poem about him.

RODITI: Yes. I must admit that when I read that he'd been murdered, I was sort of shattered. But I think it was mainly after my relationship with F., somehow I'd hoped that with him I'd establish the kind of relationship which had obviously been impossible with Lorca. I had the illusion of the same kind of being in tune and harmony, and discovered after a while that it was an illusion.

SMITH: Shifting the subject, let's go to 1937. You decided to come to the United States to go to school. Why did you choose the University of Chicago?

RODITI: Well, it was very simple. The University of Chicago was the only university in America at the time which offered you a B.A. after one year of residency if you simply passed certain exams. As I had very little money, I thought I'd try it and I managed it. They gave me credit for two years because of my previous studies and so on. Then I caught up; I was in summer school too, that year,

and got my B.A., Phi Beta Kappa and all the rest, and all within a year. After that, I had a graduate scholarship for my second year there. That first year was for me very, very important. It was a difficult year in that it was a year where I had rather more trouble with my epilepsies than I'd had for a long while--maybe because I was studying too hard and maybe the result of the strain of the previous year or two, I don't know. And it was there that I met Paul Goodman and this friend with whom I dined last night, David Sachs, who was not yet a student there; he was still a high school student, but he was very bright and used to attend the meetings of our poetry society. Now he's teaching philosophy here. I met the composer Ned Rorem, who was also a high school student who used to come to our graduate lounge and play the piano so remarkably that Paul Goodman and I one day asked him who he was; now Ned is a very well known composer. I met also a very fine poet who's dead now, Jean Garrigue, and Steve [Stephen] Stepanchev, who's also a poet. As a matter of fact, when we founded this poetry society, which continued to exist for many years, we were quite a group, and the editor of **Poetry** magazine, George Dillon, used to come once in a while and attend our meetings. For some totally unknown reasons, the chairman of the department--the English department--and his man Friday, who was a very pretentious poet with the name

of Elder Olson, decided that they disapproved of our poetry society, god knows why. There was an annual poetry prize, which still exists, like in every major university. That year Jean Garrigue, Stephen Stepanchev, and I, and a number of others competed for it. For the first time in the history of that prize, Professor Ronald [S.] Crane and his assistant Elder Olson announced that none of the poems that had been submitted was worthy of a prize. Well, it so happens now that three of the poets who submitted have been rather widely published (Jean Garrigue, Stephen Stepanchev, and I) and the poem that I submitted has been translated into four languages, and put in three anthologies--

SMITH: Which poem was that?

RODITI: "Habakkuk." Which is rather absurd. It's a poem which somehow has survived, whereas many of those which had been awarded the prize previous years have not survived, so that there was a lot of tension about that. I've never found out why Elder Olson and Ronald Crane disapproved of our activities, never. I think that it was something to do with power. They didn't like to see a rather serious initiative undertaken without their having been previously consulted and without their having initiated it. I think this was the real trouble.

SMITH: It sounds like your meeting Paul Goodman was a very important step in your life.

RODITI: Oh, certainly. It was a very important step because until I met Paul, I had never concerned myself much with philosophy. Paul had a very brilliant dialectical mind and was a student of philosophy, and our conversations were very often on problems that concerned him in his work and the dissertation he was slowly writing on the aesthetics of Kant; it was on **The Critique Of Judgement**. It was not exactly the easiest of Kant's three volume critiques. We discussed very extensively all sorts of points in Plato. For two years we met very regularly, nearly every day, and had these conversations.

SMITH: You mentioned the other day that you also read Thoreau and discussed him, and [Henry] George. What other authors did you--

RODITI: [Thorstein] Veblen, nobody reads him any longer. Goodman wrote very beautiful prose and some poetry. The one thing where I disagreed with Paul is that he was such a great admirer of [Jean] Cocteau, and I was not. I thought Cocteau was fun, but I never thought he was such a great genius.

SMITH: You had met Cocteau briefly in France.

RODITI: I had met Cocteau briefly, but also I found that Cocteau--well, he was very much what is called--he was an entertainer, **un amuseur public**, and a brilliant entertainer, but not profound. In a way some of his novels were

not much better than those of Carl Van Vechten, not much more profound. I had met Cocteau very slightly and at a time when I was still very suspicious of older homosexuals, very much on my guard.

SMITH: What about Goodman's influence upon your philosophy of literature, as opposed to the individual writers that you may or may not have liked? Had you developed a philosophy of literature by then?

RODITI: Not yet. Not yet. I think that he helped me develop one, but my philosophy of literature has changed so constantly. I won't say from day to day (I'm not a weathercock in that respect), but there's been a constant evolution, which is partly due in effect to the evolution of the position of literature in the modern world. I feel that literature plays a much less important part, at least in American life, than it did in the days of Whitman or even in the days when I was at the University of Chicago. There were books which were being written and published then which had some political impact: a book like Meyer Levin's *Citizens*, on the steel strikes; James Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*, which revealed a whole aspect of the life of Chicago which was not known to the rest of the nation; the early books of [John] Steinbeck about California--I mean, America was sort of discovering itself in those days--and Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*. Now, I don't think that

literature has that function any longer. When I--it's difficult to define the function of American literature now. All I can say is that it doesn't interest the world as much. The rest of the world was passionately interested in [William] Faulkner and Steinbeck and the early works of [Saul] Bellow. Now, well, some American writers manage to have a certain international success thanks to the Frankfurt Book Fair and to the fact that they'd been so highly publicized in America, that the rest of the world wants to see what the fuss is about and reads them, but is not particularly impressed by them.

SMITH: Do you think some of that function you were talking about is now picked up by cinema and television?

RODITI: Certainly by TV, and it's at a level which is so much lower. Even my friend Georgette Camille, I couldn't tear her away from the TV screen when "Dallas" was on. I kept on saying to her, "How can you watch this dreadful thing about these dreadful people--the kind of people who in real life you and I would run away from?" I said, "I couldn't care less what happens to them. I mean they can all sort of catch AIDS and die." [laughter] I couldn't care less what happens to the people in "Dallas." I saw it once and that's enough.

SMITH: Yeah. So did you--

RODITI: Do you watch all of it?

SMITH: I don't watch television, I have to confess--

RODITI: Congratulations.

SMITH: Did you have any ambitions to write literature that would have the impact of Steinbeck or Farrell?

RODITI: No, I knew from the start that I didn't have it in me. See, one of the reasons why Steinbeck or Farrell can write that kind of thing is that they have lived in that kind of milieu and can describe it. It's a milieu which means something. Whereas I was brought up in such an outlandish world which had so little contact with reality, that I can describe the world of a Farrell or of a Steinbeck only as a complete outsider. My own world is something so unreal that very few people would be interested in it, except--yes, well, [Marcel] Proust did it. Maybe I could have done that.

SMITH: Did you meet Farrell while you were in Chicago? Or [Nelson] Algren?

RODITI: No, I met Farrell in New York later. Well, Algren and I met only slightly, because he was having an affair with a girl who was a close friend of mine, and then later, this passionate relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, who snatched him away from this girlfriend of mine. This girlfriend of mine was in New York and dined one day with Simone de Beauvoir, who was in America and said she was going to Chicago, and she says, "If you're going to

Chicago, look up my friend Nelson Algren," which Simone did. My girl never saw Nelson again. [laughter] I think that women are much less scrupulous in those matters than homosexuals.

SMITH: I wanted to ask you if you could explain some of the background of "Through the Needle's Eye." It seems such a direct autobiographical story about you and Paul Goodman and two of your other friends. Without spoiling the delightful mythic character of it, how did you come to write it, and what did it mean to you?

RODITI: Well, it's an elaboration of a dream, of a real dream. I wrote this dream down, and then expanded it and had a lot of fun expanding it. Paul enjoyed it enormously.

SMITH: Are there other similar sketches that you wrote on your life in Chicago with Goodman and campus students?

RODITI: No, that's the only one.

SMITH: Did he write any short stories that were parallel to that--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: --that dealt with you as a character--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: --either directly--

RODITI: There's one of the stories in--what's the title of his book?

SMITH: **A Ceremonial?**

RODITI: No. A volume of stories of his--**The Facts of Life**. There's one of the stories in which there's a Sephardic Jewish character who is the sort of mixture between myself and a relative of mine whom Goodman never met, but whom I had described to him.

SMITH: Now in "Through the Needle's Eye," you refer to Goodman as the Yankee in King Arthur's court. Did he really strike you as that, as the archetypical American?

RODITI: No, but he was out of place in this decor, and not because he was typically American, but the distance between Goodman and the decor was the same as between the Yankee and the-- [laughter]

SMITH: In terms of your story, or the whole University of Chicago?

RODITI: No, just in terms of my story--this very baroque decor, and this very strange world.

SMITH: What was his mood like during that period?

RODITI: Well, he was on the whole rather happy. He was having a very curious love-life at one time with a red-headed girl who came of an anarchist background. Her parents had never married, because they didn't believe in the institution of marriage, nor did her grandparents. She didn't, she wouldn't marry Paul, although they subsequently had a child.

SMITH: Was this Virginia?

RODITI: Yes. Ginny Miller. And the child was Susan, who's now a psychotherapist in New York. At the same time, Paul was having an affair with a red-headed boy who looked as if he might be Ginny's brother. It was very funny to see the three of them walking down the street, with Paul, his arms around both of them. It caused some scandal.

SMITH: Now you've taken the position that Goodman is one of the more important American writers of the twentieth century.

RODITI: Yes. I'm not the only one to believe it.

SMITH: No, I didn't say that, but it's definitely a minority position.

RODITI: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: Could you explain that position further?

RODITI: Well, I don't know of another American writer who could be as interesting and as original in as many different fields. Some of his poetry is very good; I won't say all. Some of his stories are absolutely first-rate; I won't say all. Some of his philosophical writings, too, and his social criticisms, certainly. I don't know of any other American writer with as broad, as great a variety of interests and achieving such a high degree of professional quality in each one of them. After all, look at the writings of most other American poets, like Robert Lowell: apart from his poetry, there isn't much. Goodman was a

very remarkable mind, a very unusual mind. Two books on him have already been written and published in French. I have a friend up in Cambridge who's writing a biography of Goodman which has already two thousand pages written. If one has access to all his writings, it's something quite fascinating. And I'm not the only one to think as highly of Goodman. David Sachs with whom I dined last night, who's a professional philosopher, who taught at Harvard and here [UCLA] and Johns Hopkins, shares my view that Goodman was one of the most brilliant minds of our generation. He exerted a terrific influence on David when David was young.

SMITH: Did he exert an influence on your writings?

RODITI: No, not on my choices of subject matter, but certainly on my critical attitude towards what I write. I learned to be a much more subtle critic of my own writings and much more of a perfectionist, which is contrary to his view. Paul practically never revised a poem. His stories he revised constantly, even after they'd been published. After his death, revised versions of some of his published stories were found.

SMITH: He makes a comment in the preface that you printed in **Thrice Chosen** that your poetry lacks humor, or wished that you had put more humor in it.

RODITI: Yes, but this was at a time when I had little occasion to be humorous. Since then, I've written a great

deal of humorous poetry, and humorous stories too. It lacked humor then.

SMITH: Did you accept that criticism?

RODITI: Oh, certainly, certainly. But I could have applied the same criticism to Paul. There were periods when his poetry was gloomy and lacked humor.

SMITH: Now, through the years--I'm assuming that Goodman's name will come up again as we discuss things--but through the years, did you and he share your works in progress? Was he someone that you would turn to to get criticism?

RODITI: Yes. He didn't turn to me for criticism, he turned to me for something quite different. He used to come and stay with me in Europe later, and he was somebody who was profoundly sad, and he took contemporary history very much to heart. He was always, he was very sad about his own life, in a way. Because although he was happily married and Sally was an ideal wife for him, although he adored his children, his homosexual life was not something very cheerful. Mine, in a way, was much happier. He had very few relationships which were satisfactory to him, partly I think because he was attracted to the wrong kind of man, or boy. I'll never forget once when he came over to Europe, and he went, after staying with me, he went off to Ireland. Now Paul had raved ever since boyhood about Irish-American boys of Washington Heights, where he'd spent

his boyhood. He came back from Ireland profoundly disappointed, saying that the Irish had no sense of homosexuality or indeed of sex. He'd found that the Irish in Ireland were not at all what he expected. I teased him a bit about that. He then wrote a poem about it.

SMITH: Which poem was that?

RODITI: Well, it's a very Freudian poem about Saint Patrick killing the serpents, and the serpents of course being the symbols for pricks. [laughter]

SMITH: Has that poem been published?

RODITI: Oh, yes.

SMITH: After you left Chicago, you went to San Francisco, and you went through what sounds like a horrifying experience with a psychoanalyst. Did Goodman help you at all in terms of putting that together?

RODITI: Yes, later when I was being analyzed in New York in 1941 or '42, but my psychoanalysis was a very difficult one because of this business of the epilepsy. It never occurred to the analyst that that was the main trouble, and everybody always said that my losses of consciousness were psychosomatic, and they weren't. It was only after the invention of the electroencephalograph that the thing was properly diagnosed.

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SMITH: At this point, was Goodman already interested in the issues of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy?

RODITI: Not yet. That interest developed when he was living in New York and became acquainted with Fritz Perls. He was interested in Freud. He'd read a great deal of Freud's writings. He was interested in the theory of psychoanalysis. When we were in Chicago together, I had a very good friend who was a brilliant analyst called Lionel Blitzstein. Paul knew him too, but there was some kind of mutual hostility between them, partly perhaps because Lionel was a very successful analyst who lived in a very elegant apartment on the near North Side, and most of whose patients were rather wealthy people. Lionel made a perhaps rather tactless remark to Paul once: Lionel told Paul that he felt that Paul needed analysis. Well, Paul certainly did, but Paul had a curious do-it-yourself attitude, and he kept on referring to the self-analysis that he was carrying on according to the principals of Freud's self-analysis. I had a long discussion about that recently with Taylor Stoehr, who's writing Paul's biography and has published a piece in which he refers to Paul's self-analysis. Then I returned from Boston to New York; I discussed it again with Isad From, who knew Paul very well and practiced with him

at the American Institute of Gestalt Therapy; they were both sort of Gestalt therapists after this Perls school had been founded. And From assured me that Paul never really carried out this self-analysis. He talked about it, but didn't do it systematically, the way it should be done. Well, that is a moot point. There may be ways of doing a self-analysis which are not classical ways and which are just as efficient. I know that I tried a certain amount of self-analysis. All I can say now is that I feel that people in America lay far too much store by psychotherapy and analysis, and that what one needs is the nice, old-fashioned virtue of fortitude.

SMITH: Since we're on the subject, let's talk a little bit about some of the psychotherapeutic experiences that you had, though, the one in San Francisco didn't sound terribly therapeutic.

RODITI: Well, it was in a way, it was in a way. It came at a time when I was not prepared for it and when there were too many disturbances in my life. I don't think I lend myself to analysis well, because, after all, I've been in treatment with three different analysts: two Freudians and one of a way-out, completely outlandish school. With the two Freudians, the first one made me realize that certain drives or tendencies in me were, in a way, dangerous and needed to be controlled; and I learned to

control them to a certain extent. The second analyst, the one in New York, proved to be such a stuffed shirt, it was like being analyzed by a stone wall; after a while, I gave it up. I felt that absolutely no progress was being made. The third analysis was undertaken in Paris, more or less experimentally to see how it would work. It worked remarkably well until something went completely haywire in what is known technically as the countertransference, that is to say that my analyst suddenly began to assume certain aspects of my personality. It sounds almost like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde business or something odd like that, but it's perfectly true. I interrupted it when I saw that this was coming on. I didn't see the man for twenty years, and last year I saw him shuffling along a street in Paris, much aged. I recognized him, he didn't recognize me; and I stopped him, and I chatted with him and reminded him who I was. He looked sort of surprised to see that I was still looking so young and healthy and so on, whereas he had become such a poor, old dodderer. I took him to have coffee and chat in a café. I asked him if he was still practicing. He said, "No, I've become a translator for United Nations." He'd gone whole hog and adopted my personality. If that isn't the most extraordinary case of countertransference you've ever heard of, isn't it?

SMITH: Now, what school of psychoanalysis did he practice?

RODITI: It's called Rêve Eveillé Dirigé in France, which means "directed daydreaming." It's a very good school, and it can give excellent results, but somehow he--

SMITH: That's amazing.

RODITI: It is amazing. I began to wonder whether I didn't have some sort of diabolical, malevolent powers in me.

SMITH: Well, we all do, but--

RODITI: But I realized that something was going wrong and withdrew. God knows what would have happened if I'd continued in the analysis. I realized at a certain point that he was losing control of it, and I couldn't quite figure out what was happening.

SMITH: But in Chicago, you had not yet started in therapy.

RODITI: No, no. When I left Chicago, this friend of mine, Lionel Blitzstein, told me that I should try analysis because of this epileptic business. He was right, in a way, in that the anxiety that it caused, the fear of these episodes, was causing them to be more frequent than they need be.

SMITH: Did you think of yourself as having epilepsy?

RODITI: No. I just knew that I lost consciousness very easily, and particularly in moments of stress. I just couldn't stand certain types of stress.

SMITH: There was a passage in one of your autobiographical drafts where you write of the seizures as coming never

alone, always with people, and you wonder if it was a way of testing--or a plea for help--to see whether you could trust the person.

RODITI: Moments of extreme anxiety, but that's now something which is entirely of the past.

SMITH: Now, when you started your graduate study, you decided to go into Provençal poetry?

RODITI: Yes, because that's what my professor with whom I got on best was--a Dante specialist. His name was Borgese, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese. I had taken a seminar in Provençal with another professor, and I heard that there was a very peculiar manuscript in the library of the University of Chicago, a late medieval manuscript which had been incorrectly catalogued by somebody who didn't know the history of this thing properly. It was a Spanish translation of a Provençal book. I'd been encouraged to write up a paper on it, which was subsequently published in a learned journal. I was then encouraged to do my doctoral dissertation in that area, because I had practically no competition and seemed to have the necessary competence. Since then I've published quite a number of papers. I never did finish the dissertation because of the war, and then after the war I felt that the exact theme of the dissertation was no longer valid, because a lot of other work on that area had been done; it would have required my

starting again. But now I may do a book in which I bring together, revised, all my studies in Provençal literature and write a few chapters to fill in.

SMITH: Were the poets of a special appeal to you?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: In their themes? What was it that kept you to it?

RODITI: What puzzled me was the evolution of poetics.

Obviously, even the earliest ones, although they have no-- we have no documents concerning that--had a poetics; they had a conception of what poetry is and how it should be written. Then there are some relatively early texts of poetics contained in grammars. Then there's this evolution which leads to Dante, because obviously when he wrote his **De Vulgari Eloquentia** in Latin, which is a poetics of sorts, he knew these earlier poetics. And, of course, there are these two grammars, which I have read--a verse version of one of them by an Italian writing in Provençal. Obviously these influenced Dante, and there may have been other such texts which are lost. But I wanted to do my dissertation mainly on the poetics of the troubadors, and point out that this development of a poetics was part of a sociological evolution, that the earliest troubadors had been great feudal lords or serfs, neither of whom bothered much about the theory of what they were writing. And it was only when the majority of the troubadors were of

the, what was known in the middle ages as clerks, middle-class craftsmen of the cities that these poetics were developed. So I started off with the sociology of them, which pointed out that in a certain period, the majority were clerks or craftsmen, the city's furriers and so on and so on. It was then that these grammars began to appear, and the theory of poetics, and also local competitions promoted by the municipal authorities, by, almost, guilds. So the poetics are a middle-class phenomenon.

SMITH: Now, you've written that to understand Provençal poetry, one has to put aside five hundred years of European poetry.

RODITI: Yeah.

SMITH: Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

RODITI: Well, Provençal poetry developed from the eleventh century until the age of Dante. It was contemporary with a great deal of Latin poetry, very little Italian poetry, some North French poetry, yes. It certainly influenced German poetry. Much of the early Spanish and Portuguese poetry is written in forms borrowed from the Provençal poets. It was the most important literature of its era, and it's a language which has produced practically nothing of any importance for several centuries, except Mistral, who got a Nobel prize, oddly enough.

SMITH: Gabriela Mistral?

RODITI: No, the other Mistral [Frédéric]. Gabriela
Mistral is a--

SMITH: Chilean.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Did you find your poetry influenced at all by your
study of Provençal poetics?

RODITI: An occasional image, nothing in the forms, an
occasional image.

SMITH: Now, when you went to San Francisco, and Kansas
City later, did you later participate in local poetry
societies or gatherings? Did you meet American poets?

RODITI: No. In San Francisco I met [Kenneth] Rexroth and
a very gifted young poet who was expected to produce great
poetry and who later became a drunkard and vanished from
the scene, called Robert Horan. I think he's totally
forgotten by now, but he was very gifted. I met Dorothy
Van Ghent, who was a good poet and excellent critic, and
who also became a terrific drunk, poor dear. Yes, I met
and associated with what little there was of a literary
world in San Francisco and Berkeley. Haakon Chevalier, who
later got into such absurd trouble with [Robert] Oppen-
heimer, was a close friend of mine, and Arthur Berger who
was teaching music at Mills [College]. I had a very
pleasant time there seeing--and it was not the crowded
literary world that it has become. The campus, in terms of

the number of students, wasn't much, what with seventy thousand there now, or--whereas I think there were barely ten thousand.

SMITH: Did you find, going in as it were into the American heartland of Chicago, Kansas City, and then even further out west, that poetry circles had different concerns in the U.S. than they did in Europe?

RODITI: Oh, yes. Very different.

SMITH: How would you define that difference?

RODITI: Well, as far as Chicago was concerned, the great Chicago poet in those days, though he wasn't there much, was still [Carl] Sandburg. There was a kind of Middle Western school of literature and poetry, more of prose: Meyer Levin, [James] Farrell, Sandburg--a kind of populist literature. Of course, there were some slicker writers coming out of Chicago, like [Ben] Hecht. But, on the whole, the Middle West was strongly populist. The West, well, it hadn't yet emerged. I mean, there was Robinson Jeffers, and that's about all.

SMITH: Were you familiar with his work prior to your coming to California?

RODITI: Oh, yes.

SMITH: Did you ever run into William Saroyan?

RODITI: Oh, yes, that was wonderful. When I was a student at Berkeley, there was a wonderful bar in San Francisco on

Pacific, if I remember right, run by a weird Portugese from the Azores called Izzy Gomes. Everybody used to all foregather there, including Saroyan. In fact, it's the scene of one of his plays--I think it's **The Time of Your Life**, I think it's called. I was very poor at the time, but I could always get a free drink, and even a free sandwich from Izzy Gomes, by sitting at the end of the bar and talking Portuguese to him. He was so glad to find someone who spoke Portuguese that he'd suddenly put a drink in front of me, and then a sandwich. That's how I met Saroyan, but only slightly.

SMITH: What kind of a character was he? Did you have any discussions with him?

RODITI: Well, you know, he was a very difficult character, and now it's coming out that what with his gambling that he was very unstable. I don't think he was the genius that he has been made out to be. He wrote some delightful things, but I don't think he's such a genius. As for all that he's written about Armenians, it's so superficial.

SMITH: What about in Kansas City?

RODITI: That was dreadful.

SMITH: That probably was quite a shock for you.

RODITI: It was dreadful for all sorts of reasons: I was living on very little money, and I had to support my sister [Ellen Roditi] on account of the war. We were stranded:

we had money in England, but couldn't have it transferred. In addition, I was extremely anxious because of the occupation of France. I was anxious about a number of friends, several of whom died in death camps afterwards, though I didn't know it until after the war.

SMITH: Let's get into the Second World War. Where were you when it--

RODITI: I was on the West Coast when it began in 1939, and I was in Kansas City at the time of the occupation of France.

SMITH: Did that come as a surprise to you, the fall of France?

RODITI: No, no. I knew that the Third Republic was absolutely riddled with fascist intrigue and traitors. That's one of the reasons why I'd left; I mean, I knew too much about what was likely to happen.

SMITH: You spent a great deal of effort working to get refugees out of Europe.

RODITI: Yes. I got three, four.

SMITH: Could you talk about those four cases?

RODITI: Well, it was a whole family. It was the sister of Léon Pierre-Quint, her husband, and her two children. He had smuggled some money out of France to me, to bring himself and his family over, and I went through all the rigmarole of signing the papers. But I also helped get a

couple of Germans over, German refugees who were in France.

SMITH: Was that Lotte Eisner?

RODITI: No, Lotte Eisner went underground.

SMITH: Vladimir Pozner?

RODITI: Yes, Pozner. Haakon Cheveliar made--got me to sign the moral affidavits for him, because I'd known him. I'd published a book of his. Then there was a dancer, I've forgotten what his name was, who'd been--who'd worked with Rudolf Laban in Germany and who'd been recommended to me by Lotte Eisner, and I managed to get him here.

SMITH: Denise van Moppès?

RODITI: Denise van Moppès, she didn't come to this country. I got papers for her to come to this country, but she didn't want to come. With these papers, she was able to get to Lisbon, and, once in Lisbon, she went to join the BBC in London, join the Free French.

SMITH: What about Ilarie Voronca?

RODITI: No, I couldn't get him out. He committed suicide after the war.

SMITH: And then, of course, you spent a great deal of time on Pierre-Quint.

RODITI: Yeah, well, I didn't realize yet that he was a junkie. I'm glad I didn't get him over; I would have been in some trouble, I can assure you. He would have come with his suitcase full of--god knows what he was taking at the time!

SMITH: What were you required to do in order to get people over?

RODITI: Well, there are all sorts of different ways: for Pierre-Quint's family, there was the money. All I had to do was to sign certain papers that this money was there, that it was not mine, that I'd received it from Switzerland for this purpose and block it in an account which would be unblocked when they arrived. That was OK, they got their visas. For the German dancer, I brought his name to the attention of the Emergency Rescue Committee, as he was a member of the Socialist Party and was threatened because of his underground anti-Nazi activities. He was not Jewish, by the way. He was an absolutely bonafide political refugee, so I didn't have to do anything except prepare a dossier on him and submit it to this committee, who then did what was necessary. For Denise van Moppès, the same thing, 'cause in any case I had a statement that she was not coming to this country. Because she couldn't get out of France to go to London to join the Free French. Her cousin was already with the Free French, and she wanted to join him. I had a letter stating this, and then the Emergency Rescue Committee arranged for her to get the American visa, which she never used.

SMITH: Now, you had relatives in France who were not American citizens. Did you try to get them out?

RODITI: I tried to convince them, but I couldn't.

SMITH: Were any of them killed during the--

RODITI: Eight.

SMITH: Eight.

RODITI: A cousin of my father's with her husband and their two boys, and a more distant relative who was immensely wealthy, with her husband and her two children.

SMITH: Your mother and your brother Harold came over at what point?

RODITI: Well, my mother was here when war was declared, and my brother came over with his first wife, and that was a messy business.

SMITH: In what sense?

RODITI: Well, my brother was somebody who'd always done nothing but foolish things: he'd gotten himself involved in this business in Paris, and was paraplegic; then in London during the war, he got involved in some very stupid business and got into debt and went through bankruptcy and was put in jail. I got him out of jail and to this country. I'm surprised I don't have more gray hairs. You have no idea how much trouble I had with that man.

SMITH: Now your other brother--

RODITI: Stayed in England.

SMITH: That's James Roditi?

RODITI: But this one, Harold-- Really! Having a

paraplegic brother who gets himself in jail in a country that's at war, and you have to get him out--

SMITH: How did you do that?

RODITI: I went to Washington and told the whole story to a Mrs. Shipley at the State Department, and told her that he was an invalid, and he was my younger brother. It was crazy to put a boy in that condition in jail to begin with.

SMITH: Was he still a fascist?

RODITI: I've never known what he was in the back of his mind. [laughter]

SMITH: But as far as the public knew--

RODITI: Certainly not, no. She was very sensible and issued him an American passport in London; he had let his passport expire and so on. The British were only too glad to get rid of him, knowing he had an American passport, they put him on the first boat and shipped him over with his wife.

SMITH: What kind of personal contact did you have with the Emergency Rescue Committee?

RODITI: Varian Fry and a couple of others, people who worked in the office.

SMITH: Did they come to you and ask you for vouchers for people who were trying to get out of Europe?

RODITI: Only moral ones, because I didn't have the money to sign affidavits of support--that I couldn't do. I could

only sign what was known as the moral affidavit for somebody whom I'd known personally.

SMITH: It seems like you may have gotten caught up a little bit in the conflicts between the different refugee groups, at least through Dwight MacDonald. Could you explain that somewhat?

RODITI: No, not with Dwight MacDonald. When I was at the Office of War Information, the Voice of America, we had at the French desk where I was working, violent tensions between those who were in favor of General [Henri] Giraud and those who were in favor of General [Charles] de Gaulle. Of course, the Gaullists won in the long run. But the Giraud people were perhaps more traditionalist, and they were considered more conservative, if one could be more conservative than de Gaulle turned out to be. In those days, de Gaulle was viewed by Roosevelt in Washington as being a dangerous man.

SMITH: This was reflected at the OWI?

RODITI: Yes, which started off by being very much in favor of Giraud. Now we're beginning to know so much more about the Roosevelt's administration and what was at the back of Roosevelt's mind.

SMITH: Before we get into that, there were a couple of things I wanted to pick up on. One was [René] Crevel's suicide. He had been a friend of yours.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Were you in touch with him around the time of his suicide?

RODITI: A few weeks before. A few weeks before because of the book that he published. He had published three novels with Editions de Sagittaire: **Mon corps et moi**, **Babylone**, and **La mort difficile**. When the firm was in financial difficulties, he went over to Gallimard with his fourth novel, which was called **Etes-vous fous?**, which Gallimard published. Then he wrote a fifth novel called **Les pieds dans le plat**, which was a very violently communist novel, in a way, and at the same time a violent attack on a man called Léon Bailby, who was the owner of a rightist, almost fascist daily newspaper in Paris, and a homosexual, and who had tried to make Crevel. When he submitted this book to Gallimard, Gallimard was scared and turned it down. He came back to us, and we published it. It had very little success, because nobody dared review it. It's now been reprinted, and of course sells like hotcakes at the moment, especially as I wrote an article in a magazine in Paris telling the whole history of it. Anyhow, at the time of this Conference of Writers Against Fascism, which took place in Paris in '35, wasn't it? 'Thirty-four, 'thirty-five. [André] Breton had just broken with the communists, having led a very strange relationship with them. He

insisted on all of the surrealists breaking [with the communists] with him, and Crevel decided not to. Breton had already been extremely critical of Crevel's homosexuality and now of his politics too. Crevel was in a very bad state of health; he'd already had his lungs operated on for tuberculosis, and was in great pain and discovered that the tuberculosis had spread to one of his kidneys. It was a combination of pain, despair over the spread of the disease and bitterness over his quarrels with Breton--that is my interpretation of it--that led to his suicide.

Now, actually, he was not exclusively homosexual. I know that Crevel had a relationship at one time with Georgette Camille. I know that he had a relationship which lasted a great number of years on and off with Mopse Sternheim, the daughter of the writer Karl Sternheim. There are masses of letters from Crevel to Mopse, which are still to be published someday, and which are very interesting letters, because they're not only love letters-- He was a remarkable man, Crevel. He was the only one among the surrealists who, for instance, had read [Rudolph Carnap] or [Ludwig] Wittgenstein. He was really remarkable. He spoke quite good English, he spoke quite good German, he read a great deal. He was unbelievably handsome at one time, until the TB spoiled his looks. And he had all sorts of people falling in love with him, men and women. He was an

absolutely adorable, delightful person. I was never in love with him, but I know plenty who were.

SMITH: In your last meeting with him, what took place?

RODITI: Well, it was strictly a business meeting about the book and corrections and proofs and so on.

SMITH: And you had--

RODITI: And he looked dreadful; he was almost unrecognizable, physically. He was all puffed up, maybe from some medication which he took, maybe from some drug that he took because of the pain. He was not a drug addict, but in those days, morphine was being prescribed rather freely; until the invention of antibiotics morphine was prescribed very freely for certain types of tuberculosis of the bones and so on.

SMITH: You've written that at that time friends of yours were committing suicide as commonly as catching the cold.

RODITI: Well, my cousin did, and I was very fond of her. Crevel, my cousin and a number of friends in Berlin when Hitler came to power. They were years of terrible strain. I don't know why my cousin committed suicide. Well, I do--lack of fortitude.

SMITH: That's one way of defining it. Coming back to the United States at the beginning of the war. When did you get back in touch with Charles Henri Ford?

RODITI: Well, it suddenly occurred to me when I was in New

York, after the Voice of America, that somebody, I've forgotten who, mentioned to me--I think it was Ettie Stettheimer--mentioned to me that [Pavel] Tchelitchev was in New York with Charles Henri Ford, so I got in touch with them. Then I became involved with **View** magazine, but the involvement was very limited, because I was on the night shift of the Voice of America.

SMITH: How did **View** magazine strike you?

RODITI: Well, I thought it was very beautifully produced; it was, in a way, one of the most exciting ventures--it was a bit more chi-chi than I would have liked.

SMITH: What do you mean by that?

RODITI: Well, trendy. Charles Henri Ford has always been very anxious to be of the very advanced guard of literary and artistic fashion. His favorite expression is, "Oh, I discovered," exactly like Gertrude Stein used to say she discovered Picasso, which is totally untrue. Alphonse Kann and [Henry] Kahnweiler and Leo Stein had discovered Picasso, not Gertrude. Charles Henri was always discovering people and boasting about having discovered them and always hoping that somebody was going to boast about having discovered him.

SMITH: **View** was intended as a political magazine?

RODITI: Good god, no! It was surrealist, vaguely surrealist and sort of advanced guard. It had people like

Paul Frederick Bowles writing in it, and I wrote in it,
and--

SMITH: Had Bowles come back to America?

RODITI: Oh yes--and Parker Tyler, and a strange character,
[John] Myers, who's published his memoirs recently and
later became an art dealer. **View** published all sorts of
things. I did a translation of a section of Raymond
Roussel's **Impressions d'Afrique** for it. It introduced to
American readers a lot of rather advanced-guard material.
In a way, it was a more visual continuation of **transi-
tion.**

SMITH: How would you compare it to **VVV**?

RODITI: Well, **VVV** was much more luxurious, to begin with,
and much more strictly surrealist.

SMITH: You also did some articles for **VVV**.

RODITI: I didn't do articles, they published some prose
poems of mine and a translation of [Alfred] Jarry.

SMITH: Was that the first translation of Jarry into
English?

RODITI: I guess so, or one of the very first, but probably
the first.

SMITH: Now, William Carlos Williams did the introduction
to one of Ford's books; did you have any opportunity to
meet Williams?

RODITI: Well, once in a while when he came to New York,

there'd be a party where I'd meet him. He was very friendly; he was a nice, old gentleman in those days, and very friendly towards all of us young people.

SMITH: Did you show him any of your poetry?

RODITI: Oh, he knew it. He read all the advanced-guard magazines. He knew perfectly well who I was. But I didn't have much chance to see people because from 1942 to '45, to '44, I was on this night shift.

SMITH: I have one more question about American poets; did you have any chance to meet Wallace Stevens?

RODITI: No, he was practically never in New York. But then recently someone rummaging around in his papers found among them a complimentary remark about something that I had written.

SMITH: He never communicated it to you?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: Too bad. Let's get to the OWI. How did you get that job?

RODITI: Well, I was teaching in Kansas City.

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SMITH: How did you get the job at the Office of War Information?

RODITI: Well, while I was teaching in Kansas City, I decided--well, I had no particular reason to stay in Kansas City during the summer, when I was not teaching--to come to New York where I could stay with a wealthy friend who had a very nice apartment.

SMITH: Now, is this the summer of '41?

RODITI: Yeah.

SMITH: So, before the U.S. was in the war?

RODITI: Yeah. This was a strange poet called Edward Horn. I had done him a good turn, because he was a quite wealthy poet and very strange man, a very sweet person. He had great difficulty getting published. I'd arranged for the press of James A. Decker to publish a book of his poems, and he was delighted with that. It cost him a little bit, but he could afford it. He appeared in a series with some quite good poets, and he'd invited me to come and spend my vacation in New York in his apartment. He was going to be away in any case, and all I had to do was buy my own groceries and so on. So I came to New York, and before he went away, he gave a party to which he invited somebody who already worked with Colonel [William

J.] Donovan's office, which was not yet called Office of War Information; it was Office of the Coordinator of Information. And when this person knew that I spoke perfect French and German and very good Italian and was fairly well informed, she said that she would arrange for a meeting with Donovan's chief of staff, or whatever it was, and I was immediately engaged on the strength of my knowledge of languages, and earning twice as much as at Kansas City. So I resigned from my job at Kansas City and moved to New York.

SMITH: And at Kansas City you were a visiting lecturer?

RODITI: No, I had a job for one year, renewable instructor.

SMITH: So your duties at the office were--

RODITI: Well, at first I was working in a listening post taking summaries of broadcasts, shortwave broadcasts, mainly from Germany and Italy, war news. And then, shortly after Pearl Harbor, I was transferred to--that was when our government began to send out its own shortwave programs--I was transferred to what became the Voice of America and which was sending out to begin with programs only in English, French, German, and Italian; and then gradually I [listened to and checked] all the various other desks, Polish and what have you.

SMITH: What did you do at these desks?

RODITI: Well, I had a whole series of different jobs there, and I ended up by being in charge of the French desk at night, because Pierre Lazareff was in charge during the day. And as we were a twenty-four-hour operation in French, because we'd sent broadcasts to the Pacific in French, which would be daytime then, I was in charge of the broadcasts at night. We'd never been able to find somebody who could be trusted for the third shift, so that we had only two shifts, and seven days a week, though every once in a while, when it was very quiet, I'd take a night off.

SMITH: Now, did you write copy, edit?

RODITI: No. All I did was supervise the programs; see that the news programs were up to date, because we had a news desk and we'd have some new items come in; drop some item out of a program, because it had been run too often, and put in something new and so on. I just had to keep the whole thing going.

SMITH: Did you have any programming responsibilities?

RODITI: Yes, oh yes. See that our directives, which came from the State Department, were respected; see that every news item that was translated into French was OK'd by me before it was broadcast.

SMITH: In terms of both language and politics?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: What was the basic mission of the office?

RODITI: Well, we had to follow political directives which came to us from Washington, and, as I said earlier at one time, we were very much in favor of General [Henri] Giraud and rather critical of General [Charles] de Gaulle.

SMITH: When you say "we," was that the staff?

RODITI: The United States.

SMITH: The staff at the--

RODITI: The United States.

SMITH: The government?

RODITI: Our policy was pro-Giraud and discouraging de Gaulle, and then that changed, partly under the influence of [Winston] Churchill. I think that as time goes by, some very peculiar things are going to come up about Roosevelt, and he's going to turn out not to have been the very liberal saint that we all believed.

SMITH: Well, what were some of the things that bothered you that came across your desk?

RODITI: Well, we had a whole lot of intelligence material which came in and which had been previously evaluated in Washington, but which was passed on to us as background material. For instance, we had reports for over a year on the death camps before we admitted that they existed.

SMITH: What years are we talking about? Do you remember the specific date when you first heard about the death camps?

RODITI: 'Forty-two.

SMITH: Early in '42?

RODITI: That I would have to check. Sometime in '42. But for a solid year, I know the State Department and the White House always affirmed that such rumors came from unreliable sources. The United States government was forced to admit their existence only after an allied chief of state had fulminated against the Germans over BBC, and that was Queen Wilhelmina. When they started deporting the Jews from Holland to death camps, she made a speech over BBC in Dutch protesting against this and admitting that the people were being gassed and that they were being taken to camps where other people had already been gassed. After Queen Wilhelmina let the cat out of the bag, the State Department and the White House had to admit that this was going on.

SMITH: So then you began to broadcast the news in your service.

RODITI: Well, we were told not to broadcast the news too much because it was too demoralizing.

SMITH: What other kind of information suppression was there?

RODITI: Well, not so much information suppression as a great deal of information exaggeration. We would sometimes broadcast some wildly exaggerated news about some resistance activity, which turned out to be very minor. But

that's the whole business of news and propaganda in any case. The one thing which was really bad is the whole business of denying the existence of the death camps.

SMITH: What about anti-Semitism in the U.S.? Did you encounter it?

RODITI: In our policy in the admission of refugees certainly. Books have been written and published now on how our State Department was unwilling to give visas, and failed to save the lives of many people. Then the other thing was the United States government's and the Canadian government's--especially the Canadian even more--their unwillingness to accept refugees because of the fear that their presence would arouse anti-Semitism in America. And so what? [laughter] It existed anyhow.

SMITH: In Chicago, did you run into it? Were you aware of--

RODITI: Anti-Semitism?

SMITH: Anti-Semitic practices, yes.

RODITI: Yes, all over but no worse than they'd been before. This is a very strange country. I mean, this is a country which has somehow never managed to assimilate painlessly its ethnic groups. At the moment, there's all this talk about the Chicanos and the immigrants from Mexico. So we tone down on anti-Semitism, we tone down on the blacks, and so on.

SMITH: Yeah.

RODITI: Is that true?

SMITH: It seems to be only black neighborhoods where bombs get dropped.* Even still.

RODITI: They still get dropped, yeah.

SMITH: When you were at the OWI, did you encounter Jerome Bruner or Gordon Allport?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: They were working on a propaganda study.

RODITI: Yeah.

SMITH: I believe they were working in that office.

RODITI: I think they were working in Washington rather than in our office.

SMITH: Yes, by office I mean--

RODITI: In any case, our office was so vast.

SMITH: Let's talk about some of your colleagues in New York: Yvan Goll?

RODITI: Yeah, well, I got him his job. He didn't have two bits and was really in a difficult position, so I got him a job as filing clerk, because he was so incompetent that we couldn't trust him to translate a news item into French.

SMITH: So he really was a Jean Sans Terre?

* Referring to police bombing of MOVE headquarters in Philadelphia, May 13, 1985.

RODITI: Oh, yes. But at least he earned a living while he was doing that. Nicolas Calas, my Greek friend, Calamaris, I got him a job.

SMITH: What did he do?

RODITI: I've forgotten what, but it was something like that.

SMITH: Was he working in the Greek section?

RODITI: No, in the French section.

SMITH: Pierre Etiemble?

RODITI: Well, Etiemble was very well known already, and I didn't get him in. I'd known Etiemble at the University of Chicago when he was teaching there. Then he came and joined us briefly, and then was sent by the Gaullist government to teach at the University of Alexandria [Egypt], if I remember right. Then there was [André] Breton--Breton, who would only work as a speaker; he wouldn't write a word because he felt this dichotomy between his voice and his prose. As long as he was only speaking somebody else's prose, he was not compromising himself.

SMITH: And he told you this, that was his--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: So what was he afraid of compromising?

RODITI: The United States was a capitalist government, and he was an anarchist, or whatever. I've forgotten what he

was then, but his voice--that was okay. And then Claude Lévi-Strauss was one of our announcers.

SMITH: Had he already become a name as an anthropologist?

RODITI: Yes. And then the French writer Patrick Waldberg was at the French desk. He's not well known here, but in Paris he's now well known as an art critic. And Denis de Rougemont, a Swiss writer.

SMITH: Now, did you know people in the German desk, Italian desk? Did you help anybody get jobs there?

RODITI: No, my old friend Hans Siemsen from Berlin was at the German desk, rather pathetic.

SMITH: Why?

RODITI: Well, he'd been such a handsome man, such a charming man, and he was so terribly depressed. He'd fled Germany for two reasons, because he was politically compromised for having been a leftist, a notoriously leftist writer who'd been sort of excommunicated by the communists. He'd never been a communist, but he'd been sort of pursued in the German communist press after writing a book called **Russland, Ja und Nein**, "[Russia], yes and no." He'd been on a trip to Soviet Russia, had come back and written a very objective, dispassionate book pointing out what he felt was good there and what he felt was bad. And it was sort of balanced, pointing out that it wasn't a paradise. He was pursued by the communists in their press

and then by the Nazis for pointing out that certain things were good there. And he fled from Germany for two reasons, also because he was a notorious homosexual. He was absolutely miserable in New York and became a sad alcoholic, lost his looks. I think that one of the reasons why he was so unhappy was that he'd been forced to abandon his boyfriend in Europe, and had come to America on his own through the Emergency Rescue Committee. His sister was a very remarkable woman.

SMITH: What was her name?

RODITI: Anna Siemsen. She was a pioneer in certain forms of social work in the Weimar Republic. After the war, he went back to Germany; his family managed to put him in an institution, but by that time he had DT's [delirium tremens].

SMITH: Now you also re-encountered Eugene Jolas and Eugene McCown.

RODITI: Yes. Well, Eugene McCown was not in the Voice of America. Eugene McCown was in the OSS [Office of Strategic Services].

SMITH: So, he became a spy.

RODITI: I think that he never got overseas; no, he never did. They soon discovered what was wrong with him.

SMITH: Which was?

RODITI: Oh, a complete drunk.

SMITH: And you said that you really got to know Jolas during this period.

RODITI: Yes, because he worked in the cable department of the French Desk; that's to say, he drafted the news items to go to be cabled out. And we worked fairly close. I was able to see that he was an extremely competent news man, and one who enjoyed a very considerable reputation in his profession, people of UP [United Press] and AP [Associated Press] and so on. As a poet, he no longer seemed to have any activity.

SMITH: Had his literary tastes changed?

RODITI: No. He seemed to have withdrawn completely from literary activity.

SMITH: Would you and he discuss literature?

RODITI: Well, we had very little chance to discuss literature in the office.

SMITH: I wanted to bring up Alain Bosquet; you met him at this time also.

RODITI: Yes, in those days his name was still Anatole Bisk, and he was a friend of Yvan Goll's. I met him only once or twice, and then he went overseas to London, where he was interpreter for Eisenhower, because he spoke both French and Russian.

SMITH: He was an American?

RODITI: Well, he became an American when he joined the

American army, when he was called up. He was born in Odessa, spent his childhood in Bulgaria, and his school years and adolescence in Belgium. And became an American, and has now become French. So that he's been in turn Russian, stateless, Belgian, American, French.

SMITH: Did you get to know him very well during this period?

RODITI: No, I got to know him very well later in Berlin--

SMITH: We'll cover that later.

RODITI: Because he was sent overseas very soon after I met him.

SMITH: You also did some work with Klaus Mann in **Decision**.

RODITI: Yes, but we didn't get on very well, Klaus Mann and I.

SMITH: Why's that?

RODITI: I have a vague suspicion that [W. H.] Auden may have been responsible. Klaus Mann was very unsure of himself and was constantly being advised or consulting all sorts of people about everything. And I know that Auden exerted a considerable influence over Klaus at one time; after all, Auden married Erika [Mann].

SMITH: Now, why would Auden turn Klaus Mann against you?

RODITI: Auden has always been against me.

SMITH: Let's go into that. Back in 1930?

RODITI: Oh, yes. I wasn't Germanic enough; I was a puzzle

for Auden--to be Jewish and not German. [laughter] Auden was a very peculiar character. He was instinctively an anti-Semite who overcame it by understanding German Jews. And any Jew who was not German puzzled him.

SMITH: So it was a personal antipathy?

RODITI: Well, it was more than a personal antipathy; I mean, he just couldn't cope with me.

SMITH: Could you give some examples of how you came at odds?

RODITI: No, no. I mean, it was just a very strange feeling that although we'd known each other for years, although we had a great number of friends in common, and a few very close friends, there was absolutely no intimacy, in spite of the fact that I'd been his first translator into any foreign language.

SMITH: Yeah, I was about to ask you that. You translated him into French. Did he like your translations?

RODITI: Yes. He was flabbergasted that anybody was able to do it.

SMITH: Were you and he at all at odds from a literary point of view?

RODITI: No, it was something strictly emotional.

SMITH: It struck me from the correspondence that you and [Stephen] Spender also were, I don't know if at odds is the right word, but that there had been a distance that had developed.

RODITI: We'd been very friendly at first; then from the moment that he married, Spender dropped me. I became part of his homosexual past, although he'd never been to bed with me. But I knew too much about it.

SMITH: Was he trying to deny his past, that it even existed?

RODITI: Have you read amongst my papers this lovely story about Lady Ottoline Morrell?

SMITH: No.

RODITI: It's so beautiful. Lady Ottoline Morrell was a great literary hostess in London. She was the sister of the Duke of Portland and had married a commoner, a beer baron. He didn't have a title, but was a charming and handsome man. And she lived in Gower Street in the heart of Bloomsbury, and on Thursday afternoons, she held her literary salon. Shaw had been there; [T. S.] Eliot had been there; D. H. Lawrence had been there. She was so far from being anti-Semitic, that she had discovered a young Jewish artist from the East End of London called Mark Gertler and had helped him in his studies and promoted him until he became famous. He then died of consumption. Whereas the Bloomsbury crowd, [Lytton] Strachey, Virginia Woolf, et cetera, made occasional bitchy remarks about Jews, Lady Ottoline certainly didn't. Nor about homosexuals, either. In her eyes, the only thing that mattered

was talent and intelligence. If you had that, you were a welcome guest; what you did outside of her home was none of her business. Anyhow, whenever I was in London, I'd let her know that I was there, and was welcome to her Thursday gatherings. Once I came back to London, and I dropped her a note that I was there, and I got a reply inviting me to another day, not Thursday. Puzzled how she changed, I turn up and I discover that I'm the only guest. First, we are in the drawing room, then the maid comes in to say the tea is ready, and we move into the dining room. Lady Ottoline was very unsure of herself. She started hemming and hawing over one thing or another. Suddenly: Had I heard of Stephen's plan to marry? Did I know his friend Tony? That was the boy he'd been living with. I said, yes. Well, we can't just send him back where he came from. He was a working class boy. [laughter] She'd summoned me to discuss what could be done to find him a job.

SMITH: Did she find him a job?

RODITI: I think she did. As a messenger with a publisher, if I remember right, which he gave up to go and fight in Spain.

SMITH: Did you have friends who went to fight in Spain?

RODITI: Oh, yes, plenty, plenty, or to drive ambulances: Nancy Cunard and Peter Spencer Churchill and Tony, a number of others.

SMITH: I wanted to ask you about some of your writing during this period, and one that clearly stands out is "Cassandra's Dream," which is a very complex poem.

RODITI: Very. I started writing it in 1939, 1939, '40, '41. It took me a long time to write it, because I didn't quite know when I started it what I wanted to do. It was a poem about premonitions in general. I guess that originally it could have been something like **The Wasteland**. But I decided that I didn't like Eliot's use of quotations. I felt that whatever sources there were in my poem had to be reabsorbed completely into my own language. So that even when there are little passages which are borrowed from a medieval French romance (the opening lines), from a later medieval romance, from **King Lear** (from the fool), it's all totally reabsorbed into my own language.

SMITH: I found that one of the difficult things was the opening: the combination of myth and legendry; Homer, Arthur, the history of the Crusades; the reference to Anankê. How did that emerge, that synthesis?

RODITI: Well, there's this strange business where Homer had long become totally incomprehensible and had been translated into Latin. This Latin translation had then inspired a sort of chivalrous romance in French called **Le roman de Troyes**. When the crusaders went east, a copy of it was taken along by one of them, and the Byzantines were

absolutely dazzled by this because they could no longer read Homer. [laughter] And it was then translated into Byzantine Greek.

SMITH: Then they went back to the ancient Greek.

RODITI: Yeah, so it's--

SMITH: How does the Arthurian romance fit in?

RODITI: Because **Le roman de Troyes** was written in the same style as the Arthurian romances, and then there's also the story about how one of the knights who murdered Beckett fled to Vienna and took with him a story of Launcelot in French, which is referred to in the opening lines of Ulrich von Zatzikhofen's version of the story of Launcelot as **ein Welsches Buok**, which is old, Middle High German for a French book. Well, as I was reading a lot of medieval literature at the time, all this fascinated me, this concatenation, this strange sort of, I might almost say, cat's cradle of influences and of books traveling from one end of Europe to the other, from England--

SMITH: How does Anankê fit in?

RODITI: Well, because Anankê plays such an important part in Greek tragedy and in Homer and then Lucan comes in. Who the hell reads Lucan nowadays? **Pharsalia**. But all my readings come there. My god, there were a lot of them. The last four lines, which seem so simple, of that poem I think come from John Scotus Origena. [laughter]

SMITH: What connection did [you] see between these books traveling back and forth across Europe, stories disappearing and being rediscovered, with the general thrust of the poem?

RODITI: The permanence of the emotional impact that some stories can have. The story of Hecuba and poor, old Priam--they are stories which can still bring people to tears. It was my most difficult poem. When I finished writing it, I was surprised that I'd managed to finish it, because there were moments when I was ready to give it up in despair. First, it was a very ambitious poem, and secondly, I was writing it in a period in which I had so many other problems that it was often very difficult for me to return to the poem. I had financial problems, I had all these worries about the war and so on, and yet I managed it.

SMITH: What was the significance of the Dr. Pokorny image, or reference?

RODITI: Well, I had been for wintersport vacation in Austria very shortly before things began to get really dangerous, and among the people in this hotel up in the mountains there were discussions about what was likely to happen, and some were optimistic and some were pessimistic. That's the only significance of it--Pokorny, a typical Czech name of a kind that you found in Vienna.

SMITH: Now, did you actually make the trip east into the Balkans?

RODITI: Yes, that same year. I went to Studenitza.

SMITH: Could you clarify how you view the connection between the literary themes that you set up in the--

RODITI: Opening.

SMITH: --opening, and the clear references to what's happening in Europe and the war that takes up the bulk of the poem?

RODITI: Yes, well, I start off with considerations about the Trojan War, and about how this tale of the Trojan War has continued to be remembered and to move people for over two thousand years. Then I shift to contemporary history, and, in a way, I'm answering Jean Giraudoux's play, **The Trojan War Will Not Take Place**, because I'm so aware that it is about to take place, but not the Trojan war. It's very, very complex.

SMITH: Did you, in a literal sense, see New York as the next Ilion?

RODITI: Certainly, in a way. I viewed every major city as an Ilion, in turn.

SMITH: In turn?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Coming back to the war and the OWI, were you and the people you worked with fired by a war enthusiasm, a patriotism?

RODITI: Less than most others, partly because I've always been a skeptic, and partly because of my relationship with Paul Goodman. I certainly believed that there was some justice in being opposed to fascism. I was not so very much in favor of such things as the bombing of Dresden or the bombing of Hamburg, and certainly not of the bombings in Japan. You can see that in one of my poems about war guilt ["Editorials on War Guilt"]. That was written in '45; not many people were writing those poems then.

[laughter] It's easy to write them today. But in '45, who the hell felt that way and expressed it? No, I remained obsessed with humane ideals. I would have made a lousy soldier.

SMITH: Was there ever any consideration of your becoming a soldier?

RODITI: No, no.

SMITH: Age?

RODITI: No, because my neurologist sent me to the draft board-- They thought that I was trying to get out of it. He sent me with a letter to the draft board saying that I was under treatment for these spells of losing consciousness. They wouldn't believe it, and they made me do all sorts of things, like handstands, and the blood rushed to my head, and I promptly lost consciousness. [laughter] I passed clear out in front of the draft board. I still have

never been able to take a high dive. That kind of thing is bound to cause some epileptic disorder. But, at the time, it wasn't known to be epileptic.

SMITH: Was there any time, say in '42, that you had a fear that the war might be lost?

RODITI: No, no.

SMITH: Why was that?

RODITI: Well, I mean, I know that evil can go very far, but I still have enough faith in good; I was quite sure that Hitler couldn't win.

SMITH: Was that a generally shared view?

RODITI: No, it was just a personal confidence.

SMITH: Of course, I suppose, by '43 it became quite clear.

RODITI: I must say that now I'm not quite so confident of the future; I certainly disapprove of the Soviet regime, not in the way that most Americans disapprove of it. I am perhaps a bit more subtle in that respect, but I'm not so confident that if we came into conflict with Russia, we would win. I think we have too many illusions about what Russia is. I mean, we wouldn't really know what we are fighting there.

SMITH: Were you in any correspondence with friends or relatives in Europe during the war?

RODITI: It was almost impossible. I corresponded with

those who were in England, and I had--although it was forbidden in those days--I had a very devious way of corresponding with France, and it was not easy. I had friends in Lisbon, who had friends in Paris, and I was free to write to Portugal, neutral country. And they passed whatever news on.

SMITH: Who were the people that you kept in contact with to the degree that you were able to?

RODITI: It was extremely difficult, because several of them had gone underground and could no longer be contacted after the total occupation of France, that is to say, after Pearl Harbor. But some of my friends would contact these people in Lisbon and ask them to contact me to say that so-and-so was in hiding or so-and-so had gone underground. That's how I learned that Lotte Eisner was safe. She'd been hidden in a nunnery. But it was almost impossible, because by the time news reached you, it was so stale. Sometimes it took months.

SMITH: You said earlier that you weren't surprised by fascism defeating and taking over in France. Were you surprised by the Vichy anti-Semitic laws?

RODITI: Oh, no.

SMITH: By the rounding up of the Jews?

RODITI: Well, now we know that the Vichy government anticipated to a great extent German demands: that they

began passing these laws before the Germans demanded it; that laws that they passed were in a way more restrictive than the Germans would have demanded; and they started rounding up foreign Jews. The degree of collaboration on the part of French police was shocking. I know that from a cop who didn't collaborate and who was shocked by it. Max Ernst had a wonderful story about how he escaped from France: When he reached the border town to go into Spain, it turned out that his exit permit had expired the day before, and the cop who noticed that said, "You'll have to go back to Toulouse and renew it. Now, you go to such and such a platform, and the train on your right goes to Toulouse, and the train on your left goes to Spain. You be very careful not to take the **wrong** train." This loud, so that everybody heard him. Max understood, took the wrong train, and got out of the country.

SMITH: Did he tell you this himself?

RODITI: Yes. That is an example of a decent cop who was not a collaborationist, but there were not many.

SMITH: Why were Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas protected?

RODITI: Because one of Gertrude's little boyfriends, called Bernard Fay, who'd been one of the--

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RODITI: Well, one of the authors who we'd published at Editions de Sagittaire, a French scholar of sorts called Bernard Fay, had published with us a book on contemporary American literature. He was a great fan of Gertrude Stein and a great friend of hers. Bernard was also very much of a political reactionary, and so was Gertrude Stein: Gertrude Stein was a firm believer in Marshall Pétain. Bernard Fay had a very high job in one of the ministries in Vichy and protected Gertrude and Alice throughout the war.

SMITH: Did you meet him afterwards again?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: Were you aware of this during the war? Did American intellectuals and exiles keep fairly good tabs on what was happening to European intellectuals?

RODITI: It was very difficult. After the total occupation of France, it was almost impossible. Then we did have this prisoner exchange, when a certain number of German civilian prisoners of war who'd been arrested here in America were exchanged against Americans who'd been interned by the Germans in Vittel, and that's when the Office of War Information sent me to interview them as they trooped off the ship--interview them on reception of American shortwave

programs. And who came off the ship but Robert Murphy--or was it Richard Murphy?--yes, Richard Murphy, this sort of down-and-out novelist of Montparnasse who claimed to be the last descendant of the Valois dynasty of kings of France; Lillian Fisk, the painter who was so drunk night after night in Montparnasse that she generally got laid by Arabs on her way home; Dr. O'Grady [Dr. Matthew O'Connor] of **Nightwood** fame.

SMITH: Had Djuna Barnes come home?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Was she on that ship or--

RODITI: No.

SMITH: Had she come previously?

RODITI: Yes. The original doctor was furious to be repatriated, furious. And he went back to San Francisco in '45. I saw him still hanging around in a strange bar called the Iron Pot, which is about the lowest of the low of the San Francisco bohemia.

SMITH: The Iron Pot?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: I know that bar.

RODITI: Yes? Well, it may have become decent again. It's existed for a very long while.

SMITH: My parents used to go there too.

RODITI: Yes. Well, in '45 it was pretty low. I haven't

even looked for it; I thought it didn't exist any longer.

SMITH: As of three years ago, it was still there.

RODITI: Well, it must be a historic monument by now.

Because it has a very ancient history. But right then it was pretty bad, because there was a building called the Montgomery Block, which housed all the survivors of WPA [Works Progress Administration].

SMITH: The "Monkey" Block, as it was called.

RODITI: And they used to go there. Your parents are from San Francisco?

SMITH: Yes.

RODITI: Lovely city. I'll be there in two weeks.

SMITH: Well, at this time you wrote "Manhattan Novelettes."

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: How did that come to get written? What was the inspiration of that?

RODITI: Well, maybe Paul Goodman's remarks about not enough humor, and, in a way, I think that it was a mood a bit like certain paintings of the painter [Richard] Lindner--you know, the German refugee artist who made such a career after the war in New York--and George Grosz's views of New York, and then remembering also the drawings that [Miguel] Covarrubias had done. It was an attempt to make very visual sketches of the weirdness of New York, and

it has a strange fate in that there's one line in it about a subway cowboy with a midnight tan, and Mr. [James Leo] Herlihy has transformed that into his novel, **The Midnight Cowboy**.

SMITH: Had you known Herlihy?

RODITI: Slightly.

SMITH: Did you meet him later?

RODITI: Yes, in Paris. He was sort of embarrassed when we met.

SMITH: Did he acknowledge that he had--

RODITI: I told him!

SMITH: Did he 'fess up?

RODITI: [laughter] I said, "You could at least when you published the book have acknowledged my poem." Oh, well. His literary career is nothing to be proud of now.

SMITH: Did you see New York as a very different city than any other city you had been in?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: In what way?

RODITI: Well, simply, to begin with is its layout. I know no city which is composed of three islands and a hinterland: Brooklyn, Queens, Long Island City, Staten Island, Manhattan, and then the Bronx and all that. I mean, the layout of New York alone is something unique. Well, I suppose Venice, too, but so different that one wouldn't compare them. [laughter]

SMITH: Not hardly. [laughter]

RODITI: It just occurred to me now.

SMITH: Maybe the Venice of 1400.

RODITI: Yes. And then the extraordinary mixture and juxtaposition of ethnic groups, much less now. But the Lower East Side used to be something very extraordinary. Of course, it has become again very striking with the Spanish and the Asiatics, because all the European elements are more or less by now assimilated. There are still some Italian neighborhoods in Brooklyn, but very Italian-American; there are still some Syrian neighborhoods in Brooklyn, but already very Syrian-American. The Spanish neighborhoods are very weird. And now there's even a Cuban-Chinese neighborhood: Chinese refugees from Cuba. It's a wonderful city, completely puzzling. You can walk on two blocks of Fourteenth Street, west, and scarcely hear a word of English, nothing but Spanish--very strange city.

SMITH: At that time, of course, all of the exiles were there.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: You also wrote "Psychological Novelette."

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: That was for **VVV**?

RODITI: Well, I didn't write it for **VVV**. I wrote it, and

Kurt Seligmann decided that he'd do some drawings for it, and then he showed it to [André] Breton, and Breton accepted it.

SMITH: How did that come to be written?

RODITI: Well, I was just beginning to experiment in this special kind of what I call prose poem, that I'd been writing more and more since then. And maybe prodded on by Paul.

SMITH: Had he read that?

RODITI: Certainly. Maybe I was prodded on by Paul to experiment in the absurd a bit more. The "Manhattan Novelettes" is an attempt at it in verse, but then I did quite a number of things in prose, some which I have lost.

SMITH: Now, how did Kurt Seligmann come to do the drawing, the illustrations for it?

RODITI: He was a close friend of mine, and I used to see a lot of him in New York. I'd known him in Paris before, and--

SMITH: Was he a political exile?

RODITI: No, he'd had a very beautiful home in Paris. He came of a well-to-do Swiss family, and his wife was of a very well-to-do, Paris Jewish family. She was a Wildenstein, of the art dealers. And he'd moved, he'd been to America before. I think that he wasn't even an exile; I think that he moved to New York on a temporary basis, just for fun.

SMITH: You introduced him to his wife?

RODITI: No, no. It was George Seligmann that I introduced to his wife. No relative.

SMITH: Now, also during this time, you published two books, **Prison Within Prison: [Three Hebrew Elegies]** and **Pieces of Three**. What was it like dealing with small American publishers?

RODITI: Well, dealing with James [A.] Decker was very easy, because there he lived in Prairie City, apparently quite wealthy and bored to tears, and knowing practically nobody and willing to publish almost anything that was brought to his attention. You know, nobody knows exactly what became of him.

SMITH: He disappeared?

RODITI: Yes. He was murdered, and only recently I discovered how and why. Apparently, it was a very weird gay murder. I never met him, I never knew him. I met him, through Yvan Goll, by correspondence. It was very strange how I came to know him, because he edited and printed a little magazine called **Diogenes**, and decided or was talked into doing a special issue on Yvan Goll. Yvan Goll asked me to contribute to it, and I sent something, and I was still in Chicago at the time. Then, some correspondence with James Decker ensued. Ultimately, I sent him my book, and he published it. He published Edward Horn too--it was

Edward Horn's sister who married George Seligmann--and several other people. And then we suddenly heard no news of him.

SMITH: When was this?

RODITI: Sometime in the forties.

SMITH: During the war?

RODITI: I think so, or just after it. No news, because, I mean, a murder which takes place in Prairie City, Illinois, is not reported in the New York press. [laughter] It's only much later that I discovered what had happened to him.

SMITH: How did you discover?

RODITI: It was through Kenneth Rexroth, a couple of years ago.

SMITH: Had Rexroth been published by Decker?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Were they friends?

RODITI: Not friends. Decker was somebody whom practically nobody knew. I mean, he was one of these people who became well known in advanced-guard literary circles by correspondence.

SMITH: What kind of literary tastes did he have?

RODITI: Enthusiastic.

SMITH: That's convenient.

RODITI: It's very difficult, very difficult to see what

his tastes were from what he published. I think that he was a quite well-to-do, unhappy young man in the Middle West, who presumably had to stay there because he'd inherited some local industry or property or something. Bored to tears, he started this press and corresponded right and left and busily with all sorts of people. Where is Prairie City, exactly?

SMITH: I can look it up on the map.

RODITI: It may not even be on the map.

SMITH: Now, **Pieces of Three**.

RODITI: Well, that--Mortimer [Anthony] Gran was a friend of Paul Goodman's, and now has a rare bookstore, a second-hand bookstore in New York, and had this little press and decided that he would do a book of texts of Paul and two of Paul's friends, and Paul chose Meyer Lieben and me. Now it's become a very rare collector's item, I'm told.

SMITH: Did you select the poems or did Goodman?

RODITI: I think that I gave him a choice of poems. I can't remember, because, in any case, when the project was started, neither he nor I nor Lieben knew how many pages Mortimer planned. So I think that we all sent more than Mortimer could use and let him do some of the selecting.

SMITH: Were either of those books widely distributed?

RODITI: Oh, no.

SMITH: Were they modestly distributed? I mean, did they

get an average kind of poetry book--

RODITI: No. No distribution at all.

SMITH: Did that dishearten you?

RODITI: No, no. I think it's very difficult to dishearten me. At least, as far as literary activity is concerned. If I could be disheartened, I would have given up writing at least thirty years ago.

SMITH: We'll have to get into that. What about James Laughlin?

RODITI: Yes, well--

SMITH: And **New Directions**.

RODITI: I first contacted him when I was in Chicago, I've forgotten what the occasion was, and then in '41, after Pearl Harbor, I suggested to him that since Soviet Russia was our ally, he should do an important section of his annual devoted to Soviet literature. That's when I got him to-- I scared up a translator for [Boris] Pasternak.

SMITH: Who was--?

RODITI: Vera Sandomirsky, who taught later at Wayne [State] University, and he accepted the project, and then gradually we became very friendly as the years went by. I can't remember what was the first thing of mine that he published in his annual. Then he did the Wilde book [**Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study**]; that was a funny thing. He suggested that I do a book on a maker of modern

literature. Who would I like to do one on?

SMITH: When did he suggest this?

RODITI: Early in '45, or late in '44. I suggested [Luigi] Pirandello, and James [Laughlin], cautious as ever, said no, no, no, nobody had ever heard of Pirandello, and he wouldn't be able to sell a book on Pirandello. So I replied that if he took that point of view, the only writers that everybody had heard of were Shakespeare, who's not a maker of modern literature; Byron, who's not a maker of modern literature; George Bernard Shaw, and he already had a book in the series on Shaw; and Oscar Wilde. He turned to me and said, "Well, do a book on Wilde." [laughter]

SMITH: Had you ever thought of Wilde as a subject?

RODITI: No, never. [laughter]

SMITH: Now, Goodman was an enthusiast of Wilde's work. Had you two discussed Wilde?

RODITI: Yes, we'd discussed certain things of Wilde: his two dialogues, Wilde as a critic and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." Of course, I'd read **The Ballad of Reading Gaol** and I'd read [**The Picture of**] **Dorian Gray** and I knew the plays, or at least some of them, not all of them. I came here [Los Angeles] after the San Francisco conference to write my book on Wilde. In the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, they had every conceivable edition of Wilde and all these masses of unpublished letters of Wilde

which I was able to consult, though I was not allowed to quote from the letters, because there was still some litigation. Finally, I wrote the book, and it's done well; it's now out of print, and Laughlin is planning to do a paperback reprint for which I would do two more chapters: one on Wilde as a letter writer, because I can do that now, and then I've published a little article on Wilde and Henry James, which I would add as a kind of appendix.

SMITH: Now your attitude towards Wilde seems to be almost, "He's a great writer in spite of himself."

RODITI: Yes, because his early plays are ghastly, absolutely ghastly, the worst kind of nineteenth century verse-drama. Tennyson's **Harold** is a masterpiece compared with that, and god knows it's pretty ghastly. Much of his early poetry is pretty awful. "Charmides"--it's bad Swinburne. It took him a long time to become a truly important writer. I think that he had to sort of snap out of his aesthete pose, which he did.

SMITH: Now, of course, you wrote a poem that links yourself to Poe, Baudelaire and Wilde. ["Self-Portrait: Poe, Baudelaire, Wilde or E.R."]

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Was that written while you were working on this book?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: Prior?

RODITI: Prior. It's a tongue-in-cheek poem.

SMITH: OK. In what sense?

RODITI: Well, it's a poem on the alienation of the poet from the society in which he lives. But also it's a blessed alienation. I'd rather be an unhappy poet than a happy petit bourgeois. An unhappy poet has certain satisfactions which are quite beyond the ken of most people. You can't have it both ways.

SMITH: Maybe Wallace Stevens did.

RODITI: Oh, he did. Well, maybe, I'm beginning to think that I've had it both ways. I mean, here am I in my seventies, happier than I've ever been.

SMITH: That's perhaps the way it should be.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: The converse is a ghastly thing to think about.

Now, you also translated Breton's **Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares**.

RODITI: Yeah, that was a difficult job.

SMITH: That was for [Charles Henri] Ford.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: How did that come into being? Was that your idea? Ford's idea? Breton's?

RODITI: Well, Breton wanted to be translated and published, and Ford wanted to publish him, and Breton

decided that I was the only person who could do it.

SMITH: How did he arrive at that?

RODITI: Well, because he'd known me in Paris, and he knew that I was bilingual, and he didn't trust Americans who didn't know French as well as I did. But even then it was difficult; every word had to be explained to him.

SMITH: So you worked directly with him. How was that experience?

RODITI: Pedantic, he was.

SMITH: Now--

RODITI: He allowed me very little freedom.

SMITH: But how could he check your translation if he didn't know a word of English?

RODITI: Ah, by checking it with French friends who knew English; it was a very devious thing. In that way, he was exactly like Bertolt Brecht, who was always checking the English translations of his plays by consulting his German friends who knew English.

SMITH: Brecht at least picked up a smattering of English here and there.

RODITI: Yes. Well, he'd always been an admirer of Kipling and had, after all, written that immortal poem that runs, "Oh moon of Alabama, we now must say good-bye, we lost our dear old mama, must have whiskey, must have whiskey or we die."

SMITH: Were any of the poems in particular in that collection very difficult to get the sense of? Leaving Breton aside for the moment, were there any that were difficult, from your point of view, to capture what Breton was trying to do?

RODITI: It's difficult for me to remember now. I know that one or two were very difficult.

SMITH: It also doesn't sound like you have much empathy for Breton or his ideas.

RODITI: Well, he didn't allow me enough freedom. He insisted on an absolute word for word translation, a crib, so that my difficulty was in finding the least prosaic word. Fortunately, English is a very rich language, richer than French [but] absolutely no freedom was allowed! It had to be a word for word translation, a metaphrase as Dryden would have called it--no, a paraphrase. I wasn't even allowed to do a metaphrase, which is what Dryden did for his Vergil. Although the first line is paraphrase: "Arms, and the man I sing: **Arma virumque cano.**" [laughter] Even the syntax.

SMITH: How did you find time to do the Breton translations and--

RODITI: Oh, we were working together in the Office of War Information and the Voice of America, which was done on government time. We'd have pauses when it was alright--

Sometimes I'd come along with a rough translation that I'd done at home, and in moments between programs there'd be moments when we could work.

SMITH: Now, when did you start doing simultaneous interpreting?

RODITI: In 1944.

SMITH: Under what circumstances?

RODITI: Well, when I was working in the Voice of America, one of the men who worked under me had been an interpreter for the International Labour Office in Geneva. They had moved to get away from Europe--they were part of the League of Nations--to Montreal, and they'd run short of funds and had dismissed some of their permanent employees, and he'd gotten a job with us.

In '44, the International Labour Office, thanks to the AFL-CIO and Roosevelt, got enough funds to hold a conference in Philadelphia on the problems of labor in the post-war world. They were short of interpreters, and they took back those whom they dismissed, including the man who was [from] the Voice of America.

And they were still short of them [interpreters], and he suggested that I be loaned by the Voice of America, which I was--I'd never done any interpreting--and he gave me a test, and I passed it. I found myself doing the so-called consecutive interpreting with great ease, which

meant simply taking notes and repeating in another language someone's speech, or from memory. Simultaneous interpreting I found difficult, but that was because the equipment was so bad. Very often one didn't hear what the speaker was saying. Then in Philadelphia, they'd had the absurd idea of putting the simultaneous interpreters in a sort of basement beneath the dais on which the speakers were, so that we heard them shuffling their feet above our heads, and we couldn't see their lips or their gestures or their faces. It's very important to see the man you're interpreting, so it was very, very difficult, but I managed it.

SMITH: Did you make suggestions that were implemented in terms of the logistics, the layout?

RODITI: Yes, but it was too late to change it there.

Then, because I'd been so successful as an interpreter there, in '45 the State Department asked me to interpret the San Francisco [United Nations] conference, but that was not simultaneous. That was exhausting.

SMITH: You were the head interpreter?

RODITI: No, for that job they had a nincompoop who had engaged in Washington a certain number of so-called Spanish interpreters who were all young men of wealthy Puerto Rican or Filipino families who thought that they were bilingual and who had absolutely no sense of politics, economics, or anything. They all turned out to be hopeless, absolutely hopeless.

SMITH: At the San Francisco meeting, what languages were you interpreting?

RODITI: I was supposed to do only English into French and French into English, but I found myself doing a great deal of the Spanish into English, and on one occasion even into Spanish when my Spanish colleague panicked and fled.

SMITH: Alger Hiss was your direct supervisor?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: What kind of insights can you share about him?

RODITI: Well, he was a great believer, obviously, in soft soap; whenever there was any risk of a conflict he would sort of smooth things as best he could. I had a little bit of a conflict with him while interpreting a group which was discussing a draft of the section of the charter which concerns the security council and the veto powers and--I've forgotten exactly what it was. I was in a group where there was a Russian delegate who spoke French, [Dmitrii Zakharovich] Manuil'skii, and he made some rather strong statement in French, and I translated it into very strong English, practically word for word. This had rather annoyed the American delegate, what he had said; this led to a certain amount of disagreement. And I was hauled into Hiss's office, and he told me that he'd heard that I'd been interpreting tendentiously. I said, "No, I interpret

what's said. It would be tendentious if I softened it."

[laughter] Then I had a discussion with one of the American delegates in which I said that I believed that these veto powers were going to mean that, sooner or later, all important business would come to a standstill, because I couldn't see that Soviet Russia and America would see eye to eye on anything important within five years. I was right.

SMITH: What was your view of the conference? As a poet looking at these statesmen, did it give you any hope for the future?

RODITI: Not much. Not much. Very little. I felt that of the whole American delegation, the two most thoroughly decent and intelligent people were Harold Stassen and [Ralph] Bunche. Senator [Tom T.] Connally was OK, but he didn't know his ass from a hole in the wall as far as politics are concerned. [Arthur H.] Vandenberg too. Dulles was dreadful, a horror.

SMITH: Which Dulles are you referring to? John Foster Dulles?

RODITI: Yes. He's a crooked lawyer, that's all.

SMITH: Did you see him manipulating the situation to his advantage, his perspective?

RODITI: He was trying to manipulate the situation and sometimes managing, because people were just weary. I mean

there was something very devious about him, and very unpleasant, very strange. There were a couple of Latin Americans who were obviously decent people.

SMITH: The Latin Americans tend to appoint writers as their ambassadors.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Perhaps largely because their foreign policies were not so critical--perhaps. Regarding the controversy that surrounded Alger Hiss later, did you see anything in your dealings with him that would be relevant to that, to what you've read later?

RODITI: Well, it all struck me as being just a wonderful fairy tale. Unbelievable! I mean, all this Whittaker Chambers story--something totally unbelievable! I don't know how anybody could have taken seriously a word that Whittaker Chambers ever said. He was a psychopath.

SMITH: Did you know Whittaker Chambers?

RODITI: Certainly not. As one says on West End Avenue, New York, "I didn't have it necessary." [laughter] No, god forbid that I should ever meet people like that. Here's this man who'd been an out-and-out communist and a not too pleasant one, and who then changes and starts making preposterous revelations about others whom he claims were communists with him. These revelations were of such a preposterous nature. I just couldn't believe it, all this

business about an oriental rug.

SMITH: Did you write any poems during the San Francisco conference?

RODITI: No, I don't think that I had a minute to spare or any energy to spare.

SMITH: Now, very shortly you're going to return to Europe. How did that develop?

RODITI: I was here in Los Angeles, and I was just finishing the book on Wilde--in fact, I'd just about finished it when suddenly I had the Department of the Army ask me whether I'd go and interpret in Nuremberg. As I was at a loose end and didn't have much money, I accepted to go, not knowing really what I was going to land myself in.

SMITH: Did you stop in Paris on the way?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And what did you find there? Did Paris seem very different to you?

RODITI: Very different. Physically, no; the city looked the same, but people looked hungry and shabby, and I was shocked to discover that these cousins of mine had been deported and had not returned.

SMITH: But you must have had strong suspicions beforehand that that was the case.

RODITI: No, because until Turkey joined the allies, they'd been protected by the Turkish embassy in Vichy, and they'd

been rounded up almost in the last batch-- They'd been sent to Auschwitz almost with the last shipment. In those last couple of months, the Gestapo had not been able to round up all the Jews of Turkish origin who were in France and who were protected. These had been-- My cousins had been denounced by a French neighbor.

SMITH: How did you hear these stories?

RODITI: How did I? Because I went to the office where he had worked and saw his former secretary there.

SMITH: Did any of your French family survive?

RODITI: Oh, yes. My first cousin did, his niece, my aunt, all my relatives who had French citizenship, except one branch who were very distant, but they were very unwise, and they stayed in Paris--very unwise.

SMITH: Of course, you found out about the fate of your friends, such as Maurice Sachs.

RODITI: Oh, well, that took a long time, because the rumors about how he died were so contradictory. Even now one doesn't quite know how he died, because there are two different versions. Gallimard will not explain how they got the manuscripts of the books that were published posthumously and which apparently came out of Germany--the books, *Derrière cinq barreaux*, which he wrote in a Gestapo jail, and the book *Tableau des Moeurs de Notre Temps* which is a kind of modern parody of [Jean de] La Bruyère's [Les]

caractères [de Théophraste], which he sent from Germany--
but nobody knows how they got them--and the prison diary
ends a few days before his death. I wrote about that in
the last issue of **Frank**. Well, Sachs, anything was likely
to happen to him.

SMITH: Had you met [Léon] Pierre-Quint again?

RODITI: Yes, that's when I realized that he was a drug
addict. He'd become really a pathetic mess.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

MAY 16, 1985

SMITH: Let's start off today by going back to Chicago and discussing some of the professors that you had there that were especially influential in the development of your career.

RODITI: Well, Professor [William A.] Nitze, who subsequently taught here, was the one who first aroused my interest in medieval French literature and especially in the Arthurian romances, above all in those written by Chrétien de Troyes. It's from one of his courses that I derived the opening lines of the poem, "Cassandra's Dream," because they're a sort of translation or adaptation of the opening of one of Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian poems.

[Hayward] Keniston, who was a professor of Spanish, encouraged me to study Provençal literature and old Spanish poetry, and he encouraged me to do this job that I did on a manuscript which was in the University of Chicago library and which had never been properly written up. It turned out to be a Castilian translation, fairly late, early renaissance or late Middle Ages, because it was on paper of a kind that was more renaissance than medieval, though the script itself was in many ways still medieval; it was a sort of borderline case. Anyhow, a Castilian translation of a Provençal encyclopedia, which had been composed in

verse in 32,000 lines in the late thirteenth century in Béziers in southern France. It's the only encyclopedia of its kind, and comparing the Castilian manuscript to the original Provençal text and to existing Catalan translations of it, I came to the conclusion that this was a translation not direct from the Provençal, but from the existing Catalan translations. I suggested, in my paper, a manuscript genealogy, showing or hinting which one might have been copied from which other. And nobody's done anything on it since. I heard recently that there's a scholar in England who's decided to undertake a major work on this encyclopedia and on its various translations, because I suddenly got a letter from him. My paper was published nearly fifty years ago, forty years ago, and still remains one of the basic studies of this whole encyclopedia.

SMITH: Where was this paper published?

RODITI: In a learned journal called **Modern Philology**, I think, published by the University of Chicago.

The other professor, of course, who exerted a great influence on my whole development was Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, who later married one of Thomas Mann's daughters. He was a brilliant, antifascist refugee who'd written a novel in Italian (which is very much neglected now) and a great deal of essays of aesthetics. In a way,

he was both a disciple of [Benedetto] Croce and a violent critic of Croce, and he just couldn't give up the whole Crocean tradition, but he taught a brilliant, one-year course on Dante which opened my eyes to-- I'd always known Dante and read him, but I'd never taken it as seriously as then, although Eliot influenced me in taking Dante fairly seriously. But ever since, I've made a practice of constantly reading and rereading Dante.

Another professor who exerted a strong influence over me, although I didn't take any of his courses, was Richard P. McKeon, who's the professor of philosophy and a Spinoza scholar and an Aristotle scholar and a pupil of [Etienne] Gilson, so that he was also very expert in medieval scholastic philosophy. I met him more as a friend than as a professor and have continued to correspond with him ever since. He's taught me to be much more methodical as a thinker. In a way, I suppose that I have absorbed some of the notorious Aristotelianism of the University of Chicago, but at the same time McKeon taught me to analyze the Platonic dialogues in terms of their dialectical structure. That has been extremely useful to me as a thinker.

When I came to Berkeley as a graduate student with a teaching assistantship in the French department, I was not enormously impressed by most of my professors there, except Professor [Ronald N.] Walpole, who was a very good

medievalist, and I got on very well with him. And in the Spanish department was Professor [Karl E.] Schevill, under whom I did some further readings in Provençal literature. But the great influence there was Ernst Kantorowicz, the medieval historian with whom I took two seminars; he taught me a great deal in methods of research in medieval literature. I think that I would not have been able to write the poem "Cassandra's Dream" had I not taken the courses of Nitze, Borgese, Keniston, and Kantorowicz, because they opened all sort of windows for me, so that medieval literature became something which could inspire me as a poet, and it became something with which I was as much at ease as with later literature. It enriched me very much, and it also taught me the importance of allegory.

SMITH: Could you go into that a little bit more? How did--

RODITI: Well, reading things like the **Roman de la Rose** and Dante and a number of less famous medieval allegories, I began to understand better one of the most mysterious things in Dante: in his letter to Can Grande della Scala and in the **Convito [Convivio]**, he says that his **Divine Comedy** has to be read and interpreted in four different manners: literally, metaphorically, analogically, and anagogically. Now the anagogical is something very, very difficult to interpret: it is the function of allegory as

a process of initiation to some kind of religious or other higher interpretation of experience. I subsequently discovered much later that these four levels of interpretation are those of the Cabala. How Dante got it, I don't know.

There is a very strange story about one of the most abstruse old Spanish Cabalists, a man called Abulafia--that he set out at one time to convert the pope in Rome to Judaism in order to stop the persecution of the Jews. His progression through the Jewish communities of Northern Italy, riding, according to legend, a white horse, caused such a stir in these Jewish communities that the pope got wind of it and sent his troops to stop him and arrest him. Abulafia managed to evade this, and he arrived in Rome. And the moment he set foot in Rome, the pope died. Now, after that, he's supposed to have retired into a Catholic convent somewhere south of Rome and to have instructed the monks there in Cabala and in the four levels of the interpretation of sacred texts. So that Abulafia's instruction of the monks may have percolated to Dante, though it's difficult to prove. It's a lovely story, in any case.

SMITH: Now these four layers of interpretation, did you try to build them into your writings, say in "Cassandra's Dream"?

RODITI: Yes, but how far I've been successful, I don't

know. I think that it is most clear in the autobiographical passage, the one which you questioned me about, about Dr. Pokorny and so on, where I have tried to make personal experience into something which can be interpreted metaphorically as a metaphor of what was going on in history at that time; allegorically as being a myth, so to speak; and anagogically in that it initiates one into things which are going to happen, almost prophetic. I think it's the one passage in the poem which can be interpreted at four levels.

SMITH: Did you try to work those four levels throughout the poem?

RODITI: Well, no, because some passages are more strictly lyrical. It's a poem which is written basically almost in several different genres. It's a patchwork poem in the same way as **The Wasteland** is. I don't think that it's possible in our century to write anything like the **Divine Comedy**, because we don't have that kind of faith any longer. It's an attempt to revive, in a way, the mood of writing the **Divine Comedy**, and there are passages which come directly out of the **Divine Comedy**: for instance, that passage, "In exitu Israël ex Egypto," is a line from Dante where he is quoting actually the Vulgate. But the passage where it comes is a reflection in modern terms of a passage in Dante. So that it really is my most complex poem. It's

so complex that sometimes I shudder to think of how little it can be understood by many readers. Of course, the Jehuda Abravanel poem is very complex. Recently, when it was reprinted, it was reviewed rather unfavorably in a rather important literary magazine, which picked certain lines out of it, saying that they were platitudinous. And I wrote back and said, "Those lines which you quote as platitudinous are not mine; they are actually lifted straight out of one of the Metaphysical poets. [laughter] I leave it to you to guess which one." Of course, they didn't guess. They couldn't. It was Edward Benlowes. Who reads Edward Benlowes, but still!

SMITH: What I'm interested in pursuing more is the process of composition in a poem like "Cassandra's Dream." You start out with a kernel--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: --let's say a lyrical kernel, a personal kernel, and then you add on to it. How does that work in "Cassandra's Dream"? Where did it begin? What were the images that--

RODITI: Well, it began with some ideas about the crusades and about the dissemination of interest in, on the one hand, Launcelot's story, which went from London to Vienna and was then translated from old French into German (or Middle High German) and on the other hand, the interest in

Homer, which was revived in Byzantium by the arrival of the crusaders, one of whom brought this French romance about the Trojan War, which is based on a Latin version of Homer, et cetera, and how certain ideas spread in times of turmoil and of war. And then this led me on to my own premonitions about what was likely to happen in Europe in my own lifetime, in fact in the immediate future. And as events developed, the poem developed in that I would then remember this trip to this mountain resort (the skiing resort) and the conversations there, and the later trip the same year in the Balkans, and how everywhere I went I'd had some curious premonitions of what might happen. Then, of course, the poem developed more and more. Then there came a point when I felt that I'd said about all that I had to say on the subject, and then came this curious, strange, little bit of rhyming quatrain at the end, which is straight out of, of all people, John Scotus Erigena, a medieval philosopher. It's about the future being the unforeseen and the future being like god, who can be only defined by negation, which is-- That is John Scotus Erigena, that god can be defined by negation: he isn't this, he isn't that.

SMITH: Now there's another poem you wrote around this time that to me on the surface is deceptively simple, but actually combines a lot of layers to it, and that's "The Three Laments."

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And that is clearly influenced by your studies in medieval literature.

RODITI: Yes. The one about the loyalist is influenced by a poem of Sordello's, and Sordello is one of the Provençal troubadors--actually, he was Italian, writing in Provençal--who appears in the **Divine Comedy**. He also inspired Browning, who wrote a long poem about him. But this is inspired by one particular poem of Sordello's, "On the Death of Blacatz," who was a Provençal prince and a great paladin of sorts, an exemplary representative of medieval chivalry at a time when it was dying out. The other two are much less influenced by medieval literature. The one about the women is actually influenced by ancient Greek literature, the Trojan War, Homer. And then the Lorca poem is strictly a personal experience.

SMITH: But the three do come together as a single poem.

RODITI: They do come together because they were all three of the same period: the Spanish War, and personal reactions to it. They're sort of like a tryptich.

SMITH: Now, your writing based on Provençal sources of course brings up a parallel with Pound which I think we should explore. You were familiar with Pound's poems--

RODITI: Certainly, certainly.

SMITH: His so-called translations--

RODITI: Yes, but I disagree with Pound. I think that Pound has a thoroughly postromantic, post pre-Raphaelitic approach to it. I mean, Pound occasionally writes sheer nonsense, like when he compares a sestina of Arnault Daniel to the architecture of the cathedral of Pisa. Well, the architecture of the cathedral of Pisa is a perfect example of Byzantine-Romanesque architecture, very much inspired by late Roman architecture, and there's absolutely nothing in Arnault Daniel's poem that has any source in Romanesque, Byzantine, or ancient Roman art. Pound's approach is very emotional and very unprofessional. He is not a medieval scholar at all. He's an enthusiast and a village explainer.

SMITH: How would you compare your use of the image of "Let them eat my heart so they may have heart" with some of Pound's?

RODITI: Well, my image, "Let them eat my heart," is straight translation practically from Sordello.

SMITH: Well, you're using that--

RODITI: To eat his heart. Yes. How would I compare it with Pound? Difficult to say. I think that Pound is much more concerned with using material which can have an exotic effect. I'm much more concerned with a direct emotional impact. I'm much more selective, and I'm not concerned with decorative effects; I mean, I would not do anything

like what he's done in the Cantos with Chinese ideograms and whole passages of treatises on economics and what have you. There's some kind of bluff in Pound which I don't like. I think that he could have been a great poet. I once made a remark about Pound, which, as a friend of mine says, unfortunately didn't happen: Pound should have submitted the Cantos to Eliot in the same way as Eliot submitted **The Wasteland** to Pound, and Eliot would have cut out certainly as much proportionately as Pound had cut out of **The Wasteland**, and it would have made a much better book of it.

SMITH: There was another point that I wanted to pick up before we get back to Germany, which was that in '44 you wrote an article on French Resistance poetry.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And you noticed that it was simplified--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: A retreat from the advanced guard.

RODITI: Yes. Well, this was when **L'honneur des poètes** percolated to New York, and I was surprised at the time, not having read any of the recent work of [Louis] Aragon for some years, to see how Aragon had retreated completely from dada surrealism and from his outrageous communism of the early thirties, when he'd been writing sort of very rabble-rousing poetry, to this imitation of Apollinaire and

of certain late medieval French poets and this rather sentimental verse of **Les yeux d'Elsa** and so on. I was rather surprised, and I won't say shocked, by this regression. Then when I went back to France and became more intimately connected with the whole evolution of Aragon, I realized what was happening to him. He'd become a sort of public figure of the Communist Party and felt that he had to write the kind of poetry that would appeal to the average reader. And he'd fallen into this love of Elsa Triolet, who was a KGB spy, and it's a very curious relationship, because Aragon is known to have had very few relationships with women. One of them had been with Nancy Cunard, and Nancy is known to have relationships only with homosexuals and blacks. She had one with Eugene McCown. And then, as the years went by, it became more and more clear, through all sorts of ways if one saw him, that Aragon was a homosexual, and that he was terrified of the Communist Party discovering it. Elsa Triolet was what is commonly known, or what used to be commonly known--I'm not very up to date in American gay slang--as a bitch's blind.

SMITH: Which means?

RODITI: That she was there to fool the public into believing that he was normal, that he was not homosexual. After her death, when he became senile, the last few years of his life, he would constantly be seen cruising boys

around Saint-Germain-des-Prés and sometimes in the most dangerous areas. One sort of felt, this poor dear, he may get into trouble one of these days, and then fortunately he got hanked up with some boy who kept him out of trouble. But the whole of Aragon's later evolution from the moment he left the surrealist group is something which has never yet been written up and investigated properly. My own experience of a meeting with Elsa Triolet--I only had a couple of them--was disastrous; that was when I was an interpreter at the Nuremberg war crimes trials at the time when the commandant of Auschwitz, [Rudolf S.] Hoess, was brought from Poland, where he'd already been tried and condemned to death. He was brought to Nuremberg to be questioned as a witness, after which he was sent back to Poland and executed. Well, this was a sensational moment in the trial, and journalists from all over the world converged on Nuremberg to witness the interrogation of Hoess, and one of the journalists sent was Elsa Triolet. My boss, the chief of the interpreting staff, delegated me to be her interpreter, because it was very important that she should get everything straight. So I didn't interpret in the courtroom that day, but sat beside her and explained everything to her. And Elsa Triolet was outraged that this man who was such a criminal should not be among the defendants at the Nuremberg war crimes trial and should be

there as a witness and should not have been already executed. I explained to her until I was blue in the face that the defendants in the war crimes trial were those who'd formulated policies, not those who'd carried them out. He had not formulated the policy, he had carried it out, and had therefore been tried in the place where he'd committed his crimes, that is to say Poland. And he'd already been condemned to death and had been brought to Nuremberg only to be questioned as a witness in order to condemn those who had formulated the policies which he'd carried out. I explained this to her, I don't know how many times. She went back to Paris and wrote in the communist daily newspaper, *L'Humanité*, a violently anti-American article stating that Hoess was a free man, and was outraged because he was not among the defendants. Now, it had been explained to her, and why did she do this? Because, as a communist, she felt the need to write something anti-American. I'd explained to her that the Russians had agreed to his being brought and had asked the Poles to send him. No, no, it was the Americans who had done that. Then I realized when I went back to Paris in '54, '50, and questioned some of my friends about her-- because I'd known Aragon before the war and had seen her in Nuremberg--questioned some of my friends, and then it was revealed to me that she was a KGB agent.

SMITH: Was this authoritative evidence?

RODITI: Oh, there was considerable evidence because she got a certain number of people into trouble. She was a brilliant writer, but a dangerous bitch.

SMITH: So when we left off yesterday--

RODITI: You know, she was the sister of [Vladimir] Mayakovsky's girlfriend, and rumor now has it that her sister is the one who drove Mayakovsky to suicide.

SMITH: That's just a rumor, isn't it?

RODITI: Yeah, well, it's very difficult to find out what the truth is about something which happened in Soviet Russia so long ago.

SMITH: You went back to Germany in '46 for the Nuremberg trials. What was your position at Nuremberg?

RODITI: I was interpreter; officially, I interpreted from French into English in the courtroom and from English into French for the closed sessions of the judges, which were top secret.

SMITH: Why don't we start with some of the technical aspects of the interpreting. How was that handled in terms of meeting certain kinds of judicial standards?

RODITI: Well, in my opinion, it was being done in a very amateurish way in that very few of those who decided that it was going to be done in simultaneous interpreting had any previous experience of it, so that we would be put in

our booths without any preparation, and just put to work. We would have a vast number of different materials which would be discussed: for instance, [Hermann] Göring's interest in rare precious stones; the experiments of SS doctors on concentration camp inmates (with a great deal of scientific terminology for which we were never given the documents) so that all this was being sprung on us. When I arrived, the trials had already been going on for a while, and I think I was the first to point out that the German word **Typhus** does not mean typhus, but typhoid, so that the prosecutors who didn't understand German were getting terribly mixed up between the experiments on the concentration camp victims with what was typhus, which is **Fleckfieber** in German. But the interpreter into German, who hadn't been properly prepared, was translating typhus as **Typhus**, meaning typhoid, and there'd been no such experiments. That kind of thing was going on constantly, and it so happened that because I had a broader German vocabulary than most of the other interpreters--one of the interpreters had been an interpreter in a travel agency, and things like that-- As a writer who'd been interested in German literature for many years and had read a great variety of different authors and so on and who had dictionaries at home (I didn't bring them along), I had a much broader vocabulary, and I was able to point out some

of these errors. Also, the sound equipment that we had was very defective, so we constantly had breakdowns during the trials when we would interrupt because the interpreters couldn't hear what was being said, or something would fuse. It was very, very difficult. Only in the judges' sessions did everything work smoothly because it was a small room with fewer wires, and there was far too much wiring in that big courtroom. There'd always be someone tripping up on a wire and everything would fuse, and that kind of thing.

SMITH: Did you also check over the transcripts?

RODITI: No, I had enough work as it is, because in addition to interpreting, I was also constantly testing and training applicants for the job, because we weren't enough interpreters, and as I was one of the very few who'd already done simultaneous interpreting (in Philadelphia). We'd have people who'd just come out of an interpreting school--quite a diploma, but how good were they? So I'd test them and then others who had never been through a school, but who did know languages. I'd test them and train some when I found some who seemed to have linguistic capacities, capabilities, but who were scared of it. I sort of trained them for a few days and showed them that there was no reason to be as scared as they were; so I really had a very heavy schedule.

SMITH: Which cases did you assist in?

RODITI: Well, everything from-- I think it was the end of January until the end of the trial. The end of the trial was something absolutely grotesque, because when Göring was condemned to death, he stood up to listen to the sentence, and he had to be condemned twice or three times, because it didn't come through to him. Something went--

SMITH: Technically?

RODITI: Yes. Robert [B.] Jackson was a most unpleasant individual. He was the American prosecutor and had a very inflated notion of his own importance and personality. In fact, I know that he believed that this was an important step towards being a presidential candidate, believe it or not.

SMITH: You heard him say this?

RODITI: No, but he said it to somebody who repeated it to me. Although he knew me by sight, because he saw me every-day in the courthouse, if we ever met in the passages, I greeted him, and he never replied. I was just a small fry. He made an utter fool of himself in an interrogation of Göring about the so called **Kristallnacht**, which was the night when all Jewish store windows had been smashed in Berlin and most cities. Well, it so happened that one of the windows which had been smashed was that of the biggest jeweler in Berlin--I've forgotten what the name was,

Marquart, or something like that--and, of course, everything was looted out of the window. Göring then gave an order to the chief of police to recuperate as far as possible from fences and elsewhere much of what had been looted. And Jackson accused Göring of wanting the diamonds for his collection of precious stones, which was nonsense, because this was a firm which had a window full of inexpensive engagement rings--you know, quarter-karat, and half-karat--and the kind that would certainly not interest Göring. Göring was more and more surprised that he should be accused of being interested in all this. The reason why he'd done it was because the insurance companies had brought pressure to bear on him, because most of the material which had been looted didn't belong to the jeweler, but was, so to speak, on consignment from the manufacturers and so on, or from Dutch, from Amsterdam diamond cutting firms and so on. I subsequently pointed this out to one of his assistants, and it happened that I pointed this out to Jackson's assistant, if I remember right, in the presence of one of Göring's defending lawyers, a German lawyer who was in the office of some-- Anyhow, this was reported back to Göring, and Göring then was convinced that I was a Berlin-Jewish refugee--that I knew Berlin so well; no American could have known all that--and whenever he came into the court after that,

because his lawyer told him which one of the interpreters it was, he always greeted me. There was always a smile in my direction as being the one interpreter who quite obviously was not being influenced by propaganda and was being completely objective. That's the reputation I had with all the lawyers, the German lawyers, who understood my English and always listened to me to see whether I was being quite objective, and I was the only one who was always objective.

SMITH: Was there a problem in getting objective interpretation in this trial?

RODITI: Yes, there was, because after all, this was very soon after the war, and we'd been fed so much propaganda. Jackson himself had his head stuffed with propaganda, and had no real notion of what the real conditions had been in Germany. They'd been bad, they'd been lousy, I mean death camps and so on, but he had very little notion of what the Nazi hierarchy had been. We had some very curious things in the case of Göring. His lawyers produced a number of affidavits signed by German Jews whose lives he'd saved, including an elderly couple whose cook had left them to work for him, because they were no longer allowed to employ an Aryan employee. And this cook had intervened with him on their behalf, and he sent them to the Swiss border in a car of his; so it turned out, more and more as things went

on, that Göring in a way was a good guy. I mean, he was a blustering sort of air force officer without much in the way of ideology in his head and who could be quite humane, if one approached him the right way. He had an absolute horror of people like [Reinhard] Heydrich and [Heinrich] Himmler and [Ernst] Kaltenbrunner, who were the real murderers, and utter contempt for people like [Fritz] Sauckel and [Julius] Streicher.

SMITH: But didn't he participate in the formulation of Nazi policy?

RODITI: Mainly in the formulation of war strategy.

SMITH: Weren't some of his troops responsible for atrocities?

RODITI: Oh, no, because his troops were air. They were responsible for bombings, but, I mean, our bombings were as bad as his. He was a very curious man, and the more I got to see him and to hear him, and the more I got to know these documents, the more I felt that somehow he was a relatively decent man among these people. He was much less devious than [Franz von] Papen, who was acquitted, or [Hjalmar] Schacht, who was acquitted, and who were very devious characters, and who'd changed sides; they were absolute weathercocks, windvanes, politically. Göring was just someone who'd gotten involved in the wrong kind of thing, in a way. He had the kind of mentality of a

blustering American Legion [member]. He could perfectly well have come out of the Middle West. You see what I mean?

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RODITI: See, the more I heard the others speak, and the more I heard their defense lawyers try to defend them, the more I realized that he [Göring] was a bird of an entirely different feather, that he had very little basically in common with most of the other Nazi leaders.

SMITH: When you went to Nuremberg, were you filled with a rage?

RODITI: No, with despair. I mean, I was-- See, I'm basically a more religious than political character. We were beginning to have more detailed views of the Holocaust, and being basically by temperament more religious than political, I was more in a mood of saying a kaddish for six million people than of trying to avenge them, because I realized that you can't revenge six million people--in a mood of lamentation and prayer rather than of revenge.

SMITH: This is a mood that has pervaded many of your poems with Jewish themes. Which of those poems were written in this particular period, or shortly thereafter?

RODITI: Very few, very few, because the shock of realizing what had happened was so great that it took me several years to absorb it and to express my feelings about it. I think some of the poems about it were written--and this was

1946 and '47--were written in the sixties and even the seventies. It took me twenty years to get around to writing about it.

SMITH: Did you jot down drafts for it?

RODITI: No, I just meditated on it.

SMITH: Well, the "Editorials on War Guilt," did that--

RODITI: They were written before I went to Nuremberg. They were written between the San Francisco Conference and going to Nuremberg.

SMITH: I see in them a question mark in being able to distinguish between the victors and the vanquished, often.

RODITI: Well, that comes also from my readings of Lucan: **Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni.** The cause of the victors please the gods, but that of the vanquished pleased Cato.

SMITH: Did you see any evidence of the trials being manipulated, or evidence being manipulated to protect pet Nazis of the Americans?

RODITI: No, that was in the subsequent trials, and I was not an interpreter there.

SMITH: You've written about the Grand Mufti [of Jerusalem] and the protection given to him. Was that something that came up at Nuremberg, or you became aware of much later?

RODITI: I became aware of that later when I was in Berlin. Well, the Grand Mufti had escaped, and the British

were interested in his survival because they were still the mandatory power for Palestine. If anything were done to the Grand Mufti, there'd be Arab troubles, and they wanted to keep the Arabs from getting out of hand. He'd escaped from Berlin in time.

SMITH: While you were working on the Nuremberg trials, were you able to get out into the city and into the countryside and meet Germans?

RODITI: Oh, yes. I met there a very remarkable man who was the curator of the Germanisches National Museum there and who shortly after that, as soon as he was able, emigrated to America and was curator of the Achenbach Foundation prints and drawings in the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco--[Ernst] Gunter Troche, who'd never been a Nazi and actually had a rather strange story. He was quite obviously homosexual, but at the time of the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany, he'd been wise enough to marry and thus gone undercover. It was obviously not a very passionate marriage, and he later met an American who was in the occupation forces, and they fell in love with each other, and he divorced and left for San Francisco and lived with his boyfriend there until his death. Well, I saw Gunter a lot, and I went to Munich (often over weekends) and became very friendly with another artist, a sculptor who was a man of considerable talent,

who had never been a Nazi--in fact, had been in a minor underground movement which had helped Jews and others escape over the Lake of Konstanz by night in boats to Switzerland--and out of sheer despair, he'd become rather a drunk and given up sculpture.

SMITH: What was his name?

RODITI: Gen Golch, and we became very close friends. Then, with a small publisher, Herbert Kluger, who translated my Wilde book and published it. And then I found in Munich my old pre-war friends, the photographer Herbert List, whom I'd known in Hamburg, so that in a very short while I'd built up a little network of German friends who quite obviously had never been Nazis. When I went on leave to Berlin to see an American friend who was stationed there, I looked up the sculptor Renée Sintenis, whom I'd known before the war, and discovered in Berlin a small network of people who'd never been Nazis whom I'd either known or who were friends of friends. And I managed to get transferred after the Nuremberg trials to Berlin to interpret for the Allied Control Council, although between the two I went to London to interpret a conference for United Nations. That was the occasion when I last saw Dylan Thomas: when he spent the night in my mother's apartment, and the next day I found them tippling together. So that actually, as far as my relations with Germany are

concerned--the Germans--I very soon buried the hatchet, and I realized very soon that there's no such thing as collective guilt. We have a nice little chapter in the Bible about Lot interceding with God on the fate of Sodom and failing to find enough just men there, so that Sodom was destroyed. Well, in the case of Germany, I found enough just people, so that my readings of the Bible haven't harmed me. They've helped me solve a lot of moral problems in life.

SMITH: Did this issue of collective guilt work itself out in any of your poems?

RODITI: No, no. I knew that there were many who were guilty, but I knew that I couldn't identify them all, and occasionally one would come across a very strange case. When I was in Berlin, I had a friend, an American friend, who was in one of our intelligence offices there. One morning when I was not interpreting, I dropped by in his office for a chat. And he received suddenly a woman who'd asked for an appointment, a German woman who'd come in from the Soviet zone and who claimed to have some important revelations to make to him. This woman came in and said that she lived in Weimar and that she could go for walks in the countryside. And from the top of a hill, she could see what was going on in Buchenwald, which had been a Nazi concentration camp and was now a Soviet prison camp for

Nazis. And she could see from the top of this hill that the Soviets were beating up occasionally some of these prisoners. My friend said, "Oh, that's very interesting to know that from this hill, one can see what's going on in Buchenwald. Did you go to the top of that hill during the Nazi regime and see what was going on in Buchenwald then?" She didn't. [laughter] Well, we know what to think of that kind of source of information.

SMITH: When you first got there, was the nonfraternization order still in effect?

RODITI: Yes, but not being respected very much. Masses of GI's already had German girlfriends.

SMITH: And did you observe or participate in any of the denazification?

RODITI: No, that was an entirely different section.

SMITH: Well, for instance, Ernst von Salomon's book, **Der Fragebogen**, how accurate do you feel that was as a description of American treatment of Germans at the end of the war?

RODITI: Well, it's a brilliant book. Salomon had always been, I won't say a dubious character, an ambivalent character, and it's a very brilliant idea to take this questionnaire that he had to fill in, and then as an answer to each section of it have a whole section of his own past. Now everybody knew that he had at one time been an

extreme nationalist who'd been mixed up in these, well, German armed bands immediately after World War I which had fought the communists in the east [**die Freikorps**], and that he'd been mixed up in one or two pre-Nazi coups, and just marginally in a political murder [of Walther Rathenau]. That was known; but under the Nazi regime itself, he'd not been very prominent; he'd been rather withdrawn because by that time, he'd matured very much as a writer, and the book itself is a brilliant piece of writing. I think it's one of the very rare books of those years which may survive. First, its structure is very interesting, how he uses this questionnaire in order to explore his own past and to be on the whole very frank about it. It's very well written.

SMITH: What about the Ernst Jünger case? Did you--

RODITI: I knew Ernst Jünger; I went to visit him in Kirchhorst. Well, he's also a sort of ambivalent character, because he never was a Nazi; he was a conservative, politically, and remained one--very much of an aesthete. He'd been in the German occupation army as an officer in Paris, and while he'd been there, he'd associated to some extent with French intellectuals who were personal friends, and had obtained some favors for some of them. They were not necessarily collaborationists, and his relationships with French intellectuals were on the basis of common literary and other interests rather than on the basis of

politics. I'd read several of his books, **Afrikanische Spiele**, which is a very beautiful book, as a matter of fact, and **[Auf den] Marmorlippen**, and I reviewed one of his books for **Partisan Review** at great length.

SMITH: Which book was that?

RODITI: A book of memoirs, I've forgotten what-- **Strahlungen**, yes. I'm convinced now that he's one of the major German writers of his generation, certainly of those who stayed in Germany. I mean, the **Marmorlippen**--I don't know what it's called in English--Marble cliffs?

SMITH: **Cliffs of Marble.**

RODITI: **Cliffs of Marble**, yes. It's a beautifully written book, of much the same general allegorical nature as some of Kafka's books, but much more--how should I say?--decadent or post-romantic in its style; it's much more the writing of an aesthete. There was another writer whom I saw quite a lot of in Berlin and who's been ignored in America called Hermann Kasack, who'd never been a Nazi and who'd been active in the Expressionist group and who wrote a couple of very extraordinary pieces of prose: one long novel--I've forgotten what the title was, but I did review it somewhere here in America--and who's certainly in the tradition of Kafka [**Die Stadt hinter dem Strom**]. A very strange novel which shows an awareness of the concentration camps and of the inhumanity of all that. This was written

during the Nazi regime and published only after it. A very decent character and a very fine writer.

SMITH: Now, how did you come to meet Alexander Koval?

RODITI: Well, in the office of an American officer who was in charge of the daily press in our sector of West Berlin and who was of German origin. His family had been important publishers, not Jewish, and very conservative, who'd emigrated to America because they disapproved of the Nazi regime--Hobbing, that's his name, Hobbing. And I met Koval in his office one day, and Koval was so obviously starving and in such a dreadful condition that I took him for a meal. I was very much at a loose end at the time, apart from my work, and gradually became more and more involved with him, partly simply by feeding him and discovering too that he had real literary talent, and a rare kind of literary talent--thus one of the real great disappointments of my life because so little has come of it. Of course, he has all sorts of excuses, because he was very much incapacitated by war wounds. He's still alive and under great pain much of the time, because he has spinal injuries. I tried very much to encourage him to write, but he became a bit of an alcoholic; now, fortunately, he's been weaned from that. He still is brilliant, but there's a frightening blockage in him. Until a couple of years ago, he was very offensive with me, not willing to admit that we'd had

for several years a homosexual relationship, in the course of which he was always breaking away from me to marry some girl and then coming back, not having married her. Suddenly, last year, he took to phoning me from Berlin; obviously he's overcome his guilt feelings and is very anxious I should come and see him in Berlin, which I hesitate to do. I'd like to see him, yes, but I don't want to become too deeply involved with him again, which is most unlikely in any case. He was remarkably handsome and remarkably gifted. What more could one want?

SMITH: He'd been an actor and a dancer?

RODITI: No, he'd been a paratrooper in the German army, and his family were rigid Protestant anti-Nazis. Actually, his parents had emigrated to South Africa, and at the last minute he'd not been allowed to leave because he was of military age. They left for South Africa in the hope that they'd be able to get him there. After a year, when they saw that he couldn't leave Germany, they went back to Germany. He'd been brought up as a strictly Protestant anti-Nazi, and because of his magnificent physique, he'd been trained as a paratrooper, and being a pacifist, he tried to commit suicide with his last practice jump, and didn't, and broke practically every bone in his body.

SMITH: In his autobiography in *Das Lot*, he mentions that he was involved with theaters and worked as a choreographer.

RODITI: Yes. Well, also he worked later, I got him to work with [Bertolt] Brecht for a while, but I helped him a great deal: I got him to translate Saul Bellow's [**The Adventures of] Augie March**; and I got him a contract to translate--what's the name of the English novelist? He's very well known--**Anglo-Saxon Attitudes**.

SMITH: Oh, Angus Wilson.

RODITI: Angus Wilson; and I got him an option to translate the plays of [Jean] Genet, but he bungled it. If he'd done that, he'd be sitting pretty on the royalties now. But there was something, a sort of cult of failure in him, a bit lackadaisical. Yes, a sort of cult of marginality left over from his anti-Nazi adolescence.

SMITH: A cult of marginality?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: What do you mean by cult?

RODITI: Well, whatever the regime, whatever the environment, he can always manage to be marginal to it.

SMITH: How did Berlin strike you when you arrived there? Obviously much different from 1930.

RODITI: Oh, a nightmare, an absolute nightmare with all the ruins. When I arrived there at the end of '46, there were still rusting, broken-down tanks, Russian tanks, in some of the streets. You could walk into the ruins of some of the Nazi ministries and open whole filing cabinets and

take out documents. In fact, there is here a document which I picked up on the floor in the former ministry of foreign affairs, which was an invitation to attend a reception of Potsdam sent to Prince [Bernhard] von Bülow when he was chancellor and signed by the chamberlain, who was [Prince Philipp zu] Eulenburg, the man who got into trouble for homosexuality a few years later--this great scandal which inspired Proust and Musil too. And I picked that up and kept it for years and donated it here as being an odd piece of--

SMITH: Spoils of war. [laughter]

RODITI: And I should have picked up far more of these documents; they were just lying around, and you could walk in.

SMITH: Did you stay in the American headquarters at Schlachtensee?

RODITI: Well, I was given a billet at Schlachtensee, a charming little house. I brought my mother over because she was doing such foolish things in London. At least I could prevent her from getting further involved in the kind of catastrophic financial venture--

SMITH: Did she want to come to Berlin?

RODITI: Well, she'd gotten herself into such a mess in London that she was glad to get out of it.

SMITH: What kind of mess was this?

RODITI: Financial, as always. I extricated her from a financial mess every few years.

SMITH: Was that a factor in your always having to work, having to take care of your family?

RODITI: Yes. Well, after my father's death, I took off thinking that I'd never have to worry about them, but then my mother got herself into such hot water in London that she suddenly sent my sister to join me in Chicago, although I couldn't afford to support her. I wasn't earning any money yet; I was still a graduate student. Well, one way or another, I managed to look after her. Then my mother came over on some madcap business venture of her own, which of course failed. She stayed on through the war, and I had to help her and my sister. I managed to get my sister a job after a while, and then I brought my brother over--

SMITH: Your brother Harold.

RODITI: Yeah, I got him out of jail. Then after the war, I still had to help him a bit and occasionally help my other brother and help my mother, and it has gone on forever. The absurd thing is that my father was always convinced that I'd never be able to earn a living with the things that interested me. And I've earned a living and helped all the others.

SMITH: What about your Berlin family that Koval mentions in one of his letters to you. Müttel Majo.

RODITI: Who?

SMITH: He mentions Müttel Majo. Little Mother Majo?

RODITI: I wonder who that is? I had no family of my own left in Berlin. Much later a very distant relative who survived as a refugee in France--god knows how he managed-- I managed to send him back to Berlin where he would get a pension as a victim of fascism, which he wouldn't get in France. He lived there very comfortably until his death and became a Hebrew teacher--for they were short of that-- for the residual Jewish community there. His name was Salomon. I have no relatives left in Germany.

SMITH: I think he meant family in a figurative sense. The people that you ran with.

RODITI: They changed constantly, according to whoever needed any assistance one way or another. They were a legion if you add them all up. I helped a lot of artists and writers; in fact, I used to give a huge party once a week and feed them all.

SMITH: These were younger writers?

RODITI: Younger and older, and some became very famous, ultimately.

SMITH: Such as?

RODITI: Mac Zimmerman, very famous in Germany, and Heinz Trökes were two artists, and then a film critic called Luft who became the most influential film critic in Germany,

rather a bit of a go-getter in a way--and masses of people. When Klaus Mann came to Berlin, I gave a party in his honor and introduced to him all sorts of new German artists and writers that he didn't know. When the surrealist artist Hans Bellmer came to Berlin, I gave a party in his honor, which turned out to be a catastrophe because he met there this gifted German artist and poetess called Unika Zurn. They fell in love with each other, and she went back to Paris with him. He was such a weirdo-- I don't know what his sexual hangup was, but he certainly had some from his drawings and from her appearance, because she became more and more psychopathic living with him and finally committed suicide--an extremely gifted woman whose works now are worth a great deal of money. Apparently, she was as masochistic as he was sadistic; I mean they were just destined for each other.

SMITH: At this time, was there much interaction between the West and the East zones?

RODITI: At first, yes. Until the currency reform, one could go absolutely freely into the Russian sector of Berlin, and we used to go to the theater there.

SMITH: To Brecht's theater?

RODITI: Yes, and other theaters, because one of my friends and a friend of Koval, a painter called Paul Strecker whom I'd known in Paris before the war because he lived in

Paris, was very successful as a designer of sets and costumes. I went to see a number of shows for which he'd designed the sets and costumes. I met [Zlatan] Dudow again in Berlin and went to see the final version of **Der Feigling**--the script I'd worked with him in Paris, which had been entirely rewritten in a much more communist manner.

SMITH: Did you and Dudow discuss any joint projects?

RODITI: No, no. I mean, I was in no mood to become involved with anything in the East Zone. What else did I see in the East Zone? I saw this strange old lady artist, Sella Hasse, who'd been the closest friend of Käthe Kollwitz. Poor dear, she was practically starving; she lived in East Berlin. I used to have her over on Sundays, feed her up, and she did a series of drawings of me, claiming that she was going to do an etching; but the etching never came, because as long as she could claim she was going to do it, she still got her Sunday meal. Some of these portraits of me by her are now here, four or five of them framed together. And she's become very famous in East Berlin, her work. She's dead now, but they did a big retrospective of her work and a book on her. Who else did I see from the East? Bubi Treuberg, Count Treuberg, whom I'd known in Paris before the war; he was a friend of Virgil Thomson's and of Maurice Grosser. I'd known him in Paris before the war as being, well, a sort of jet-set

young man of fashion. His mother came of a very wealthy, Jewish banking family and his father of a very distinguished, Bavarian aristocratic family. His grandmother's portrait by one of the major artists--by [Gustave] Lembach I think--is supposed to be one of the finest portraits of the German school of that era. Anyhow, he'd been in a concentration camp.

SMITH: Why was he in a concentration camp?

RODITI: His mother had been a great friend of Kurt Eisner, the Munich communist-coup man, a friend of Rosa Luxemburg, and had very leftist connections, although she was a banker's daughter. She was put in a concentration camp and executed. Bubi had fled from Paris to Lisbon and was kidnapped there and smuggled back to a German concentration camp and was liberated by the Russians, and as the Russians knew that his mother had been a member of the German Communist Party and a friend of Rosa Luxemburg, they immediately appointed him director of the club for artists, which they founded in East Berlin. I was very surprised to find Bubi looking so well; of course, he was fed on caviar by the Russians, as much as he wanted. We were very glad to meet again, because we had known each other very well. He left that after a while and moved to the West and married a very beautiful girl and had a child by her, then divorced and fell in love with a movie starlet, Eva Bartok, and became

involved in the movie industry in Italy. I don't know what's happened to him. Oh, he'd now be in his late seventies if he's still alive.

SMITH: Did you meet any of the luminaries, Heinrich Mann, Stefan Zweig?

RODITI: Not Stefan Zweig, he'd already committed suicide, I met Arnold Zweig, Arnold Zweig. Yes. I think Heinrich Mann was dead by then.

SMITH: No, he died in the early fifties, as I recall.

RODITI: Yeah, but I don't think he was in East Berlin. He was living with a French woman--when I saw him out here, he was--and I don't think she wanted to go to East Berlin--she didn't speak any German--and I think he went back to live in France.

SMITH: So you visited him here in Los Angeles?

RODITI: Well, when he was staying with Thomas Mann, briefly, I went out to see Klaus one day and was in the house there in the Pacific Palisades and met Heinrich Mann like that and chatted with the French woman for about five minutes, and then Klaus and I went out.

SMITH: Did you meet Thomas Mann?

RODITI: Thomas Mann was so suspicious of all of Klaus's friends that at that time it was certainly not the best introduction. I may have seen him through an open doorway, and obviously he didn't want to meet me.

SMITH: What was your relationship with Klaus Mann like?

RODITI: Well, it was-- It had originally been a business relationship, because when I was at Editions de Sagittaire, we had been the first people to publish Thomas Mann in French. We'd also published his [Klaus Mann's] novel **Alexander** in French, and we published [René] Crevel, who was a close friend of his, so that I met Klaus Mann first in the office of Editions de Sagittaire because he'd come there to discuss possible publication of some other book of his, since we'd already published one. I met him with Crevel a few times, and whenever he was in Paris after '34-- he was constantly coming to Paris between Zürich and Amsterdam because he was editing a magazine called **Die Sammlung**, if I remember right, in Amsterdam and working in Zürich also with his sister--and when he was in Paris, I'd see him very often at the Select Cafe, which was the cafe for young writers and artists between twenty and forty. Those over forty went, as I said the other day, to the Dôme.

SMITH: You just mentioned that you helped get Koval a job at Brecht's theater.

RODITI: Yeah, but that was later.

SMITH: What did he tell you about working with Brecht? What kind of impressions did you have of Brecht?

RODITI: Well, I met Brecht in East Berlin after 1950, I've

forgotten exactly which year, and I visited him because I knew his son, Stefan [Brecht]. And at that time I'd lost my job with the government, having been declared a security risk. Now under this legislation which claims to give you access to files on yourself, about three years ago I asked to have access to them, and I was sent some 12 pages of xeroxes, most of which was blacked out as being still top secret. It contained such nonsense that I wrote a six page letter to be added to the file, because I couldn't care less what they know about me now, because as Charles d'Orléans said, **Toutes mes hontes j'ai bues**. Some silly woman had been interviewed about me by the FBI, and she made the following preposterous statement: "He leads a wild life with women, and he's not the kind of man I'd like to be involved with." And this had been made at a time when I'd been a practicing homosexual for at least ten years. So I wrote back making that statement, saying, "Please put that in my file, because I feel that your agents don't know their ass from a hole in the wall." And then there were bits of financial information about me, which weren't about me but about my brother, or my first cousin Charles Roditi, about involvement in business deals with which I never had anything to do, and rather shady ones. "Obviously, your agents are complete idiots, and unreliable; it's a scandal that the taxpayers' money should

be wasted on collecting misinformation like that." Anyhow, I went to see Brecht, and he offered me (because I'd had trouble with the United States government), a job on the faculty of the University of Leipzig to teach American literature, and I being patriotic, refused.

SMITH: This is kind of tangential, but you do have a poem, "The Dark Ages," which parallels-- I suspect it was written before Brecht's famous poem, that begins, "We live in dark ages."

RODITI: It was written in Kansas City, inspired by a translation of a poem of [Boris] Pasternak's, not Brecht's.

SMITH: I don't think Brecht's poem was written at the time.

RODITI: No, but mine is inspired by Pasternak. But while I was in Berlin in government service, I did one spectacular thing with the help of my friend Tom Stauffer: we smuggled the philosopher [Hans-Georg] Gadamer, who's now at Princeton, out of the East Zone with his whole library.

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RODITI: Well, Hans [-Georg] Gadamer was a professor at Leipzig, and was not too happy there because he wasn't a communist and had never been a Nazi, and was considered a major existential philosopher, and was very anxious to get out of the East Zone to Western Germany. My friend Tom Stauffer, whom I'd known from the University of Chicago, was at that time an officer in some political job and had something to do with universities too. And Gadamer came to him on a visit to West Berlin and opened his heart to Tom. I have an idea that Gadamer had been told to look up Tom in a letter from [Richard P.] McKeon or from some philosophy professor whom Tom knew, because Tom had been a philosophy major.

SMITH: And you had known him in Chicago?

RODITI: Yes. And anyhow--he had been one of McKeon's students--we could get Gadamer to West Berlin, and his basic library we managed to smuggle to West Berlin, but the difficulty was to get him out of Berlin to Western Germany, because we couldn't put him on a train because the Russians wouldn't allow him through the bit of the eastern zone. He had to be sent out by plane or on one of our military trains incognito. We had difficulty getting the permission to get him on a plane or on a military train until I had

the bright idea of sending some airmail letters to professors here in America who knew him and who would sort of sponsor it. If I remember right, one of them was Professor [Paul] Friedlander, a professor of philosophy here, and the other one was Ernst Kantorowicz, who was at Princeton by then. Anyhow, I collected enough letters to prove to the military authorities that he was an acquisition for the West. Then we got him out of Berlin, and he taught in Frankfurt University for a while, and then came over here.

SMITH: What year did you get him out of Berlin?

RODITI: That must have been '47. Certainly before the currency reform.

SMITH: And the blockade. Was there much smuggling of East German intellectuals and celebrities into the western zones?

RODITI: Well, we had a few odd cases, like Alfred Kantorowicz, who'd been in America throughout the war and who'd gone back to the East and then became disgusted with it. There wasn't much smuggling yet. Well, it was fairly easy to move from the eastern zone to East Berlin and then to move from East Berlin to West Berlin. The difficulty was to move large quantities of books or household goods, and also to move out of West Berlin if one had East German identity papers. You could stay in West Berlin OK, but if you wanted to go to Western Germany and went on the usual

train with these East German identity papers, you could get into trouble with the Soviet controls, especially someone like a professor of philosophy at one of their best universities.

SMITH: Let's move on to your major literary activities--

RODITI: In Berlin?

SMITH: --in Berlin.

RODITI: Well, that was **Das Lot**, and that had a curious history too. Alain Bosquet, who has a curious itch always to be running a little magazine of sorts, had had the bright idea of publishing a little magazine in English, French, and Russian, which would have been published as a sort of supplement to the Berlin edition of **Stars and Stripes** for distribution at the Allied Control Council where the three languages met. I think it was called **Accent**, if I remember right.

SMITH: **Accord**.

RODITI: **Accord**, yes. Only two issues came out: one was an extra couple of pages to **Stars and Stripes**, and the second one came out as a magazine, and what that one contained was a translation by Alain Bosquet of the opening passage of "Cassandra's Dream" into French. We never managed to get much from the Russians or much cooperation from them, and we got rather amateurish material on the whole submitted to us from the French and the English, and

the Americans for that matter. I said to Alain, "Why don't we do a magazine in German which would bring to Germans material from the literatures of the allied countries and others, which has not percolated to Germany during the Nazi regime?" And [Alexander] Koval found this publisher [Karl H.] Henssel who was willing to undertake it, and then I found the title for it, *Das Lot*, which means--what do you call it? A thing for plumbing the depths of water. I know the word comes somewhere in Mark Twain.

SMITH: Like a plumb line.

RODITI: A plumb line, it means a plumb line. That's what it means! So we were sort of plumbing the depths of contemporary literature. And I immediately made up a list of authors whom I felt should be translated, because they were unknown, and they included Paul Bowles, Henry Miller, [Kenneth] Patchen, [Paul] Goodman, [Kenneth] Rexroth, Wallace Stevens, Cyril Connolly; and then I had a few absolutely wild choices: [Constantine] Cavafy, Boris Poplavsky (who was quite unknown), and then I suggested-- I was not very active as far as the choice of French authors was concerned; I left that mainly to Alain Bosquet, though I insisted on Saint-John Perse and on Milosz.

SMITH: Oscar [V. de L.] Milosz?

RODITI: Yes. Czeslaw [Milosz] was unknown at the time. Then I scared up some sensational German writers,

considering-- One was [Friedrich] Dürrenmatt, who was totally unknown and had never been published in Germany, and the other one was [Paul] Celan, who had never been published in Germany.

SMITH: He was also Jewish, right?

RODITI: Yes, but Dürrenmatt isn't. And--

SMITH: I thought Dürrenmatt was Swiss.

RODITI: Yes, he's Swiss. So that it immediately became the most sensational postwar magazine in Germany. Every issue that we brought out was a success, but it made no money because it was too difficult to produce with paper shortages and so on and what have you.

SMITH: Now, your paper came from the American military authorities.

RODITI: Yes, but I mean, when we had--well, during the blockade we had to give up. But anyhow, all I know is that six issues now sell as rare books for two thousand marks.

SMITH: The two-volume bound issues?

RODITI: No, not even bound. There is even talk of doing a facsimile edition for libraries.

SMITH: What was the division of labor among the three editors?

RODITI: We also had Djuna Barnes. I checked all the translations from English, and Bosquet checked most of the translations from French. I checked some of them. I had

great difficulty with Djuna Barnes. The curious thing is that Suhrkamp [Verlag], who was the best publisher in Germany, decided to publish Cavafy, Djuna Barnes, Connolly, and [E. M.] Cioran on the strength of our translations which we published there. Cioran had never been published in Germany either. He was my choice.

SMITH: Was he also Jewish?

RODITI: No. I'm quite broadminded; I occasionally publish a goy. [laughter]

SMITH: You were also involved in getting Henry Miller published in Germany.

RODITI: Well, yes and no; he was so much what West Germany wanted at that time that the few German intellectuals who were interested in what was coming out in America soon--especially his publisher Rohwolt--very soon discovered Henry and invested quite a lot of money launching him.

SMITH: More specifically, what was your rationale for the authors you chose? I mean, there were many, many American, French, and British authors who weren't published during the Nazi period, I'm sure. Yet you chose very specific people.

RODITI: Well, very personal taste. No, I felt that Djuna Barnes, certainly, because I considered that she was one of the major experimental prose writers of the last few decades; that's looking back to 1946 or '47. [James] Joyce

had been translated and published in Switzerland, and Gertrude Stein I was not particularly interested in. I was more interested in Djuna Barnes. I found that in any case, Gertrude Stein is nine times out of ten totally untranslatable. I recently read some French translations of her; it just becomes quite infantile in French, that's all. Connolly, I found **The Unquiet Grave** a very remarkable book of self-analysis of a very learned man of great taste. Cioran, well, his extreme pessimism was in a tradition which reminded me of some of the more intimate writings of Flaubert: some of his letters, his writings on commonplace remarks on the bourgeois and so on. Wallace Stevens, I felt, was a very great poet who was totally unknown.

SMITH: In Germany or in Europe?

RODITI: Practically throughout Europe. Patchen was still a very lively and experimental American writer; and then I did some sort of experimental things. I published in the same issue a story of Paul Goodman's and a story of [Nathaniel] Hawthorne's, which have a great deal in common in their themes. I thought that the comparison between the two was sort of striking. On the whole I feel that I did a very good job of editing. I'm very proud of it now because I don't think that I made a single mistake in choice. I'm-- There certainly are authors whom I might well have included, and most of those that I'm told that I should

have included, I was planning to include in further issues, often because I hadn't yet found a suitable translator. I wanted, for instance, to bring one of Henry James's short stories, probably "The Pattern in the Carpet." I'd already obtained an option for the rights of a passage from **A Thief's Journal** of [Jean] Genet. I had some Italian material that I wanted to bring: some poems of [Eugenio] Montale. But then we stopped publishing, and I still had a whole file of material, which included some of the authors, that I--"Why didn't you publish him?" Then I was looking for a translator for Dylan Thomas, but I hadn't found somebody who could do it.

SMITH: What were the kind of discussions that you and Bosquet and Koval had? Were there differences in editorial perspectives between the three of you?

RODITI: With Bosquet, yes, because Bosquet is someone extremely ambitious and who was already planning to retire from interpreting and to make a career as a writer in Paris. He was paving the way towards this by wanting to publish people who he thought would be useful to him.

SMITH: Such as?

RODITI: Pierre Seghers, who was a very minor poet.

SMITH: Any other people that you discussed?

RODITI: Well, I convinced him that the person who could be most useful to him was Saint-John Perse, and I was right.

[laughter] And he made a career out of his friendship with Saint-John Perse, something which I was never able to do.

SMITH: Going back to looking at some of the details along the way, a footnote: who was Pyotr Sazhin? He was a writer that was involved with **Accord**, a Soviet writer.

RODITI: I have no idea. That is somebody--

SMITH: The name appears in some of your correspondence.

RODITI: Are you sure it isn't Pyotr Ravitch?

SMITH: No, S-a-z-h-i-n.

RODITI: That must have been somebody whom Bosquet had scared up, because I don't know Russian, whereas he does.

SMITH: Were there Soviet writers in the occupation army that you had any contact with that you wanted to involve?

RODITI: No, but Bosquet had a couple of contacts with the Russians, because he and [Si] Karlinsky-- Karlinsky made the selection of the poems of Poplavsky and [Velimir] Khlebnikov, which we published, and checked the translations.

SMITH: The [Boris] Pasternak poems, were those your suggestion?

RODITI: Yeah. Poplavsky was my suggestion, and am I proud. Who the hell had ever heard of him at the time? Since then, Karlinsky has written a beautiful piece on him in--what's it called? **Tri-Quarterly**--a piece on him which is practically a parody of [Vladimir] Nabakov's **The Real**

Life of Sebastian Knight. It's the story of how he was able to identify Poplavsky, and how he discovered him. He mentions me along the line. He was a most mysterious character whom I knew in Paris briefly, and who died of an overdose, and who was of all the White Russian writers in Paris the one who was closest to the surrealists.

SMITH: Now, you mention in another letter that was written before the blockade that you anticipated that **Das Lot** was going to become a political football in the East-West struggle, that the paper from the American military authorities was dependent on the number of Soviet attacks you could generate.

RODITI: Yes, that was when-- I'd gotten involved in Soviet attacks, but that was a bit later. But we were not being attacked very much by the Soviets.

SMITH: Why would they attack you?

RODITI: Exactly. Why? But the military authorities hoped. Later, I was violently attacked when Melvin [J.] Lasky started **Der Monat**, and Stefan Hermlin in the Soviet zone did an anthology of American black poets with an absurd anti-American preface which exaggerated very much the situation of black writers. I criticized this in an article in **Der Monat**, an article in German, which I could do, because having known Countee Cullen and Richard Wright and so on, it seemed it was quite possible already (it

hadn't always been) for a black writer to make a perfectly normal, decent career as a writer. And I was attacked, a full page in the **Tägliche Rundschau**, the daily paper of the Soviet zone. A full page attack, something which rarely happened to any American writer. The funny thing is that I met Hermlin only five or six years ago at a writers conference in Belgrade, and I introduced myself to him, and he couldn't remember my name even. I said, "Well, you wrote a nice article against me in **Tägliche Rundschau** once."

SMITH: Did the Western authorities, the American authorities view **Das Lot** as a part of the re-democratization process in Germany?

RODITI: Difficult to say so. I think they felt that it was much too high brow. They had their own publications which included the **Amerikanische Rundschau**, in which I wrote a very platitudinous article, if I remember right, on Carl Sandburg, which was more or less the kind of thing they wanted then. And I did a couple of very platitudinous articles for them, which were translated into German. I knew what they wanted, and they were so short of people on the spot. You see, they were buying their material in America and then having it translated, but every once in a while they felt there was a gap which needed to be filled, and then they turned to me and said, "Can you write an

article on such and such a subject?" If I had the material provided, I could. And then there were the literary articles that appeared in the American daily newspaper, I've forgotten what its title was. Well, **Das Lot** was too highbrow for them. They just couldn't see what we were up to.

SMITH: Let's try to compare **Das Lot** to some of the other postwar magazines. First of all, the obvious one would be **Sinn und Form**.

RODITI: Yes, well, I knew the editor of **Sinn und Form**.

SMITH: Who was?

RODITI: A poet, I've forgotten what his name was. It was a beautiful magazine, and he went as far as he could in the Soviet zone. He was a rather withdrawn and sweet-natured poet. Beautiful poetry he wrote. I just can't remember his name offhand. He is included in many anthologies, and he finally moved to the West. He lived out in Potsdam, and he used to come into town and we'd see him, and every once in a while we'd give him a suggestion for **Sinn und Form**. I've forgotten what the suggestions were, but we'd have dinner together and say what are you publishing in your next issue. Our relationship was very cordial, because he was a not a communist. He was just someone who had not been a Nazi, had proof of having been an anti-Nazi, had been given a license and who lived, in any case, in the Soviet zone.

SMITH: What was the fate of that magazine?

RODITI: Well, it continued for quite a long while, because it enjoyed the protection of [Bertolt] Brecht and of Johannes Becher, who were the two leading--and of Hermlin--the three leading communist poets. And then I think that when he decided to move to the West or shortly before that, it just petered out.

SMITH: Now in the West you had **Der Merkur**?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: How would you compare **Das Lot** to **Der Merkur**?

RODITI: **Der Merkur** was much more academic. What is his name, that poet? Peter Huber or something like that?

SMITH: [Hans] Paeschke was the editor.

RODITI: No, but I'm thinking of **Sinn und Form**. Peter something or other, if I remember right. [Peter Huchel]

SMITH: Not Peter Gan?

RODITI: No. Peter Gan was a weird one, he lived in Paris. We published him in **Das Lot**. I'd known him before the war in Hamburg and in Paris. His real name is Richard Moering. No, there was another magazine in the West, **Die Wandlung**, which was edited by Dolf Sternberger and which was also rather more academic. That's about all.

SMITH: In Italy, there was **Inventario**.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: In some ways they seem to be trying to fill the same gap.

RODITI: Yes, *Inventario* was a very good magazine. But in Italy there were masses of magazines immediately after the war. And I think that Italian literature had an easier time recovering from fascism than German literature. First, because not so many Italian intellectuals had emigrated. Germany had lost so many of its leading intellectuals through emigration, and so many had committed suicide or died in concentration camps. It took some time before things got underway and organized. Same thing in Austria.

SMITH: I also wanted to ask you about the poem that you published in the first issue of *Das Lot*, "The Nature of Unknowledge." [laughter]

RODITI: That was the absurd misprint of my proofs which I had corrected and got lost in the mail--"The Nature of Knowledge." Well, it's sort of difficult for me to explain that poem now. It's one of those things which came to me and which still in a way puzzle me. I have an idea that the clown and the gull may have been vaguely inspired by some picture I'd seen, which one I don't know. But I think that it's one of those poems in which I try to achieve a synthesis between philosophical thought and surrealist dream imagery. I try to sort of condense it into some kind

of allegory. Whether I succeed or not, I don't know. And when I look at it after many, many years, I still feel that there isn't anything I would change in it. Very often I feel with a poem like that, that it's jelled in its own peculiar form; it's something that I wouldn't be able to write now. I vaguely understand how and why I wrote it, though I can't remember exactly. And, well, it's an object; it's what a philosopher would call reified: it's no longer something at the back of my mind, and as such, in a way, it no longer belongs to me; it's no longer a concern of mine.

SMITH: Why in the collected poems [**Poems 1928-1948**] did you publish it face to face with its German translation, why?

RODITI: Oh, because Koval wanted me to do it. He was very proud of his translation. And, yes, I did it to please him.

SMITH: Did you, yourself, have any special feeling towards that translation of--

RODITI: It was rather good, yes. I now feel that it is one of the very few poems of mine in which one might detect a slight influence of Wallace Stevens.

SMITH: In what way?

RODITI: Some of the imagery, and the way I handled it.

SMITH: Was this conscious or unconscious?

RODITI: It may have been partly conscious, because I actually wrote it at the time that I was helping Koval to translate "Peter Quince at the Clavier," and a couple of other Wallace Stevens poems, which we didn't publish either because we wanted to keep them for a later issue, or because the translations weren't quite satisfactory yet. Anyhow, I found myself very concerned with the poetry of Wallace Stevens for a short while, and then wrote that poem without being aware at the time that there may have been that influence. That's the way it happens, things coincide, and there's some kind of osmosis.

SMITH: I'd like to go back and just probe into your relationship with Richard Wright. How did you come to meet him, and where?

RODITI: Well, I met Richard Wright, if I remember right, after the war in Paris. He was a great friend of my friend Helene Bokanowski, who was running a literary agency in partnership with his [Wright's] wife. I didn't see much of him, but our relationship was very cordial, because he knew that I had been a friend of Claude McKay and Owen Dodson and Cullen and of [Harold] Jackman. He was of a very different background, Chicago, and not at all of the background of the Negro educated bourgeoisie. He was an increasingly unhappy man, and towards the end of his life suffered from complete blockage. As a matter of fact, he

wrote during his last few years two thousand haiku, or approximately two thousand, and practically nothing else.

SMITH: Did you used to go visit him when you were living in Paris in the fifties?

RODITI: I didn't go visit him because he was too depressed, and he was not very--one felt that visitors were not very welcome, but I would meet him sometimes.

SMITH: Did he show you any of these haiku?

RODITI: No. I discovered that later. He was also depressed because he'd been, at one time, marginally involved with the communists, and at the time of that dreadful book, **The God That Failed**-- I feel it's dreadful because I think that these confessions--I mean, like a bunch of good Catholics. [laughter] And all waiting to obtain the absolution from Melvin Lasky, who's a "Catholic priest-nebbich." Pardon me such a Yiddish expression. [laughter] Well, Richard Wright was very depressed at that time, and when all these people like [André] Gide and [Stephen] Spender and what have you were confessing their sins: how they've been led up the garden path by the communist devil.

SMITH: Let's get back to your paying job in Berlin. You were an interpreter at the Allied Kommandatura?

RODITI: No, at the higher level, the council, the [Allied] Control Council, and the legal directorate, drafting laws

which were supposed to be valid for all of Germany.

SMITH: So you had direct contact with--

RODITI: Our director, the member of the directorate who represented America was Sam Kramer.

SMITH: Sam Kramer. What about Lucius [Du Bignon] Clay? Did you have any--

RODITI: Later. After the break up of the Control Council, when meetings ceased, I was sent back to the States as being surplus.

SMITH: Was this during the blockade?

RODITI: Yes, and then suddenly I was called back from Bremen a day before I was to take the ship, and put to work on this file which I kept in the civil administration division of--which I brought up to date to begin with--of Soviet infractions against the Potsdam Agreement. And I had sort of a card index of every little thing, including when they'd stopped a removal of furniture from East Berlin to West Berlin, things like that, but also much more important ones.

SMITH: How did this information come in to you?

RODITI: Oh, well, I took it out of newspapers, out of files of various agencies, like the board of control and what have you.

SMITH: Did you go out into the field?

RODITI: I went out into the field too, and read the Soviet

press, the Soviet German press, and then when the United States decided to bring the matter up before the Security Council, they sent over somebody from the State Department who was astounded to see that this file was there. And I worked with him for two nights, and my file became the United States White Paper, of which I'm the author.

SMITH: Accredited author?

RODITI: No. It was anonymous.

SMITH: What did you view in terms of the events leading up to the Berlin blockade in terms of the Quadripartite meetings?

RODITI: Well, I'd already been for sometime in this intelligence work, and I had written for General Clay a few reports (which I have here copies of them) on the Soviet plans for a constitution for East Germany. This was concurrent with our own civil administration division's organization of a constitution for Western Germany. I knew that if we introduced currency reform in the West, it would lead inevitably to a closing of the frontier between East and West, because the Russians were not prepared to undertake a currency reform in the East, and it would create an impossible currency situation on account of Gresham's Law and a few other such things, you know. Because officially, they would claim that their bad currency was equal one to one to our good currency, that

kind of situation. So I knew that if we reformed the currency, there would be some inevitable break, and some inevitable separation. I'm not sure that many of our eggheads there were aware of this. I think I was one of the very few who realized this. In any case, the reports that I sent to General Clay on political developments in Eastern Germany really interested him. That's one of the reasons why when personnel decided that I was superfluous (because, theoretically, I was still only an interpreter doing this other job to keep me busy, because I knew German and the head of civil administration had decided that he could use me), General Clay called me back because he knew that the kind of report that I was preparing was vital in his getting information from me that he wasn't getting from any other source. I mean, I'd come in at the end of the day every day with a report which I'd hand to his secretary, or sometimes walk into his office; if the door was open, he'd beckon to me to come in, and I'd stand there while he read the report, and he'd ask me a couple of questions. The report would sometimes be three pages, sometimes half a page, depending on what I had to report.

SMITH: What kind of a man was he?

RODITI: Well, obviously a brilliant manipulator. After all, it isn't every general that on retiring from the army becomes president of such a big corporation as he became

president of--what was it? [Continental Can Company] or something like that--I mean, he was a man who knew how to get around, knew how to avail himself of the talents of all those who were under him. He was certainly infinitely more pleasant to work for than [Robert B.] Jackson. Jackson was a conceited dumbbell compared with Clay. I didn't like Clay as a person, because he's not the kind of person that I would choose to associate with, but working for him was pleasant. He appreciated my work; he was very pleasant.

SMITH: What about his handling of the Russians?

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SMITH: Well, we were talking about your working with Lucius [Du Bignon] Clay. How did you view his handling of the Russian military authorities?

RODITI: Well, at the time, it struck me as being perhaps over-aggressive, at times. But now with hindsight and compared with our present president's [Ronald Reagan] handling of the Russians, it was very mild and very subtle. In our legal directorate we had a particularly unpleasant Russian delegate, a man called [Colonel-General V.] Kurassov, who was so totally indoctrinated and stubborn, one could go on arguing with him for days and days. He never yielded on anything, on principle, even where he could have yielded. At the time, because I had worked only in that directorate, I tended to view it as being a phenomenon of his own temperament. After all, I was still relatively, how shall I say, innocent, if not inexperienced as far as dealings with Russians are concerned. But in subsequent dealings with Russians-- After all, my only dealings with them before that had been in 1945 in San Francisco, and the war crimes trials, but in the war crimes trials, we'd had only one incident where I'd had reason to suspect duplicity on the part of the Russians. And that was the whole episode of the massacre of Polish officers in

Katyn, where they were totally unyielding and were blaming it on the Germans, although we had some evidence that it was not the Germans: we had some evidence coming from the [General Wladyslaw] Sikorski army people, and the [General Wladyslaw] Anders army people, and very unwisely, perhaps, the Americans yielded to the Russians there. Now, it's quite clear that the Russians massacred them, and I know it from personal testimony, because the Polish painter and writer Józef Czapski, who lives in Paris now, was a prisoner in Katyn when the Russians took Katyn, and they took him out of Katyn and took him to Moscow for questioning in the prison there--what is it called? The Lyubyanka. And when he came out of the Lyubyanka alive, he discovered that the Katyn prison camp no longer existed, that they were all dead. This was the sort of kind of error that occurs in the Soviet regime. Had they known that one or two people had been taken out of Katyn and had survived in the Lyubyanka, they would have killed them there. Anyhow, he joined the Anders army subsequently and is in Paris, and has written his book in which he recounts his whole experience, so that, although I had suspicions in Nuremberg that the Russians had probably done it, and although I had suspicions in Berlin of the duplicity--and more than duplicity; it's the way the Soviet mind works--it has taken me further experience like interpreting at the follow-up

conferences on the Helsinki Pact in Belgrade or in Madrid to realize first that one never gets anywhere with them, and one has to be firm with them. One of the difficulties in our dealings with the Russians is that practically at every international gathering where I've had to interpret, the American delegation has consisted of different people, very often people who had no experience of dealing with the Russians. The Russians are still represented at most top level meetings by [Andrei] Gromyko, who was in San Francisco. Well, Gromyko has much more experience in dealing with the Americans than any of our diplomats have of dealing with them, which is rather tragic, in a way, and absurd. And this, you can report to the White House from me. [laughter]

SMITH: Did you have a--

RODITI: Don't you think it's valid criticism?

SMITH: It comes with the territory, as it were, in our political system, the juggling for power at the top. Everybody thinks they have the best way of doing it, even though they have no experience. Did you have a chance to see Marshall [Vasilii Danilovich] Sokolovskii often?

RODITI: No. I did go to a couple of receptions to which we were all invited in Potsdam, where they simply poured vodka down our throats, but I'd been warned by a friend how to cope with it. And before going to one of their

receptions, a couple of hours before, I sipped slowly a glass of olive oil, which made it possible to drink any amount of vodka without getting drunk, because it lined one's gut with--

SMITH: Now, why would you be afraid of getting drunk?

RODITI: Well, it's not pleasant to fall flat on one's face at a Soviet reception where all the Russians are standing up, standing pat.

SMITH: I wasn't quite sure whether there was some deeper motivation, political motivation. Now, since you were in the legal division, did you have opportunity to work with Edward Litchfield?

RODITI: Yes, he was my boss when I was in the civil administration division.

SMITH: What sort of a man was he?

RODITI: Very intelligent, but he had a couple of hobby horses. One of his hobby horses was wanting to abolish the distinction in the German civil service between **Beamter**, who are permanent civil servants, and **Angestellter**, who were civil servants who can be dismissed. And I kept on pointing out to Dr. Litchfield that it was very fine and large that we should lecture them on this subject, but it could also be done with the civil service commission in Washington, D.C.--as my own status was not that of a permanent civil servant; I was an **Angestellter**, if you want

to translate it into German terms, and I could be dismissed any moment, as Dr. Litchfield could have seen since I had already once been declared surplus. But this was his hobby horse, and he had a few others. But otherwise he was very able. Perhaps more of a, well, more of an academic than of an administrator.

SMITH: How did the Americans treat the Germans that they were working with?

RODITI: Oh, it depended very much on the individual American.

SMITH: Well, let's say, General Clay and Dr. Litchfield.

RODITI: Well, Dr. Litchfield didn't have any Germans working in his office; nor did General Clay.

SMITH: But didn't Dr. Litchfield have to deal with Germans in the drafting of a constitution for--

RODITI: Oh yes, but I mean there he would be dealing with leaders in the political parties and professors of law and so on. There he would be very courteous and practically on equal terms. But these were all thoroughly de-Nazified.

SMITH: Was the concern, in a sense, to reform German society, German culture, to make it more American?

RODITI: Well, it depended on the individual. Litchfield had a little tendency towards that; in things like cultural affairs, they gave that up very soon. It was obviously nonsensical to want to produce imitation American writers

in Germany, though there were a couple of people who felt that contemporary German art should learn a few tricks from Jackson Pollock. Well, we did have a couple of German artists: one, Yuri Kubitschek, who was sent by our cultural affairs, or whatever it was called, to America for a couple of weeks and came back imitating Jackson Pollock. That was the end of his career as a major painter.

SMITH: Now, when did you start to feel that the blockade was inevitable, an American/Russian confrontation?

RODITI: Well, the moment I knew that the currency reform was going to come. It had to occur.

SMITH: Now you wrote in one letter, just weeks before the blockade started, that you did not know if you were going to be alive or not, in a question of months.

RODITI: Well, there was a feeling that we might be going to war, and I was out on a limb in Berlin.

SMITH: Was this a strong feeling in Berlin itself among the allied communities?

RODITI: Among the more thoughtful ones. Certainly not among the GI's and most of the military, who couldn't see much further than their nose and their girlfriends, the German Fräuleins, and their black-market deals. They were all kept busy all the time.

SMITH: Now, what about your German friends and the German intellectuals, what was their response to the blockade?

RODITI: Well, most of them, except those who had jobs for the Americans, had a very thin time, because, I mean, no electric light at night, or, for instance, one time it was almost impossible for them to cook meals at home: there was no electricity, no gas most of the time, no coal. It became more and more difficult to feed oneself decently until the air lift got really underway. And then there were certain mistakes made: mass quantities of dehydrated potato were brought in, but the dehydrated potato required to be cooked rather long, and one didn't have the wherewithal to cook it. The strange thing was the vast number of cabbage patches which sprung up in all the public parks and everywhere. People were getting seeds and growing sort of victory gardens everywhere.

SMITH: Now, you wrote a poem, "Berlin Schlachtensee 1948." Did you write that during the blockade?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: What prompted that poem?

RODITI: I can't remember it.

SMITH: You can't remember the poem, or the--

RODITI: Can't remember the poem. Where was it published?

SMITH: I don't know that it was published. I found it in your manuscripts.

RODITI: I simply don't remember it.

SMITH: I can dig it out. In fact, I can dig it out now.

[tape recorder off]

I'd like to ask you about your observation, your participation, if any, in the splitting of the city, the establishment of the Free University [of Berlin], the splitting of the cultural life of the city.

RODITI: Well, by that time I was no longer employed by the government. In 1950, I think it was, I was declared-- That was just when the military government, that is to say the equivalent of the office of military government, the central office, was moved from Berlin to Frankfurt and was taken over by the State Department. The State Department, for some peculiar reason of its own, decided that it didn't like the office in which I worked, which was Dr. Litchfield's office. None of us, except a typist, was taken over by the State Department.

The State Department got rid of Sam[uel] Wahrhaftig by accusing him of being a communist, and they did it in the most dreadful way. Sam was not a communist. Big headlines appeared in the press in America about it, and it practically drove him to suicide. Then our, well, I wouldn't say secretary nor filing clerk, but the one who handled all the archives, called Charles Madely, and who, in any case, didn't want to stay on in the government service. He had come as a GI and stayed on as a civilian. He'd had enough of it, and he was gay, and he knew which way the wind was

blowing, and he suddenly said that he wanted to go home, very wisely.

I was talked into staying on, and we were being moved to Frankfurt, from Berlin to Frankfurt, one by one on so-called travel orders. There came a point when I was the only one left in our office, with no travel order yet and not a damn thing to do. Even my files for my work had been moved.

Then one day I went round to personnel to say how come? There was a lot of hemming and hawing, and I was told that there were objections in Washington to my being transferred to the Department of State, which I thought very peculiar considering the fact that I'd been employed by the Department of State in San Francisco. It's taken me a long, long time to understand all of this. Apparently, it's an accumulation of sheer gossip. I'd had, as I told you, a run-in with Alger Hiss as far back as 1945. At the end of the San Francisco conference, all the interpreters (and there were not many) were told to fill in application forms for jobs with UN, and I did, too. I never got a reply to it.

Out of sheer curiosity, a couple of years later, since I had a job in any case, I inquired what had happened to my application form; it had disappeared. It had never come to the person who was supposed to give the jobs. So I presume

that Alger Hiss had already suppressed it. There is no other reason, because he went on to UN with this whole bundle of applications, and he may already have blacklisted me with the State Department.

There were other things which came up. I mean, the fact that when I first applied for civil service in 1941, I was asked to give a certain number of references, and I very innocently thought that the only references they needed were concerning my knowledge of language, and I gave them [Giuseppe Antonio] Borgese for Italian, [Ernst] Kantorowicz for German, and Haakon Chevalier for French. [laughter] So that was another thing against me.

SMITH: Had you kept in contact with Haakon Chevalier in the forties?

RODITI: Up to 1944, certainly, because he was on a sabbatical in New York when the International Labour Office were looking for interpreters and engaged me, and I said, "Well, why don't you give Haakon Chevalier a test?" He passed it and worked in Philadelphia, and after his troubles here moved to Paris and made a career as an interpreter there, thanks to me. I see him very rarely.

Well, I know perfectly well that most of the story about him is sheer poppycock, and that he's been extremely indiscreet. I would say more than indiscreet, he's been very naive. He's gotten himself into this situation out of

sheer naivete. Anyhow, whatever the State Department had against me--and then, of course, "the wild life with women," and a few other such things. But it's taken me a long time to find it all out. In any case, the intelligence agencies are refraining from giving me the full picture of it. And by now I couldn't care less, because I mean--

Anyhow, I left Berlin then, and it was very much of a shock to me, because I'd been working for nine years for the civil service and been constantly promoted, and I knew that I'd been doing a very good job. I knew perfectly well that as far as security was concerned, there had never been any leakage from my office, or from me. And I'd observed a number of people who had been far more indiscreet and outspoken than I, and who got by and were taken over by the State Department, including a drunk who'd mislaid in Frankfurt a whole portfolio of top secret documents, which was returned by the German police, which had found them lying around in a bar. He was taken over. Nothing like that had ever happened to me.

SMITH: Of course, there's the stereotype about the homosexual who could be blackmailed. Did you encounter that at all? Did you suspect that kind of thinking was behind it?

RODITI: But there are also the heterosexuals who get

blackmailed; that's happened a couple of times to diplomats of ours in Moscow who've gotten themselves into trouble with girls. You can't be represented exclusively in the diplomatic corps by eunuchs.

SMITH: No, actually I--

RODITI: The Chinese did that at one time. [laughter]

SMITH: I was thinking more in terms of that kind of mentality, not the validity of it.

RODITI: Yes, but I mean I'd never been caught in the act. Whatever information they had about me was certainly hearsay. There was another business, and that is that my friend [Tom] Stauffer, who was a very close friend of mine and who was in the diplomatic corps in Egypt, had gotten caught there, and had written to me some rather indiscreet letters. But who could have opened these letters? And whatever was indiscreet in them was indiscreet about himself, not about me.

Well, they may have had reasons, but not enough to justify that decision. And, as a matter of fact, some years later I was offered a job in the State Department, which I turned down, saying that I was too old to accept a job with an employer who had seemed to me not to be a very reliable one.

SMITH: Actually, the poem in "Berlin Schlachtensee" that I was referring to raises the question of how Jefferson and

Lincoln would view the farm boys in Berlin lording it over a starving people.

RODITI: Yes, oh yes, it's the rough version of a poem which has been entirely rewritten, and which hasn't been published yet.

SMITH: How did you rewrite it?

RODITI: Oh, I don't have it here.

SMITH: That process is also of interest, how you take a rough thing and--

RODITI: Yes, well, I mean I had a number of these rough things which had been dashed off in a hurry.

SMITH: Let's move on. What was your reaction to the foundation of the State of Israel?

RODITI: Dubious.

SMITH: Why?

RODITI: The Messiah hasn't come, some of our more orthodox brethren believe; also, it struck me from the beginning that it was by nature a very large ghetto surrounded by very hostile Arabs, to say nothing of the very hostile Arab population within Israel. In a way, I felt that the enthusiasm of all the survivors of the death camps and so on who had gone there was admirable in a way, but I was very doubtful about the future of Israel, and I've become increasingly doubtful because demographic statistics reveal now that within, I've forgotten how many years, I think

it's twenty or thirty, there will be more Arabs than Jews there. As it is, there are already over 250,000 Israelis or former Israelis in the New York area, and I don't know how many here.

SMITH: About an equal number.

RODITI: Yes, well, of course that includes those who have gotten out of Soviet Russia and had to pass through Israel and had no intention of staying there.

SMITH: Were there many discussions among you and your friends, Jewish friends in particular, in '47, '48 on the question of Israel?

RODITI: Yes. There was Melvin Lasky, who was very much in favor of it and who organized an evening discussion at which this curious man called [Arnon] Ard turned up, whom I subsequently discovered was an Arab agent of sorts. He claimed to be a journalist in the press camp, but had a very dubious past. That's when I managed to collect all this information, subsequently, on the people of the Grand Mufti [of Jerusalem], who were still around in Berlin, which I'll never publish. I'll rewrite it when I get to that chapter, that area in my memoirs.

SMITH: Now, in 1949, Ezra Pound wins the Bollingen Prize.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: The first one. This raises a whole number of questions about the responsibility of writers for their

actions. Let me start the discussion of this subject with [James] Laughlin. Laughlin asked you to raise money for Pound's defense. Did you?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: Why not?

RODITI: I knew that there were enough wealthier people than I who were going to, and professors in English departments. Why should I raise money for Pound's defense, since I had never liked Pound as a person, I'd been shocked by what he'd done during the war, and considered that he should be held responsible? Well, yes, in a way, he was insane, and had been all along. [Robert] McAlmon and Kay Boyle had been aware of the streak of insanity in him ever since the late twenties.

SMITH: The Bollingen Prize is obviously a political act by the judges. It can only be viewed as that, as the statement of people such as T. S. Eliot, who was one of the judges, on what they viewed to be the persecution of a great poet. Were you in contact with Eliot or any of the other judges?

RODITI: No, no. But I mean if you see **The Selected Poems of [Ezra] Pound** in the paperback edition of *New Directions*, the statement in these brief biographies they have of what he was doing on Rome radio during the war is toned down to such an extent it's practically a lie.

SMITH: Now, Laughlin was a friend of yours. Did you--

RODITI: He still is.

SMITH: Did you bring this to his attention?

RODITI: There was no point in it, there's no point in it. I mean--

SMITH: Did he--

RODITI: He's convinced that Pound is a very great poet. Long ago, I said to him that in my opinion, he doesn't come up to the ankle of Vergil, Dante, Homer, and half a dozen other poets, including Victor Hugo, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dryden, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I could mention two dozen greater poets than Pound, and that even in the twentieth century I consider him not as great as [Constantine] Cavafy, not as great as [Eugenio] Montale, not as great as Eliot, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, or [Bertolt] Brecht. But I mean, I'm not going to convince him, so why should I waste further breath on the subject? Personally, I quite like some of the earlier Pound, I quite like occasional passages of the Cantos, but I cannot read the whole Cantos; I mean, there's a great deal there that I find just garbage.

SMITH: Let's assume that he is a great poet. Does that excuse his actions in the service of Mussolini in the fascist government?

RODITI: Certainly not! I mean, being a great poet doesn't

excuse one's actions if one rapes little girls, or little boys either. One has moral responsibilities, no matter how great an artist one is.

SMITH: I mean, parallel to this is the rehabilitation of Gottfried Benn.

RODITI: Well, Gottfried Benn was nothing. If Klaus Mann hadn't made such a story, such a *tzimmes*, as one says in Yiddish, out of it-- Gottfried Benn had just failed to emigrate and briefly tried to make his peace with the Nazi regime, never joined the party, and then broke with it and remained in Germany and continued his practice as mainly handling venereal diseases, like [Louis Ferdinand] Céline, oddly enough. But Gottfried Benn, there isn't a single poem of his which can be said to be a fascist poem. There are a couple of prose pieces where he defended himself in his quarrel with Klaus Mann, in which he explains his point of view. It was a point of view which was perhaps valid in the early years, '34, I think, that's all; by '35 he was out of it. So then Gottfried Benn, whom I saw in Berlin a couple of times, can not be compared with Pound morally.

SMITH: It struck me, vis-à-vis Pound, that maybe the essay that you wrote, "On Public and Private Poetics," is an important one in terms of your perspective on not just Pound, but all development in twentieth century literature--your decision to move away from private language and private myth.

RODITI: Yes, well, I was more concerned with better communication. Increasingly as the years go by, I find that the situation of the poet in the English-speaking world is becoming something really catastrophic. I mean, who the hell reads us? Nobody's willing to publish us. And when one compares it with the situation of the poet in India, for instance, an English-language Indian poet like Nissim Ezekiel, if he publishes a book, it's printed in about three to four thousand copies, and they are sold within a few months; and he's not a very good poet. Any poet writing in one of the Indian languages is printed in-- if he has any reputation--five thousand copies, and it sells. Same thing in Japan, same thing in all the countries behind the iron curtain, of those poets who are allowed to be published, like [Il'ia (Karl) L'vovich] Sel'vinskii, hundred thousand copies like that. In Bulgaria, any poet who gets published is out of print immediately. In Germany, poets sell better than here. So that it's imperative that we should manage somehow to create an audience for what we're doing if there is any value to it at all. I continue to have this absurd notion that there is some value to it; I find it difficult to define that value, but, of course, it varies from poet to poet. But I feel that we have some kind of moral respon-

sibility, which is where Pound failed; and then we have aesthetic responsibility in educating our readers towards appreciating more subtle ways of making certain statements.

SMITH: How have you tried to do that?

RODITI: Well, by not writing like any newspaperman.

[laughter] I think that some of my poetry is very subtle. I make statements, and it is subtle in a way that is not offensively decadent or chi-chi. I try to be fairly direct and truthful, and artful, let's say. Difficult to put one's finger exactly on what one's doing.

SMITH: Right. In the fourth issue of *Das Lot*, the one that appeared in October of 1950, the three editors appear directly, and you have your "Diary of the Editors."

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: In which each of the three of you makes a statement which seems to be speaking on the political issues of the--

RODITI: Yes, subtly, mind.

SMITH: Subtly, yes, well, in your case (in the other two cases, I'm not so sure). What kind of discussions went into the decision to print the "Tagebuch der Herausgeber"?

RODITI: I think it was [Alain] Bosquet who had the idea; I'm not sure whether it was Bosquet or whether it was [Karl H.] Henssel. Anyhow, I said if we do that, I'm going to produce what I did produce, which was a bit more daring than they expected. But I don't regret it. Well, it was

influenced to some extent by my readings of [E. M.] Cioran.

SMITH: Of who?

RODITI: Cioran.

SMITH: I had noticed that there were certain similarities to the Brecht aphorisms that were published long after his death.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Very similar kind of perspective.

RODITI: Well, also [Georg Christoph] Lichtenberg; I'd been a great reader of Lichtenberg then already for two years.

SMITH: I'm not saying that you were influenced by Brecht. That would've been impossible.

RODITI: No. No, much more by Lichtenberg and by Cioran.

SMITH: And is that an example of *Verzweiflung*?

RODITI: I guess so. Well, you know, I've been writing aphorisms all my life, and it's impossible to find a publisher for a book of aphorisms, although I have a book ready. I've submitted it to Laughlin: no go. Sun and Moon Press: they like it, but they say they wouldn't be able to sell enough copies. So I'm waiting until the memoirs have been published, and then maybe I'll become so famous, that somebody will want to publish the book; it's ready. It's called "A Peck of Perplexities". A sort of Elizabethan title.

SMITH: Yes.

RODITI: You also at this time published your collected poems [Poems 1928-1948]. How did that come about?

RODITI: Oh, well, that had been in the sausage machine, so to speak, with Laughlin for some time, and because of my traveling and so on; then he decided that he was going to have it printed in Germany because it was so much cheaper, and that's why it was printed on such lousy paper; then somehow the proofs which I'd corrected got lost in the mail. I had a great deal of trouble with that book.

SMITH: It seems to have about one typo every two or three pages.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: What was it like dealing with Laughlin as a publisher? You had two books in two years.

RODITI: I found him difficult, very penny-wise, as one says. Of course, everybody in the literary world has always assumed that he is much wealthier than he is. Everyone has always thought that James is a multimillionaire because of the steel corporation. But he is only a minor heir to that, so that he is only a millionaire, not a multimillionaire. And considering how much money he has, he's done pretty well with that firm. But people like [Kenneth] Rexroth and others were always disappointed with how close-fisted he is, and it takes him ages to come to a decision on anything, and then ages to

produce it because everything goes on a very slow--no more
than so many books a year.

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SMITH: You've done three books with him [James Laughlin].

RODITI: Yes. Well, we've had our tiffs and our differences, and we've remained very good friends. In fact, now we're very affectionate friends, in a way. We've known each other forty years, and I mean--

SMITH: How do the economics of it work for you as a writer?

RODITI: Lousily, lousily but then until recently I couldn't care less how much I made as a writer, because I was earning a good living doing something else. I mean, it would have been lovely if suddenly I had had thousands of dollars falling, showered on me like Jupiter showering gold on Danaë, but I mean I'm--that's never happened to me. I've always had bad luck, even with my biography of Magellan [**Magellan of the Pacific**], which should have done much better, but the firm with whom I had the contract--the American edition was sold out to McGraw-Hill which found itself with the obligation of publishing my book and was not interested in it--published it and remaindered it at once. I did OK on the English edition. Faber and Faber sold the Italian rights for an absurdly low sum. I then recovered all the rights myself, because they refused to reprint it, Faber and Faber, because it was part of a

collection and they'd given up the collection. So I said, "Well, in that case, I take back the full rights." I've meanwhile sold the Portuguese rights for twice what they got for the Italian rights, and I'm negotiating the Spanish rights. I'm negotiating a paperback reprint here, which won't bring in much, but still.

SMITH: Well, with New Directions, which is an advanced-guard publishing house, can a writer realize any income from that?

RODITI: No. The distribution is too limited. Well, in the long run, yes, if you become very famous. If your books are sold on all sorts of campuses for use in classes, and there are some Ezra Pound volumes and some William Carlos Williams volumes and maybe some Thomas Merton volumes which bring in pretty good royalties.

SMITH: Does [James Laughlin] use them to subsidize the publication of lesser-known poets?

RODITI: Well, no, because he's very scrupulous. I mean, the Pound royalties, as long as Pound is not in the public domain, go to the Pound heirs. William Carlos Williams royalties, too. I guess that the Thomas Merton royalties go to the Trappist Monks or something like that. He's very scrupulous; James is penny-pinching, scrupulous, Scottish in every respect. Scottish Presbyterian: you can see it; it comes out all along. But I've become very fond of

him. We have lunch together, or dinner together; we talk about old friends. He was extremely generous with Kenneth Rexroth; he helped Kenneth. He would never admit it, but when Kenneth was in the hospital towards the end of his life, I'm sure that it was James who paid the hospital what had to be paid over and above Medicare; I'm sure of it.

SMITH: Was Rexroth ever a partner in New Directions?

RODITI: No, no. Kenneth was furious with James at one time, wrote me the bitchiest letters about him. But they patched it up. And I had my rows with James, but I've seen worse in the way of publishers.

SMITH: Well, there was a problem you had where you had a publisher for the Wilde book [**Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study**], to reprint it, and he wouldn't go along with that.

RODITI: Yes, well, now he's willing to reprint it himself. That will clear up soon. And my row was when he was at the Ford Foundation with **Perspectives USA** when that asshole [Samuel] Delbert Clark, who had been **New York Times** correspondent in Berlin and had been kissing General Clay's ass as much as he could, got a job at the Ford Foundation. When he discovered that I was working for them, he felt that--maybe, because he had something in his own past that he wanted to conceal--he found nothing wiser to do than to denounce me and say, "How can you employ this dangerous security risk?" It took me some time to find out

that it was Delbert who'd let that cat out of the bag. I have a nice page about him in my memoirs. That's what's nice about writing one's memoirs. One can-- [laughter]

SMITH: Well, that leads us up to your adventures in the CIA funding of magazines and culture.

RODITI: Oh, **Der Monat**.

SMITH: **Der Monat**, right. And the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Berlin in 1950.

RODITI: When I realized what it was, I-- What's the name of that dreadful man who used to be an editor of **Partisan Review**? [James] Burnham? Okay, you've forgotten it; he deserves it.

SMITH: Dwight MacDonald I know.

RODITI: No, Dwight was adorable. Dwight was never an editor of **Partisan Review**. Burnham--what was his name? He'd written something on Macchiavellian politics, and he was so outrageously, almost fascist at that conference. Melvin [J.] Lasky was an old friend of mine; I'd known him through Paul Goodman originally. It never occurred to me that this former Trotskyist had turned into this ambitious career man, riding anticommunism and working for the CIA, it hadn't occurred to me. When he proposed that I should help him organize this conference, I managed to scare up a lot of participants who were really interested in cultural freedom and not simply in attacking the Soviet regime.

When I saw what this was developing into with all the troops of **The God That Failed** turning up, I was rather horrified, and that's when I withdrew from it.

SMITH: You withdrew in the course of the congress?

RODITI: Well, it didn't last very long. I was responsible for the interpreting there; I was chief interpreter and had brought the interpreters for it and so on. But it was such a nonsensical business.

SMITH: Now, you had a fight with Lasky.

RODITI: Well, I mean I had a fight with Lasky over something very specific. I had obtained a brilliant paper by a major writer, Hermann Broch, who at the last minute was unable to come. Lasky decided not to mimeograph it and distribute it, and Broch wasn't there to read it. I said, "Well, I'll read it." No. "This is a major writer; you can't do that to a man of that importance." It's most embarrassing for me, because I had obtained it as a personal friend of Broch's; not that we were close friends, but we corresponded and so on. I was shocked. See, it just wasn't an anticommunist paper; it was very much like [Robert] Musil's paper at the 1935 Conference in Defense of Culture in Paris.

SMITH: Were you at that conference?

RODITI: Paris? Oh yes. That's where I met Musil.

SMITH: Were you just a participant, or did you speak?

RODITI: Oh, I was just in the audience. I was much too young to be a participant. I've always been rather too modest; now I realize that for many years I didn't take myself seriously enough. If I had been as sure of myself as [Stephen] Spender or [W. H.] Auden, I would now be much more famous. But, by not being so sure of myself, I have managed to write--to have a more diversified production than Spender, and a less pompous one than Auden.

SMITH: Now, Musil, we were talking about Robert Musil, in Paris.

RODITI: Well, that was a very strange business, because in 1933 [Jean] Paulhan and a couple of other French writers started a new literary magazine called **Mesures**, which was to replace **Commerce**, which had gone out of business and which had been financed by Marguerite Caetani di Bassiano. They'd found an American called [Richard] Church to finance **Mesures**. And for some peculiar reason, I don't know why, they decided that they wanted in the first issue to have some French translations and--now hold tight!--of poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Somebody told them that I would be able to do it. And I translated "The Windhover," "Felix Randal," "Duns Scotus' Oxford," "Hurrahing in Harvest," and "Tom's Garland," and half of "The Wreck of the **Deutschland**." They published all in the first issue, except "The Wreck of the **Deutschland**," which I published in

Cahiers du Sud. They were so surprised by these translations, because I was still very young (I was not yet 24), that when they discovered that I could read several other languages, including German, they asked me to recommend to them any contemporary writer or interesting neglected writer of the past whom I thought should be translated. And I recommended my friend Hans Siemsen; I'd translated already his story, "Die Geschichte Meines Bruders." They found it, quite properly, not absolutely first rate. It's beautifully written. It's a charming story, and I finally published it in another magazine called **Europe**. And then Siemsen, who'd already introduced me to the work of Kafka and Else Lasker-Schüler, had told me I should read Musil, and that only the first volume of **Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften** had been published, and of course all his earlier work. I read the first volume, and I was most impressed by it and suggested to the editors of **Mesures** that this was a writer who deserved to be considered. Well, Paulhan couldn't read German; Bernard Grothuysen, who was German born, could, read it and found it very good; and it was passed on to [André] Gide for a second opinion--Gide, being a gentleman who had always claimed to be very familiar with German, and he always talked about the language of Goethe and Nietzsche and so on and so on and so on. I discovered with time that Gide's German was flimsy, to say the

least. Anyhow, we waited and waited for an opinion, and finally the book came back, and Gide had reacted to Musil exactly as he had to [Marcel] Proust some twenty years earlier when he turned Proust down. It's very interesting. Anyhow, a few months later there comes this conference, and who should turn up as the Austrian delegate but Musil. Now, before submitting the book for translation, I'd written to his publisher asking for an option to make sure that nobody else was doing it. The publisher must have told Musil that somebody of the name of Edouard Roditi in Paris had asked for an option, but that nothing had come of it. Now, Musil arrives in Paris and contacts me, and at the conference he made this brilliant speech, which is by far the best speech that was made at the conference, the only one that could be read today; it was included in his complete works. And I thought that I'd make another desperate attempt to interest Gide in him, and I arranged for an interview between them; I was the only one present. It was a total fiasco; Gide made an utter fool of himself. Musil was a man of exquisite manners, very balanced, and who had a sense of humor, but was a great realist. I mean, I remember Gide asking Musil whether he thought that the Austrian Socialist Party, as Gide expected at the time, would be able to resist the Nazis. Musil had no illusions. And then Gide made some

absurd remark about the Austrians being much more conscious of their European tradition and fate, being the land of Mozart and [Rainer Maria] Rilke, than the Germans. You should have seen Musil's eyebrows go up when he heard that crap. [laughter] I never saw him again, but it was a lesson in a way. I was beginning--I was already beginning to have my doubts about Gide being as great a man as he's still being cracked up to be in certain quarters. I think he's a fine writer, yes, but I don't think he's a truly great writer. It takes more than that.

SMITH: Maybe we could briefly discuss your adventures with **Perspectives.**

RODITI: Oughh! It's going to be painful. You see, I was doing very nicely as an interpreter at the time. I'd been practically employed nonstop as a free lance interpreter by World Health Organization, UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization], FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization], et cetera. I'd been on a four month job in Ankara, which had been very difficult, but still it was very interesting. The living conditions were not always easy because we toured around Anatolia and so on. And Laughlin offered me this job which seemed to me very interesting, and I thought, "Well, I'd be able to stay put and write a bit more instead of being four months in Ankara, then two weeks in Detmold, then three weeks in

Geneva." I was moving all the time and to such an extent that I was living out of suitcases, because there were very few trained interpreters available. And so I accepted. Then it turned out that the project consisted in my having to supervise the translation into French, German, and Italian of an issue which had been put together in English in New York without consulting me. And it was budgeted in the craziest way: I mean, I was expected to pay translators absurdly low fees, and I was not expected to have an office. I was supposed to do this out of a hotel room--I didn't even have an apartment yet in Paris, because I'd been moving around all the time. Such things as paying social security for a secretary in Paris had not been foreseen. I said, "But I've got to!" I had a battle, a fight with New York over every item like that, like paying social security for the secretary. Well, why didn't I employ her by the hour? I said, "Well, then I have to go through an agency, and she'll cost much more." And well, why didn't I get some student? I said, "But I have to dictate letters in French, German, English, and Italian, and I've got to get a secretary who can take it and type these four languages, and for that I have to compete with international agencies, because the number of secretaries who can do that in Paris is very limited." Thus, I had a constant battle. And after bringing out, I think, three

issues, I was so exhausted that when this Delbert Clark business came up, I was glad to resign.

SMITH: Now what was the point of **Perspectives**? What was its editorial slant?

RODITI: Well, bringing to the attention of the ignorant intellectuals of France, Italy, and Germany such world-shattering writers as Mary McCarthy, as if we didn't have the exact equivalent of her in Paris in Simone de Beauvoir. [laughter] I mean, **Les mandarins** of Simone de Beauvoir is the French equivalent of **The Groves of Academe** or **The Man In The Brooks Brothers Shirt**. Well--and then such absurd choices as wanting to translate [E. E.] Cummings into Italian, German, and French; it was, is impossible. The choice of poems--I was not even allowed to choose the poems. Finally, when I had a great deal of correspondence over these Cummings poems, I was allowed to choose some which would be more translatable into German and others which would be more translatable into Italian and so on. And then I was not even allowed to choose a French translator of Cummings, because Cummings insisted that some American friend of his who lived in Paris and ran a bookstore and had never written anything in French knew French perfectly and was to be his translator. The crap this Mr. [Jon] Grossman brought in as translations of Cummings into French--we had to put his name as the

translator, but we worked hard in salvaging his translations.

SMITH: Now, Rexroth, in one of his letters to you, and this comes up in a couple of other people's letters, asks if this is a CIA venture.

RODITI: Well, it wasn't--and it wasn't. I became wiser as the years went by. I discovered that the Ford Foundation had got away with certain tax things with IRS on condition that it finance certain jobs that CIA or Department of State couldn't finance. It was the same thing as the-- What's it called? The other foundation which was financing **Encounter** and **Der Monat**.

SMITH: Rockefeller [Foundation]?

RODITI: No, no, Rockefeller is much more respectable than that; they wouldn't touch anything like that. Oh, it's-- I've forgotten what the foundation's called. They manufactured yeast.

SMITH: Fleischmann?

RODITI: Fleischmann, yes, the Fleischmann Foundation.

Yes, well, they were getting away with **Der Monat**, an Italian periodical, and **Preuves** in Paris, and **Encounter**, because the CIA wanted them to do this, and so they had all sorts of tax advantages by doing it. The accusation that they were a CIA operation is too simple, because the CIA doesn't operate as simply as that. It doesn't say, "Here's

a hundred thousand dollars, go ahead and do this."

Noooo. It goes and finds somebody who has trouble with IRS and says, "We'll clear your troubles with IRS if you do this for us."

SMITH: What did James Laughlin want out of this? What was his perspective?

RODITI: Very innocent. He hoped to make William Carlos Williams, Thomas Merton, Ezra Pound, and a few more of his authors into world-famous authors. Now, of course, the Ford Foundation was not ready to feed Ezra Pound into all these things. James lost interest in it after a while, because it wasn't doing what he thought it was doing, and in a way, he was very bitter because of our quarrel over it. Now he admits secretly to me that I was right.

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SMITH: You want to talk more about interpreting?

RODITI: Yes, after I lost my job with the civil service, I decided not to come back to America because friends of mine had told me that it was particularly difficult to find jobs around 1950, and especially for me, who had been nine years in civil service and had been discharged as a so-called security risk. The McCarthy era was still on, and I just didn't see how or what I might do. I had a vague idea of resuming my studies and did enroll briefly at Frankfurt University to get a Ph.D. in philosophy and attended Professor [Max] Horkheimer's classes on Spinoza, but I was in lousy health, partly as a result of this shock and depression, and my epilepsy began to bother me again.

I went-- After a while, I interrupted my studies and went to Geneva to look up a few friends and see a doctor there who had been recommended to me. And there I met again an old friend for whom I'd worked before working for **Perspectives USA**, Marie Ginsberg, a very extraordinary woman who had been librarian of the League of Nations before the war and whom I'd known in New York because she worked as an information specialist of sorts for the Office of War Information. She knew that I was a skilled interpreter, and she had organized in Geneva a corporation which

supplied the equipment for simultaneous interpreting and whole teams of interpreters to organizations which didn't have a permanent interpreting staff and who would be having sort of short conferences of one week or two weeks. And she engaged me on a freelance basis very often. I began to travel again as an interpreter. The doctor I saw in Geneva gave me some kind of medication, I've forgotten what. Anyhow, it stabilized me for the time being; if I remember right, it was some barbiturate.

SMITH: Did he understand that you had epilepsy?

RODITI: No, he understood simply that I was, well, like a raw egg, I was so nervous and depressed. I found that I could get by and was doing relatively well. I was working to a great extent for conferences of federations of unions: the metal workers union, the graphic workers union and a couple of others, the federations of unions of all the free world and also for the office in Brussels which grouped together all these free-world unions, as opposed to the leftist central office of unions which was in Prague. They kept me fairly busy, especially as the president of the metal workers union was a very remarkable Swiss elderly--called Konrad Ilg, who had risen from the ranks and was a self-educated man and a very good speaker, but he spoke a Swiss-German dialect with a very strong accent, and very few interpreters could understand him. I could, and I

don't know why. I've never learned Swiss-German, but in no time I caught on to his Swiss-German and became his, I won't say official interpreter, but the one he always asked for. And I became rather specialized in interpreting odd dialects of German: Austrian-German, Swiss-German--and there are several Swiss-German dialects. That kept me very busy.

Another job I had which was rather interesting was when I was sent by FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] to Ankara on a conference which had been particularly badly organized, because FAO had organized this conference on river-basin development programs, dam building, hydro-electric plants and what have you, irrigation, et cetera, reforestation of the mountains so as to prevent silting up of dams, et cetera. It's highly technical. And then [FAO] asked all the nations of the Mediterranean basin to send experts as delegates, and they'd neglected to tell them what the languages of the conference would be. They had assumed that everybody would understand English and French. When I got there, we discovered that there was a Portuguese delegate who understood French, but could only speak Portuguese. There were some Greek delegates who understood French or English, but could only speak Greek. There were some Yugoslav delegates who understood and spoke very weird German, sort of Serbo-Croatian German. There

were a couple of delegates from Arab countries who spoke and understood fairly good English, except one or two who could only speak Arabic. And there were Turkish delegates, many of whom spoke only Turkish. Well, the Turkish government was able to scare up interpreters from Turkish into English and English into Turkish, and we managed to scare up an Arab interpreter from Cairo. I was left with having to handle the German and the Portuguese, plus English and French, with a colleague who fortunately understood Greek, quite by chance.

Anyhow, the conference was supposed to last, I think, six weeks, but because of the linguistic difficulties, it lasted three months. And finally, we had great difficulty in being paid. I'd already had difficulties with FAO, because they'd recruited me from, of all places, Athens, where I was interpreting another conference. They'd suddenly heard that I was available, but they didn't send me my contract and the instructions where I was to go for a week. I was left stranded in Athens, and it was a time when there were still some currency restrictions. The people who employed me in Athens had paid me only my per diem in Athens and had paid me my salary into my account in Geneva, which was the normal thing. So I was a week in Athens, practically stranded, but somehow with the help of the American consulate which cabled FAO, so that it was

finally told that they had to straighten things out, because I couldn't stay much longer in Athens. But I discovered at that time that the administration of some of the UN organizations was incredibly slow and confused. After that, I was more careful; I always moved around with traveler's checks so as not to be dependent entirely on their payments in per diem.

But anyhow, this was my first trip to Turkey, and I had occasion to go to Istanbul a couple of times and to contact there for the first time my distant relatives. And it was then that I met a distant cousin who later married the writer, the Turkish writer, Yashar Kemal, and we became very fond of each other, so that when she married Yashar years later, not so long after that, I became a close friend of Yashar's, too.

SMITH: What's your cousin's name?

RODITI: Thilda Serrero. She'd already been married once to a man who had one of the most historic Sephardic Jewish names: his name was Abravanel, not the first Abravanel in my family, but he was not much good, and she divorced; she has a son by him. He never did anything about his son, and it's Yashar who brought the boy up and finally adopted him, because the father simply disappeared, and was never heard of again. I know what happened to him: he moved to Belgium and set up a medical practice there and married several times after that.

Anyhow, that was my first contact with Turkey. As our conference with its river development projects, river-basin development projects, took us all around Anatolia on all sorts of expeditions to see projects and the locations of future projects, I managed to see quite a lot of Asian Turkey, and I was quite fascinated by many of the monuments that I saw there: Byzantine, early Christian, early Islamic. This sort of inspired me to return very often since then and to develop an interest in Turkish history and Turkish art and Turkish literature.

To come back to the interpreting, I met, as an interpreter, a number of fairly famous people. I was interpreting at the metal workers union conferences for the Reuther brothers [Walter and Victor] of the CIO and a lot of American labor leaders of one kind or another, and also for French, English, and West German labor leaders. In addition to that, I became interpreter for Ernst Reuter, the Bürgomeister of West Berlin, and was very frequently in Berlin to interpret his speeches into French or English. He could speak English, but when he made these speeches at conferences, I was always his interpreter. One of the reasons why he liked to have me as interpreter was that very often there'd be a question period in which particularly stupid or tendentious questions would be asked in French or English, and I would always manage to tone them

down, so as to avoid too long a discussion. And since he understood both French and English, he knew that I could handle these discussions, which were not very important as such. He just didn't want to get himself out on a limb. He'd made his speech, and so there was a discussion period. If some really foolish question were asked, I knew how to wrap it up in such a way that it wasn't too foolish, and he could give a quick reply.

My reputation as an interpreter from German increased so that I began to be used by the West German foreign office, and thus had to interpret the first president, Theodor Heuss, on several occasions. He was a charming old man, a man of very great culture, but who was particularly difficult to interpret, because first he spoke with a relatively strong Swabian accent, which is not exactly Hochdeutsch, it's Süddeutsch, South German. And he had a habit of embellishing his speeches with impromptu quotes from Goethe. Well, Goethe is not someone whom you can translate into English or into French at the drop of a hat, but fortunately I still had the memory of a kind of parrot, so that when I would interpret him into English I would simply say, "As Goethe once wrote . . ." and then repeat in German what he'd said, or do the same thing in French without interpreting it, because sometimes it was something which just couldn't be translated that readily, or if one

translated it, well, the point of it was lost because there was sometimes a pun or something like that. So he was very, very friendly, and he'd sort of turn to me before he'd make his speech and say, "Well, now we're on."

[laughter] So I would go up onto the platform and take notes while he made his speech, and then he always congratulated me and thanked me afterwards. He was a man of exquisite courtesy and, as a major politician, probably one of the most pleasant that I have ever had to deal with and certainly a real humanist. It was difficult but it was a pleasure to work for him.

At the same time, from 1954 on, I began when I was in Paris to work with a French writer friend of mine, a woman who was of Russian origin called Dominique Arban and who had a radio program once a week, a sort of small, round-table discussion of recent books translated into French from some foreign author. Between '54 and '58 I must have broadcast a good hundred times. There'd always be Dominique Arban, myself, and generally one or two other writers. On one or two occasions, we had Albert Camus; on several occasions we had André Maurois; and the most frequent ones were a professor of American and English literature called Jean-Jacques Maillou and a young man who has become a very well-known writer and professor in France meanwhile called Bernard Dort, who was a Brechtian from the

word go and has remained a Brechtian from the word go. I found Bernard sometimes a bit difficult because he could get involved in such weird arguments in our radio talks. Dominique, we always called Natasha. When she started talking, there was no end to it. She would sometimes get into quite absurd discussions. I'll never forget one program where we had invited Eugene Ionesco to participate in it, because one of his plays had just been put on in Paris, and, after all, although he writes in French, he's foreign born, he's Romanian. It was the play in which there's a character who has three noses, a woman, and there's a passage in that play which is intended to be an absurd parody of surrealist poetry. It was the kind of poetry that [Paul] Eluard writes. And Natasha got herself out on a limb, explaining how poetic she'd found this passage. When she'd finished that, I said I didn't find it so poetic; I found that it was rather a parody of Eluard's poetry, and Ionesco turned to me and said [rather gruffly], "You're quite right." [laughter] Anyhow, as a matter of fact, I managed to have a couple of discussions with Ionesco, not over the radio, and finally did an interview of him, which was published in **Harper's Bazaar** in New York at the time that his first play was produced in America ["Conversations With Ionesco," May 1958]. He was very grateful to me for that. So, although we became quite good

friends, I no longer see him at all, because he's become increasingly withdrawn. He became a terrible alcoholic and was very ill with cirrhosis of the liver, and the last fifteen years or so sees only his most intimate friends and people with whom he has to deal for some business reason. He's a sort of semi-invalid, and at the same time a very busy man.

My relations with Camus were peculiar because he was also a very depressed character, and this was mainly after the beginning of the Algerian War, and he dared not go back to Algiers. I'll never forget on one occasion when we met at the studio, before the program; I arrived, and he was already there. I greeted him laughingly in Arabic, thinking that he knew it, since he was born and bred in Algeria. He turned to me, and he said, "I don't speak or understand Arabic." And I, tactless as I can sometimes be, said, "Weren't you ever interested in knowing what your neighbors were saying?" Then later, when rereading his book *La peste*, in which he describes this epidemic in a city which can be recognized by any reader who's ever been to Oran (where he was born and bred) as Oran--the description of the city is obviously Oran--one reads this book and sees that he describes the city as if it had no Arab population at all, which is most remarkable. It's described--well, yes, there are occasional references to

some slummy districts, but practically no description or reference to the vast majority of the population of that city; it's very peculiar.

Anyhow, in 1954, I was engaged to go and interpret a very ill-fated conference, as far as I'm concerned, in Algiers; it was in April. The chief interpreter for that conference who was recruiting the team of interpreters was a friend of mine, a French interpreter, brilliant, and a good writer of Russian origin called Cyril Borovski. The languages of the conference were English, French, Italian, and Spanish, and the conference was one of citrus fruit growers and exporters of the Mediterranean nations. Shortly before we were to go to Algiers, all sorts of things went wrong with the structure of the team: Borovski himself was called off to go to a much more important and lengthy and well-paid conference of FAO in Italy, so I became chief interpreter; a couple of other interpreters dropped out, and at the last minute I found myself obliged to scare up interpreters.

It wasn't easy; there were not so many interpreters in those days; most of the competent ones were already booked. I scared up, among others, Haakon Chevalier to be in the English booth, I think it was, with me. I could certainly interpret Italian and Spanish and French into English, and Haakon assured me that he could handle

Spanish, which turned out he couldn't. And I found that I had a couple of sheer lunatics to interpret into Italian--I mean, two totally irresponsible women! One of them was always taking off. Some man discovered she wasn't there; where was she? Well, the wife of the president of the conference whom she met at dinner the previous day had asked her to join the ladies on an excursion and interpret for them, [that is] to say the wives of the various delegates--as if this was important, but off she'd gone without warning me.

My friend Georgette Camille had decided to join me in Algiers, and we decided after the conference to spend a little spring vacation there and visit the country a bit. Camus had given me the names of a couple of his writer friends there, so that after the conference I stayed on and traveled around with Georgette and met a number of Algerian writers and artists; above all, I met the novelist Mouloud Mammeri, the novelist Mouloud Feraoun, who was murdered four years later by the OAS towards the end of the Algerian war.

SMITH: The OAS were the--

RODITI: The violently pro-French settlers, those who were opposed to Algerian independence.

SMITH: They were not a government organization?

RODITI: No. I visited Mohammed Dib, who was a teacher in

Tlemcen, which is a very beautiful city by the way. Before going on this expedition in which Georgette accompanied me to some places, then decided that she would rather go and see certain other places, and then we met again, I had inquired of the Algerian tourist agency in Algiers how to get to various places, and they'd made suggestions that I should go up into the mountains of Kabylia, which suited me because I wanted to see Mouloud Feraoun, who was director of the boy's school in a town up in the mountains. They'd given me instructions on how to go to these various places by bus, where I could stop and so on. So off I went on my own into Kabylia. I'd arranged to meet Georgette again in the town of Bougie, which is on the coast of Kabylia, and the weather was beautiful; it was beautiful spring weather, with all the almond trees in flower. It was really lovely. And I had a charming couple of days in Fort National with Mouloud Feraoun; we got on very well.

Then instead of taking the bus, since I still had time and was travelling light, I decided to hike. It was beautiful along the road as far as the next place, which was Azazga. Somewhere along the road an armed man stopped me and asked me what I was doing. I said I was an American tourist, and that seemed to satisfy him. I thought he might be some sort of guard to stop poaching or something like that, you know. And he said that when I got to the next village, I was to say Omar had--that I'd spoken to

Omar on the way, and everything was OK. I got to the village, and everyone was rather surprised. I said, "Oh, Omar told me it would be OK if I came here." And it was OK. They insisted on my stopping for a meal, and I was a guest of honor. Then I left again, until I got back to the road and stopped the bus and went on to Azazga, and then from Azazga on to Bougie where I met Georgette, then back from Bougie went to Algiers, and I went back to Paris.

Now shortly before leaving for Algiers, at last I found an apartment in Paris, which was very difficult at the time, and I'd gone to have--to obtain a phone line. I was told, "Oh, you won't be able to have a phone for at least a year; it's a long waiting list in that area of Paris. And to have a phone, if you need it professionally, you must get special papers from your professional organization," etcetera etcetera. I didn't have time to do it before leaving Paris, and I just told them, "Well, I need it professionally because I'm an international conference interpreter, and I'll bring you the papers when I return." I get back to Paris and find the phone already in the apartment. Of course, I didn't ask why; I was only too glad to have it there. It took me some time to realize that there were some very peculiar clicking sounds on my line, and after a while I realized that my line was being tapped.

And shortly after my return, I had to interpret a conference in England of a mental health organization. I met there a very strange character, who was a psychotherapist in Paris and a rather interesting man who was practicing a new neo-Freudian type of psychotherapy. And there was this business of having my phone tapped, or the idea that it was being tapped disquieted me very much. I saw him a couple of times in Paris.

SMITH: What was his name?

RODITI: De la Chesneraie. I met him, as he lived around the corner from me. He said that I was suffering from persecution mania, and I should undergo some therapy. So I started therapy with him, and that's the one with whom the countertransference worked. But the more therapy I had, the more I was convinced that I was being watched, and I had no idea why.

In 1958 I came back to America to see my mother and had meanwhile decided that I wanted to move to Paris all the belongings that I still had in the apartment, which I'd had for some years in New York, and where my mother was living, because the building where she'd been living had been demolished, so she moved into my apartment. And to move it, as a removal, I had to get certain papers from the French consulate in New York. I went to the French consulate for these papers, and they told me to come back, so

I filled in an application and so on. I came back after the delay--oh, they didn't yet have the OK from Paris, because, as an alien, I had to have a resident visa, not simply--since I wasn't coming as a tourist. The papers said that I was tenant of an apartment, that I had a copy of the lease and so on, that I had a place to live, that I had a profession, that I had sufficient means, and so on. I waited and waited and waited, and still the paper didn't come through.

Finally, I got sick of waiting, and I just packed up all my books, because it was mainly books and a couple of pictures, and I packed the books in, I think, fifteen cartons and came back by ship. It was easier to take fifteen cartons of books by ship, come back to Paris and move into the apartment. About two weeks later, I'm awakened in the morning, at eight o'clock in the morning, by the police with an expulsion order. I was being expelled from France, and I had to leave France within twenty-four hours. I had no idea why, and I took this expulsion order to the American consulate, and they were absolutely no help; they panicked. I then went to see a lawyer who was a civil liberties lawyer, French, and he panicked and refused to handle the case. So I left that evening for London and continued for about two years to work as an interpreter from London.

But on two or three occasions, I went back to France illegally, and during that time I finished writing the book **Dialogues on Art**, because I had been the Paris correspondent of **Arts** magazine, a New York periodical, and had written a few interviews with artists and decided that since I had these interviews and since I know a good publisher in London, I'll add a few more. I interviewed Henry Moore and a few others and made a book of it: twelve interviews. It was published by Secker and Warburg in London and Horizon Press in New York and sold out; it did quite nicely.

Then I was told by a friend that the best way to clear up this whole business was somehow to go back to France and get arrested. I'd been back to France twice--I'd been in Paris on purpose to interview [Ossip] Zadkine, stayed in my own apartment; nobody had done anything about it. Meanwhile I had sublet the apartment. Anyhow, from Geneva I went across the border into France and made there a couple of long distance phone calls and sent a couple of money orders from the French post office and did everything I could to attract attention. When I reached the border to go back to Switzerland from France, I was arrested, and I was taken to the police station and told that I had to appear in court in France in St.-Julien-de-Savoie on such and such a morning. I turned up there--friends drove me

there from Geneva--and something very, very strange happened there.

The judge and the prosecutor suddenly decided that my expulsion order was not valid. It was dated of a day when I was still in America, and they'd waited for my return to expel me. Now this is totally illegal, because, as the judge said, if the French police like doing that kind of thing, they can sign expulsion orders for four hundred million Chinese who have never been in France. There's no end to the work they can do. You can not expel a foreigner who is not in the country. So the court decided that my expulsion was not valid. I was able to return to Paris and so on. Strange story, isn't it?

SMITH: Yes. Have you ever figured out what was behind all of this?

RODITI: Yes, it's an extraordinarily complicated story. Apparently during the McCarthy era, when I failed to come back to live in America, the FBI got into its pretty head that I must be up to some monkey business in Europe, and asked the French police what I was up to. The French police kept an eye on me and found nothing much wrong with my activities. Yes, I was travelling a great deal, but they discovered I was travelling mainly for UNESCO or FAO. I was having phone conversations in a number of odd languages, and occasionally somebody, a guest, would phone

from my home in Turkish, or something like that. They'd been kept pretty busy employing translators and interpreters to interpret the tapes of my phone conversations.

In fact, on one occasion, they had asked the translators union to send an interpreter who would be able to translate something from Portuguese. I was the interpreter, and it was one of my phone conversations with the ministry of foreign affairs in Lisbon, which wanted me to come to Lisbon to interpret something from Portuguese. That had already been a very odd thing; that was why I was sure that I was being watched, because, I mean, if you were asked to come and interpret one of your own phone conversations, you know that they are being taped, but that was before the expulsion. Anyhow--

SMITH: Did you inquire of the police why they were tapping your phone?

RODITI: No. As I had to sign a paper in order to be paid, I left them to figure that one out, because they'd asked the interpreters union to send an interpreter, and they didn't know my name when I turned up, but then I was given the slip to sign. Let them worry about that. So that my dealings with the police were pretty odd. Anyhow, that's probably got their back up to begin with.

And then I discovered that when I was in Algeria, this Omar and this village were already dissident; there was

already fighting there. Now, officially, the government admitted that there was fighting only six months later. And this was in the spring, and all the official documents about the Algerian War say that it started in the fall, but individual villages were already in revolt, and I had had lunch in one of them without knowing it. [laughter] So, somehow, they'd gotten wind of the fact that I'd gone into this territory (without knowing it), and they'd become deeply suspicious about my trip to Algeria. Also, because one of the interpreters in the team was Haakon Chevalier, and this was just the moment when the [Robert] Oppenheimer-Chevalier story came out in the news. And there was I sitting in an interpreters booth with this suspicious character whom they couldn't expel because Haakon has dual citizenship: he's French and American. You can't expel a Frenchman, so it all fell on my poor shoulders, all this nonsense of one kind or another. It was towards the end of this period, shortly before it was all cleared up, that I had a very bad crack-up, I mean breakdown, in Basel, and was hospitalized.

And it was there that they discovered with an electroencephalogram that I was epileptic. I discovered it only at the age of forty-nine, and was only then put on proper medication. When I came to New York about a year later, I saw one of New York's best neurologists because I didn't

like the medication I was on. It made it very difficult for me to interpret; it was too heavy doses of barbiturates, and I wanted to know if there was some other medication. He interviewed me at great length on what the phenomena were, and I told him something which interested him, and that is that I am, of course, highly sensitive as far as the eyes go, like all epileptics, I discovered later, in that I get very woozy from watching TV or watching movies or from watching cars go past.

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RODITI: What interested him more was when I said that I am just as sensitive, if not more sensitive, to sounds, and that I get the same kind of wooziness from a continued sound of a motor. For instance, if I'm in a train or in a plane or in a car for any length of time, or a bus, there comes a moment when I get an access of petit mal. He then decided to do on me--to put me to a new test which he invented for the occasion, and that was an EEG in which instead of using the flickers in front of the eyes, he observed my reactions to sound; it was an audiological test. And he discovered that I was much more sensitive to sound than to sight, which was rather unusual. In further study of my case, it was identified that I had a left anterior temporal lobe trauma from birth. This trauma here is what has caused all the trouble since childhood, and the kind of trouble that it causes varies a great deal from one case to another. It's very difficult until the electroencephalogram was invented to identify it as a form of epilepsy; that's why it remained for so many years unidentified. But since then I've been on medication--I've changed the medication several times--and I've suffered much less, so I still can not watch TV or movies and I still have to be careful and take larger doses when

traveling for any length in a plane, because I do get petit mal in planes and trains, or if I'm for any length of time in a bus--the sort of constant noise of a motor.

SMITH: Your sensitivity to sound, was it ever suggested that there might be a link there to your ability to pick up languages so quickly?

RODITI: Oh yes, oh yes. I have very, very sensitive ears. Actually as an interpreter, I generally work--since one can manipulate the level of sound of the reception--I generally work at a much lower level than most of my colleagues, because the level which they work at deafens me.

SMITH: How many languages do you interpret in?

RODITI: I interpret into--I interpret simultaneous into two, English or French; consecutive into German, too. I don't find my words fast enough to do, any longer, to do simultaneous into German. I have done it when I was younger, but I interpret into English or French from either of these languages, and from German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. The last few years I've dropped Portuguese because I didn't do it often enough and my vocabulary was no longer what it should be to be able to do a decent job in the very technical conferences which I was asked to do.

SMITH: Now, what about translating?

RODITI: Although with translation, I translate with the help of a dictionary from Dutch, Turkish, Latin, of course, Greek, and with great difficulty, Swedish. It's got to be rather simple Swedish.

SMITH: Are you more or less comfortable in speaking all of these languages?

RODITI: No. I'm comfortable in speaking Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, sort of conversational Portuguese. If it comes to very complicated, technical Portuguese, I don't find the words fast enough. But I've translated quite a lot of poetry from Portuguese. I can do research in Portuguese. I have very little difficulty reading Portuguese. I'm beginning to have difficulty with reading Turkish and Greek, in fact, very considerable difficulty with Turkish in the last two years: lack of practice, and then, well, shrinking of the memory.

SMITH: Did you speak Turkish for a while?

RODITI: Oh yes, at one time. Lousy Turkish, but still I managed to get understood. I mean, it's a language which has an entirely different logic to it, so that you have to learn to think in Turkish, and that I've never been able to do. It's a language which has suffixes, and you have to know in which order, and sometimes you have to add two suffixes or three to one word, and in which order they have to come. There are very peculiar things, like they have no

word for "of," and they don't have a genitive like Latin or German, so that the officer's club, where I was billeted when I was living in Ankara, because there were not enough hotel rooms, is called the **Ordu Evi**. Well, if you translate that, it means, "Army, house of," because the *i* at the end of **Evi** means "of." So you can see what the problem is: you have to think out logically, according to an entirely different logic, the syntax of your sentence.

SMITH: Now in your translations from Turkish, you've done which authors?

RODITI: Well, I've done Yashar Kemal, but I didn't do it alone; I did it with his wife, who didn't want to sign the translation of his first book. She then discovered that she could do it by herself. I taught her how to translate, and the difficulty with Yashar is that he uses a great deal of sort of Anatolian peasant dialect, Turkish words which are not in dictionaries. I mean, all sorts of names for plants and what have you, and wild life, and we had to consult him constantly with that book. Now, of course, after that book, Thilda [Kemal], who has a sort of Istanbul school Turkish and who was not familiar with all this Anatolian peasant Turkish, has gradually acquired the vocabulary to translate all his other books; I mean, in any case, she has him there in the house.

SMITH: When you were working together, she would do a rough--

RODITI: No, we'd do it together. Yes. And I was there for three months to do that book. Then the other book which I've just translated, the Yunus Emre poems, that I did with the help of a friend who is a professor of Turkish at the school of Oriental languages in Paris, but there too it's medieval Turkish, and there is no such thing as a dictionary of medieval Turkish, and there are many words there which are in modern Turkish, but there are many which are not, because the language has been purged since the years of Kemal Atatürk of a lot of its Persian and Arabic words, and they've been replaced to a great extent by loan words from Western Europe. For instance, the word for "statistics" is *istatistik*; and so on. I remember when I was in Ankara I was constantly having to--at this conference I had constantly to work with a government office called the Merkez Istatistik Müdürlüğü, and I used to tease them saying, "Ha! Ziya Gökalp (he was the great reformer of the language), Atatürk has said that you have to purge Turkish of all its Arabic and Persian loan words, and you still call yourself Merkez," which means "center" in Arabic. *Müdürlüğü* means "administration." The central statistics, administration of statistics, but they still use many words which are derived from Arabic, and they use

hoca (hodja) for a priest, which is Turkish, for an Islamic priest, instead of **imam**, which is Arabic.

SMITH: What was it that attracted you to Emre?

RODITI: Well, he's a very interesting poet; he's the first Turkish language poet whose name is known and who has left a considerable body of work. There are a couple a bit earlier who have left very few poems, and there's a lot of anonymous poetry--there's the **Dede Korkut**, which is a sort of Turkish epic; it's the **Beowulf** of Turkish, and which is not written in Turkish as it's spoken in Turkey now, but in a Turkic language, if I remember right, in Uighur; I'm not sure, I've forgotten which one-- And Yunus Emre is very interesting because he used forms borrowed from classical Persian poetry and many ideas which are borrowed from classical Persian poetry. But at the same time, he has a very strong personality of his own: there are some poems of his which are nonsense poems and which are very much like, sort of, the nonsense of the Fool in **King Lear**, and which is sort of double-entendre nonsense: it's sense. There's one particular poem which reads, in a way, almost like a painting by Jerome [Hieronymus] Bosch, a wonderful nonsense poem which I enjoyed translating; it was very difficult to put it into--

SMITH: Which poem is that?

RODITI: Well, it doesn't have a title, but I mean-- And

then he has a lot of poems on the themes of, well, mortality, and these poems are very much like the medieval Western-European poems on the so-called, what Ernst Robert Curtius called the topic of, which appears first in Latin poetry, **ubi sunt**: "where are," where are the heroes of antiquity, where are the snows of yesteryear, and so on. And actually it already comes in Omar Khayyam, where there's something about Kai-Kobād and Kai Khosru, and very strange things I went and became involved in, like Jamshid's cup in Omar Khayyam, which turns out to be the origin of the Holy Grail, which I didn't know. Ancient Iranian legends crop up in the Arthurian romances, which I didn't know until I read an extraordinary paper published by a learned society in Bombay on the Iranian sources of Arthurian romance. Jamshid's cup is the Holy Grail, and the Holy Grail appears in the Arthurian romances only after the second crusade, after there'd been some considerable contact of Christians with the Orient.

SMITH: Jamshid's cup? What is that?

RODITI: It's a mystical cup which is mentioned in Omar Khayyam, and it had never occurred to me that it had such deep resonance, so to speak, until I read Henri Corbin, who was an orientalist, a great orientalist from Paris, specialist in Iranian-Zoroastrian mythology and traditions, and there's a whole chapter in one of his books on Jamshid;

it turns out that Jamshid is Parsifal. What's that?

[laughter] And then that explains the name, Parsifal.

SMITH: How so?

RODITI: "Pars"--Persian.

SMITH: It could be. But there could be another explanation too.

RODITI: Yes. Well, I mean, "Persian" in Persian is **Farsi**, and the F becomes a P in most western languages.

SMITH: Has Emre influenced any of your poetry, would you say?

RODITI: No.

SMITH: Or those studies in medieval Turkish, Persian?

RODITI: Yes, yes, some of my most recent poetry, but not much.

SMITH: There was the poem that you read the other day on, uh--

RODITI: I think maybe the poem about Merlin the bird.

SMITH: "Did He Die?"

RODITI: Oh, well, no, that's something different. That's definitely inspired by a poem of Constantine Cavafy, and also by the legends of Shebtai Tzvi, the false Messiah.

SMITH: You were mentioning, another, maybe Merlin's--

RODITI: "Merlin the Bird." The poem about Merlin the bird being a prophet.

SMITH: What's the connection there?

RODITI: The nonsense in it, the sort of turning nonsense into something mystical.

SMITH: Now, Emre was a sufi.

RODITI: He was a **kizilbas** (kizilbash), if you want to know, which means a red-head.

SMITH: Red-haired or red-capped?

RODITI: Red-capped. Yes. They were a very revolutionary, subversive branch of the **mevlevis**; the **mevlevis** were the whirling dervishes, the order founded in Konya by Mevlana, that's to say Jelal al Din al Rumi, who was a Persian actually, who settled in Konya under the Seljuk sultans and who was a great philosopher, writer and mystic. One of the spin-offs of the **mevlevis** were the **kizilbas**, who were wandering monks who formed agricultural communities; they were very progressive. They were very much against feudal landowners and were helping the poor peasants a great deal, and were later very much persecuted, because they were considered revolutionary.

SMITH: Were they connected with the Sheik Bedreddin?

RODITI: Yeah. Well, he's partly **kizilbas**, I guess, or he may--I think he's now called **bektashi**. But the various orders were still in a state of flux at that time.

SMITH: You also translated a poet named Kanik?

RODITI: Oh, Orhan Veli Kanik. Well, he's a modern poet; he's not very complex; he's just rather charming and

pleasant. He's dead now.

SMITH: Did you ever have any interest in translating Nazim Hikmet?

RODITI: Well, Nazim wanted me to translate him, and as I said to him, too much of his work has already been translated, and badly translated, mainly by people who were interested in him because he was a communist and because they were. So he's been translated into sort of half-a-dozen different personal idioms, and I said, "The whole of your work needs to be retranslated by one poet, so that you will at least have the same idiom from beginning to end. He was in Paris, and he said that, well, he'd think it over, and on his next visit to Paris, he'd talk it over with me. Then he went back to Moscow and died, so nothing came of it. But I'm glad I didn't, because to translate Nazim Hikmet--it's a hornet's nest now.

SMITH: It is?

RODITI: Oh, yes. Everybody who's at all communist and thinks he knows Turkish has been at it. And all sorts of copyright translations, half of which are lousy.

SMITH: What about the translations that Persea Books published?

RODITI: They're the best, but an awful lot has been done already.

SMITH: Not very much in English, though.

RODITI: Much more are published in English in England than here.

SMITH: Another poet of importance that you've translated was [Fernando] Pessoa.

RODITI: Yeah, that was fun.

SMITH: How did that come about? How did you become interested in him?

RODITI: Oh, a long time ago. My friend Armand Guibert was translating Pessoa into French, and although I knew Portuguese, I started reading him. As I was going to Portugal as a translator fairly often, I bought his complete works, and then I thought, well, I'd translate a few samples of his different personalities, because he wrote under so many different names and in so many different styles. I did this more or less as a sort of exercise in writing in different styles. Then I did a very short essay on him and sent the lot to **Poetry** magazine, which published it all. Then I also discussed--while I was working on Pessoa to English--I discussed Pessoa with Paul Celan, who was living in Paris, and he decided that we should translate Pessoa together into German. Celan, of course, didn't know Portuguese, so I did the rough translation into German, and he then polished it up and submitted it to me for my OK so that there'd be no mistranslation. Then I did an essay, an expanded version of what I'd published in **Poetry** magazine, which was translated into German, and the whole thing

appeared in the--I think it's called **Neue Rundschau**, which was the best German literary magazine of the time. At that time, I was seeing a lot of Celan in Paris, and we became quite--we had been quite friendly because, after all, I'd been the first to publish him in Western Germany in **Das Lot**. But he became increasingly difficult and touchy about everything imaginable. He suffered from some peculiar persecution mania, and megalomania; he really expected red-carpet treatment everywhere he set dainty foot. He felt that he was a bard and not a poet--you see what I mean? And the least unfriendly criticism of a new book of his was immediately interpreted as anti-Semitism. Well, the fact is that much of his later poetry, his second or third volume, is almost willfully incomprehensible, and you don't have to be an anti-Semite to say, "Well, I prefer his earlier poems."

SMITH: George Steiner has written that Celan was very much influenced by [Martin] Heidegger and Heidegger's etymological approach to language and poetics. Did you see that happening? Did you have discussions with him on Heidegger?

RODITI: No, I dislike Heidegger's philosophy so much that I've always avoided discussing anything that has to do with Heidegger. I feel that Heidegger plays around too much with the German language, and establishes in his thought distinctions which are strictly verbal and not conceptual,

so that they are not valid as distinctions in any translation.

SMITH: But what about Celan--

RODITI: I find that [Edmund] Husserl is a much more valid philosopher because his distinctions are translatable, and he doesn't pun the way Heidegger does. I distrust a philosopher who puns in one language.

SMITH: Was Celan influenced by--

RODITI: Oh, certainly in much of the later poetry. I recently received some letters from Israel from a lady who's doing some research on Celan and who included in one of her letters some poems of her own written in the style of Celan; well, it's nothing but an avalanche of puns, and it just isn't poetry any longer. It's punning in German.

SMITH: Now, you've said that a test of a great poem is its translatability. You now seem to be adding that the test of philosophy is translatability. Could you explain that?

RODITI: Yes, well, I think that--what does philosophy mean? It means love of wisdom. Now wisdom is certainly not something which should be restricted to one language. I think that the greatness of Plato and Aristotle and Kant and all the great philosophers is that they're dealing with ideas which can be expressed in other languages too, and the moment a philosopher restricts himself to his own

language, it ceases to be--to have any universal validity.

SMITH: Now what about in poetry? Translatability of poetry?

RODITI: Well, that's something different. I think that much of the best poetry is translatable, though it loses a great deal in translation. Look at Dante, at how often he's been translated, and how each translation is very different from the last one of him. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation is lovely in a way, but it's very nineteenth century Victorian. And then you look at James Russell Lowell's translation and [Charles Hall] Grandgent's prose translation and now Allen Mandelbaum's translation, which is published here. Well, you can compare them and see what the qualities of the one or the other are, what the flaws [are] too. But you go back to Dante and find there is still something which remains untranslatable, and that is the musicality. Poetry should be, I wouldn't say translatable in the ideal-- I'm going back to Dryden's three levels of translation, which he discusses in the preface to his translation of **The Aeneid**: paraphrase, metaphrase, and imitation. Well, the best translations are those which are made, I guess, by very gifted poets like Rossetti, and they reach the level of imitation. Grandgent's prose translation of Dante is paraphrase, and it's a damn good paraphrase in which ninety percent of the meaning

is there. Most translation which is not paraphrase is metaphrase; that's to say that it helps you to understand, or conveys to you the essential part of the meaning of the original, but still misses a lot. In imitation, there's always the risk that you put in something of yourself to replace that which you were unable to translate.

SMITH: How do your own translations fall in that spectrum?

RODITI: It depends who I am translating.

SMITH: Kemal?

RODITI: Kemal was certainly paraphrase because you can't stick to the syntax of Turkish, which has no relative clauses. I simply did a word for word translation with Thilda and then rewrote it as English prose. And the reviewers of **Time** magazine said, "How strange that a Turkish writer should have a style so similiar to Ernest Hemingway." Well, I'd been reading Hemingway again before redrafting it. [laughter] So it was imitation in a way.

SMITH: Emre?

RODITI: Emre is probably paraphrase, because I wanted to remain as close as possible to the original--no, metaphrase. But some of the poets that I've translated are strictly paraphrase.

SMITH: [André] Breton?

RODITI: Yeah, that's paraphrase.

SMITH: Saint-John Perse?

RODITI: Well, I was very immature then, we can leave that out.

SMITH: Pessoa?

RODITI: Metaphrase.

SMITH: [Hans Magnus] Enzensberger.

RODITI: I think that was paraphrase.

SMITH: Did you ever reach imitation?

RODITI: Oh, yes.

SMITH: Where?

RODITI: Oh, well, in my translation of Alma Johanna Koenig, which is in **Thrice Chosen**, and in some of my translations of German.

SMITH: Which poems, or which writers?

RODITI: Alma Johanna Koenig, Else Lasker-Schüler and a couple of those who were included in the Anvil Books anthology of contemporary Jewish poets, where I allowed myself more freedom. Well, thank you, Mr. Dryden for helping me through that one. [laughter]

SMITH: Is poetry a form of knowledge?

RODITI: I suppose so. I think for that, you must go and ask Plato, who would say no in one of his dialogues, but yes in another.

SMITH: I ask, because you posed that question in a paper that you wrote, I guess in Chicago.

RODITI: Well, poetry is a form of, I wouldn't say of

knowledge, but an interpretation of experience, and all interpretation of experience leads to some kind of knowledge or self-knowledge. Here, we're getting deep into philosophy again.

SMITH: That's fine. Now, another writer that you've translated is Albert Memmi.

RODITI: Oh, well, that was, well, just a job to make a bit of money, and because I was asked to translate him. I'd written this enthusiastic review of his book in--

SMITH: *Pillar of Salt*?

RODITI: Yeah. In--I've forgotten what magazine in New York [*Commentary*]. Then the publisher asked me--who'd read this review--wrote me and said, would I wish to translate it? Well, it was a relatively easy job, though they went and did some awfully silly editing, like I refer to street car lines in Tunis, and they changed it to bus lines. Well, there were no bus lines; there were street cars there. I never understood why editors in Madison Avenue do that kind of thing.

SMITH: You've also done a lot of work in Sephardic literature: translating, editing, anthologizing.

RODITI: Yeah. I'm still working on this anthology. I've done a great deal of reviewing of books published in Spain on it and of reprints in the Latin alphabet of Judeo-Spanish books which had been published in the nineteenth

century or earlier, Spanish in Hebrew script, which is a sort of difficult job, because now I have to do an article on Turkish loan words in Judeo-Spanish for a learned journal--that's going to be something!

SMITH: How did this interest develop? When did it--

RODITI: Well, I learned Spanish as a kid from my grandmother and when I first went to Spain, I was speaking very fluent Spanish in a way, but people pricked up their ears and found that it was rather odd. And one day I was asked where I had learned my Spanish, and I said, "de mi abuela en mi mancevez." And when I use the word **mancevez** meaning boyhood, they all sat up because it is a word which has dropped out of Spanish since the sixteenth century, but which we still use in Judeo-Spanish. And then I began to realize that I was using an occasional French word in Spanish, or Hispanized French word, or Hispanized Turkish word. For instance, "tavern" in Judeo-Spanish of Salonika is **meyhane**; well, that's not a Spanish word, it's **mehane**, which is a Turkish word--things like that. Then I became very interested in this peculiar Spanish that I'd learned, partly because I felt that I had to correct it in order to speak the kind of Spanish that most Spanish-speaking people speak. I became very conscious of these odd words which had crept into the language of Istanbul and Salonika and Izmir in the four centuries since the Inquisition. And

since then, I guess I've purged my Spanish of much of that. I've now become interested in the linguistics of Judeo-Spanish.

SMITH: In what sense? In what aspect?

RODITI: Well, there are constantly new books on it being published. For instance, I received an enormous dictionary to review (published in Madrid) of the Judeo-Spanish of Salonika, and the man who compiled it doesn't know Turkish and doesn't know Modern Greek, in addition to which he's a prude, so that he does not include such charming words as **pezevenko**, which means pimp and which is derived from Turkish. Lots of obscene expressions which were used by the Jewish stevedores of the harbor he doesn't include. And what Turkish words--what words borrowed from Turkish he includes, he misspells the original Turkish, and the same thing with Greek. So now I'm doing a paper on that, on the need, when compiling a dictionary of this language, to know the languages from which words are derived, so as to give their etymology correctly and spell it correctly.

SMITH: You've mentioned that in translating, it's often helpful to set up a triangle between three languages. Could you explain that somewhat?

RODITI: Well, it depends which languages you're dealing with. For instance, sometimes when I'm translating from German into French, I have a German word which has some

meanings in German which would not be included in the French equivalent, and then by translating it first into English, which goes more easily, I can then find in French, let's say, an adjective which will give the full meaning of the German word.

SMITH: Can you think of an example?

RODITI: Oof, not off-hand like that; it's a complex business in which you play your knowledge of one language against your knowledge of another in order to find the best way of translating it into a third language.

SMITH: What about your current and future interests in terms of translating? What are you working on and thinking about working on?

RODITI: Well, I'm still thinking about that vast project for the University of California Press of the Sephardic anthology, which I'm supposed to be doing with half a dozen other people, but I've nearly finished my part of it. I told Stanley Holwitz the other day over at the offices that by the time they get ready to sign the contract for it, I risk being dead; but in any case, the work that I plan to do for it will already have been done; then I'm passing it on to Ammiel Alcalay, who's much younger than I am and who keeps a file on all the translations and all the footnotes and so on, so he has it. I've done about fifty pages of translation from Latin, Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan,

Provençal, and old Italian, and a couple of texts from Greek, and I've compiled a list of material which others should translate and which I've simply read but don't plan to translate: Dutch material, more Italian than Latin and Spanish material. I'm sticking to the medieval material, mainly. And then I've done a lot of Judeo-Spanish texts, known as midrashic texts, that's to say, parables to explain interpretations of passages of the Old Testament.

SMITH: Are there any contemporary poets that you're planning on translating?

RODITI: For this anthology?

SMITH: For this anthology or--

RODITI: Yes, well, there'd be Edmond Jabés, but he's been translated by others. There might be one or two twentieth century Italian poets: Crescenzo del Monte, though god forbid that I be asked to translate him, because he writes in Judeo-Roman dialect, the ghetto dialect; it's very witty, very funny; it's a kind of an Italian Yiddish. He's been translated by somebody.

SMITH: In a situation like that, when someone writes in a dialect that's like an Italian-Yiddish, do you then translate it by using American Yiddish phrases?

RODITI: No, one just gives the meaning and explains in footnotes.

SMITH: Have you ever translated from Arabic?

RODITI: No, I don't know it well enough. It's a very difficult language. Ough!

SMITH: You've lived in Tangier, you've owned a house in Tangier for quite a few years--

RODITI: Yes, got rid of it, thank god.

SMITH: --were very involved, I suppose, in Moroccan society, Moroccan culture for a while?

RODITI: Well, no. Tangier is a strange city; it's a kind of pocket Beirut, not Beirut as it is now. It's on a very small scale like [Lawrence] Durrell's Alexandria. It's a sort of hybrid Western city on the tip of Africa with a very Europeanized Arab elite and a huge--a small Arab elite and a huge Arab proletariat, and when I first went there, it had a much larger European assimilated community.

SMITH: When was this?

RODITI: Oh, in the fifties. I'd been there before the war. It had as many as twenty thousand Spaniards at one time, and now I don't suppose they have five thousand. It had a couple of thousand French inhabitants; I don't suppose there are a thousand now. It had a Jewish community of about fifteen thousand, and now I don't suppose there are a thousand. The Jewish community was very Europeanized. Even the American community, which has never been very large, has dwindled to such an extent that the Department of State was thinking of closing down the

consulate until we all protested, because for all the Americans who were in northern Morocco, it's the nearest consulate. In winter it's almost impossible to get to Rabat. Supposing something happens and the territory between Tangier and Rabat is flooded; trains stop for days, planes can't land; all at once one is completely cut off, and this happens every other winter. And then there is a sort of historic reason: that is that the old American consulate building, which is in the old Arab city, in the **Medina**, I think, is the oldest piece of property belonging to the United States State Department abroad. It's a beautiful building which has belonged to the United States since the 1820s, and it was no longer occupied. With the help of a number of people, it is now being turned into a study center and museum of Moroccan/American relations and of the history of Tangier. I managed to collect a few old prints, views of Tangier in the nineteenth or the eighteenth century, which I've donated to it, and books on the history of Tangier which I no longer need. So it's become a rather nice study center and a beautiful building. It had to be renovated, so for the time being, the Department of State is not going to close down the consulate, since, thanks to the study center, every summer a certain number of American scholars and students go over there, and we're building up its library so it can be more widely used. But

I don't go there any longer.

SMITH: You were involved in helping several Moroccan writers, Mohammed Mrabet.

RODITI: Well, Mrabet--I introduced Paul Bowles to Black Sparrow Press, and then in Paul's trail, Mrabet was introduced since Paul translates him. Then I introduced Mohamed Choukry to Paul because Choukry is a real writer. Mrabet is a story teller; he can't write a word, and Paul just tapes Mrabet's stories, and then translates some and edits them slightly. They're never written or printed in Arabic, whereas Choukry was writing in Arabic and not managing to get published because the prudish Moroccan censors would never allow it into print, and he didn't have the connections to be published in Egypt or Syria or Iraq or Lebanon, where they're less prudish. So he was first published in English. Then--what's his name? An Arabic, Moroccan writer who writes in French--Tahar ben-Jelloun--translated him into French, and he was practically a best-seller in French and appeared on "Apostrophes," the most important literary TV program in Paris. Then he sold the film rights of his book to a French film company.

SMITH: Which book was that?

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RODITI: Some title in which the word "bread" comes. He made a lot of money with it. He's now spending all this money, if he hasn't finished spending it already, getting drunk with all the whores of Tangier, and apparently not finishing any new book. But I also helped a couple of Moroccan painters: I've helped Mohammed Hamri, and got his little book published by Capra Press--rather wild stories as good as those of [Mohammed] Mrabet, but he doesn't write or he doesn't tell as many stories as Mrabet, so that there's only one little book of them. I helped a Moroccan Arabic scholar who couldn't afford to go to the university in Marrakesh and get his master's degree, in order to get a better job teaching, so I financed that. He's a very good scholar, he's doing now a doctoral dissertation on an Arabic Andalusian poet of the Middle Ages named Ibn Zaidūn. It's going to be quite an important thing, because an awful lot of nonsense has been written about Ibn Zaidūn, and he's got it all straightened out and knows how to interpret it. I've helped him a great deal with that, because the nonsense comes, if I remember right, in the writings of Ibn Ḥazm--no, or some later Arabic writer of the Middle Ages, who gives a totally legendary life of Ibn Zaidūn, which has been accepted as gospel truth. I pointed out that this

kind of legendary life is something which is common in the medieval literatures of Christianity of that period, a hundred years after Ibn Zaidūn. One gets obviously legendary lives of the troubadour Peire Vidal, saying that he was in love with a lady called--her name means wolf--and that he despaired so much, because she treated him so badly, that he became a werewolf and ran around the countryside and so on. This is legendary, and the same kind of nonsense is written around Ibn Zaidūn. I quoted several examples of legendary lives of poets composed a good hundred years after their death in that late medieval period, all of which apparently (when I got all this evidence for his dissertation) surprised very much his professors of Arabic literature at the University of Marrakesh. I don't think that his professors of Arabic literature at the University of Marrakesh can be very good; if they were very good, they wouldn't be there, because it's a very new university which is absolutely dominated by the *ulama*, that's to say the doctors of Koranic law who would never allow any very original interpretation of any Arabic literature, especially such an obviously, how should I say, Epicurean poet as Ibn Zaidūn, who probably would have gotten into trouble with them. In Andalusia at that time, they were much more liberal.

SMITH: Did you encounter much anti-Semitism in Morocco?

RODITI: One encounters it all over the world in certain areas or in certain classes. I never encountered it much in Morocco. The curious thing is, Morocco is not a typically Arab country; it's a country which has a very large Berber population, and the Berbers traditionally dislike the Arabs--they're beginning to get on better, yes--and in the south, there were some very peculiar Jewish communities which spoke Berber and not Arabic, and the Berbers got on much better with the Jews who spoke their own language than with their Arab overlords. [laughter] So that I mean, I've been in small places in the south where some of the tenant farmers have complained that the Jews have all gone off to Israel, and now we have these dreadful Arab landlords. [laughter]

SMITH: Skipping across the Mediterranean, in the same general culture zone: **Delights of Turkey**, the book that you wrote in the seventies, published in the seventies--

RODITI: Yes, I'd been writing those stories on and off since the early sixties, I had a lot of fun writing them. I've actually published three of them in **Playboy**, which caused me a lot of trouble, because my New York agent had sold them to **Playboy** as being adaptations of Turkish folklore, and they were original stories, and they had been published there as ribald classics, believe it or not. Then when I explained, after they'd been published and

after I'd been paid, that they were original stories, I had to go through a whole rigmarole in order to be allowed by **Playboy** to reprint them in a volume of my own stories, and they were furious. I said, "It's my agent who did it. I didn't."

SMITH: Then they were published by James Laughlin.

RODITI: Yes, they're still selling, oddly enough; they still sell.

SMITH: Why not?

RODITI: Well, like many New Directions books, they were practically not reviewed, so they sell maybe by word of mouth. Someone picks up a copy in some bookstore and reads it and finds it hilariously funny and then tells friends, and they order it and so on. It's going to go on selling, like my Oscar Wilde book, which went on selling for twenty years, thirty years. It's only now that New Directions have sold their last copy of the Wilde book.

SMITH: Why did you choose to put the stories in a Turkish setting, rather than a French setting?

RODITI: Oh, well.

SMITH: Or an American setting.

RODITI: Well, some of them couldn't go into any other setting other but a Turkish one. Some of them are so very much inspired by, partly, episodes in the Arabian Nights, and by the Nazreddin Hoca stories, which are Turkish folk

tales. I know all the chronicles of Bokköy, **bok** meaning "shit" and **köy** meaning village, which is some little village in the depths of Anatolia on the banks of a river which separates Turkey from an Arab-speaking country, so that the river is called on the other side, Wad el Hara, which means "The River of Shit," being a common name in Arabic countries for rivers which have a lot of reddish sand in them. It becomes in Spanish "Guadalajara," which is an Arabic name originally. So that there is a lot of play with Arabic words and Turkish words in these stories, especially in "The Vampires Of Istanbul"; at the end, every Turkish name has a meaning, and I'm doing the same kind of playing with words there as [Vladimir] Nabokov does with Russian words sometimes.

SMITH: Let's go a little bit onto the business of being a writer, and--

RODITI: The most wonderful example of what Nabokov does, is in one of his books: there's a woman who appears only once to open a door and exclaim three times "Oh!" And her name is Olga Olegovna Orlova. [laughter] Now that is typical Nabokov; it's the kind of thing that I like doing, too.

SMITH: How did you do it in "The Vampires of Istanbul"?

RODITI: Well, every name of every character means something in Turkish.

SMITH: Have you been able to get advances on the books that you write?

RODITI: Well, on the **Dialogues On Art** when it was first printed, on the biography of Magellan [**Magellan of the Pacific**], yes.

SMITH: Were those advances large enough for you to do the book that you wanted to do?

RODITI: Well, on the biography of Magellan, it was unfortunately a small advance, but I got a grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation, which covered all the expenses of the research. But I've not handled all that well in my life, partly because I was too busy interpreting, and I was more interested in getting published. You see, it's been difficult for me often to get published, because I'm not around in Madison Avenue. I'm not somebody that one meets constantly at literary cocktail parties. I just turn up every couple of years and there I am, and I've meanwhile been forgotten.

SMITH: But you have had agents?

RODITI: Yes, and quarrelled with them. Because until now, I've never had a really good one.

SMITH: You have had an American agent, a French agent?

RODITI: No, American agents. A French agent, I wouldn't advise anybody to have one.

SMITH: What does your American agent do for you? Who is your agent and how did you get--

RODITI: Well, she's a very elderly lady, but one of the biggest agents in New York, Bertha Klausner, and I got her because she's Haakon Chevalier's agent. Haakon has become a bit senile and has written a book which is such a mess that she can't offer it to any publisher, it's got to be very carefully edited (eliminating repetitions and explaining things which are not explained, and so on), and so since I'm in Paris and know him well, when I get back to Paris, I'm going to be seeing him to rewrite or to edit the book for him. It's a book of memoirs in which, for instance, he refers to certain things which appear to have happened in California in the thirties, mentioning names, and that means nothing to a reader of forty or fifty even today. He's got to explain who these people were. I remember because I was there, and I've got to point out to him, "Haakon, here you've got to explain this political trial, this political thing. Add four or five lines explaining, not footnotes; it's got to be in the text." And then cutting repetitions. It's still--again a story about the [Robert] Oppenheimer business, as if there hadn't been enough written on it. But as he's an old friend and he wants this to be published--I doubt whether he will get it published, but certainly I'm going to be paid for it. Then I've become very friendly with her, and she wants to handle my memoirs, and I think she'll handle it well.

SMITH: What's been your experience with translation rights?

RODITI: Well, I've done very nicely on the Yashar Kemal, because I have a contract with him in which I get a percentage of the royalties for every reprint in English, though there I had a very bad experience with an agent, in that she sold the film rights to Fox films [Twentieth Century-Fox Corporation] without consulting me, and Fox paid the full amount to Yashar Kemal, although they'd read it only in the English version. So I then threatened to sue them and sent their lawyer my contract with Yashar. Then rather than go to court, they paid me out of court. But then they never made the film. And in any case, the agent sold the film rights for an absurdly low price, for \$6,000. For years Fox films didn't make the film, and then only recently--I don't know how it was done, but this was done behind my back again, because it should have been done with my agreement--Peter Ustinov somehow pried the film rights loose from Fox films and made a lousy film of it, which has been a total failure. But I only discovered that he'd done that, because, after the film had flopped, my brother in England saw it on TV and said that it had been a complete flop. So that the *Memed, My Hawk* film rights have been a sore point with me for close on thirty years, because this idiot agent (who is dead now) bungled it

completely. She was so surprised that anybody should approach her for the film rights that she just yielded at once instead of arguing and getting a decent price for it.

SMITH: What about remaindering? Is it possible for an author to avoid remaindering? Have you--

RODITI: Well, it's very difficult to avoid being remaindered by a big firm like McGraw-Hill because they don't even let you know when they're going to remainder you.

SMITH: You're speaking of your experience with *Magellan*?

RODITI: Yes. But I think it's going to be reprinted in a paperback.

SMITH: Let's move on to your art criticism. That's a major subject in your--

RODITI: Well, I was doing art criticism for *Arts* magazine from about 1956 on; I can't remember exactly when I started or when I stopped. Then when I came back to live in Paris in 1960--

SMITH: You were reviewing European art for an American magazine?

RODITI: In 1960 I came back to Paris. A friend of mine who was the editor of *L'Arche*, which was a monthly magazine of the Jewish communities of France, asked me to take over from the art critic that they had who was retiring, and I've continued to do this ever since, now, for twenty-five years, soon, under three different editors. But I get on

very badly with the present editor, who's more interested in politics than in cultural affairs, and more interested in self-promotion than in anything else. I mean, he goes as far as to include three articles of his own in an issue, and always on-- My argument with him is that he's made it into more and more a current events magazine, and I say, with a current events magazine and the production delays and so on which you have, by the time it's out half the material that's in the magazine has appeared as news in **Le Monde** or elsewhere. To do the kind of thing you want to do, it should be at least weekly, if not a daily like the **Jewish Chronicle** in London. A monthly should have more opinion and more cultural material and less day-by-day politics, so that I'm probably going to withdraw from that. I just can't waste my time arguing with somebody whom I dislike. I'm too old for that; I mean, why should I get involved in that kind of crap? And I can do without the little bit they pay me and concentrate on writing more interesting material. I wrote them a beautiful article-- I'm not praising myself, but the material was beautiful--on a facsimile edition of a medieval Jewish manuscript, which is a very rare thing; the facsimile edition cost \$2,700. Imagine, it was an article on controversies in the Middle Ages between rabbis on whether it is allowed to have human figures in the illuminated manuscripts, liturgical ones,

and in what cases they were allowed and in what cases they were not; it was a very well constructed article which quoted Maimonides and the Maharam of Regensburg and other such opinions, and discussed three such manuscripts. And he rejected it! The moment I showed it to him, I had just translated it into English and showed it to a magazine in New York which immediately accepted it and congratulated me on it. I could have published it in London, I could have published it in German, but this idiot in France doesn't see that this was a serious job which would interest his readers.

SMITH: What are your principles of art criticism? What guides you in the articles that you write?

RODITI: Well, it depends who I am writing for. If I'm writing for **Arts** magazine, which I no longer do, my principles were those of originality and quality. For instance, I did a certain number of interviews for them: I interviewed Hanna Höch, who was a neglected, but very interesting, elderly German former dadaist; she'd been a great friend of Kurt Schwitter's and had been totally ignored during the whole Nazi regime and forgotten during the ten years which followed it. I did an interview of [Joan] Miró for them, which they enjoyed because it was a fun one. He was so nonsensical.

SMITH: Is that the interview you published in **Dialogues**?

RODITI: Yes, yes. Well, I did several of those, and I did articles, which were not interviews, on an early cubist who'd been neglected called Alfred Reth, on another one called Henri Hayden, and then I did an interview of Niki de Saint-Phalle, who's a very trendy artist. I'd do reviews of current exhibitions in Paris which would be of interest to New York readers. For *L'Arche* it's different, because I was supposed to concentrate my attention on Jewish painters, and there are plenty of them in Paris, and I find myself sometimes in a very difficult situation because rabbis intercede with me: would I write an article on such and such a painter who's lousy, or such and such a sculptor who's really pathetic, so that I become what is known in Yiddish as a *kehilla versorger*; that's someone who is looking after the community.

SMITH: Now you very early criticized abstract expressionism. Why was that?

RODITI: Well, I think to begin with I could never agree with the kind of writing of Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, because they're people who suddenly got hepped up over abstract expressionism with no previous knowledge of any art. I can not imagine Harold Rosenberg writing a sensible paragraph on Caravaggio; he just wouldn't know how to begin it. I have some training in art history; they were trendy critics, and I feel that abstract expressionism

lumps together as a trend a lot of people who don't belong together. There is absolutely nothing in common between [Willem] de Kooning and [Mark] Rothko to begin with. De Kooning is an expressionist, an expressionist of a very peculiar sort, very personal, very Dutch, as a matter of fact, if you know what the Dutch expressionists were doing twenty years earlier, which Rosenberg didn't know; he'd never seen them. And [Theodoros] Stamos, for instance, has nothing in common with--what's his name, the--with Rothko for that matter or with any of the others; he's much closer to [Paul] Klee in many ways. They just loved to gather a lot of people who had very little in common, and I find that among them, I certainly like and respect de Kooning, whom I would not call an abstract expressionist. I've never in my writing on abstract expressionism criticized him. I've never had occasion to write on Stamos. I was at one time extremely dubious of Rothko. I feel that most of the time it's decorative and not more, and towards the end when it gets so dark, it's manic depressive, and that's all. And to think that the Rothko pictures in the National Gallery in Washington--I just don't even look at them. They can only inspire you with despair. One can understand why he committed suicide shortly after that. He was a manic depressive and totally incapable of producing anything figurative because his mind had become a dark blank,

and that's all that he's projecting, a dark blank. A psychoanalysis of his painting would be something ghastly. Jackson Pollock, whom I knew personally, he had a temperament, a certain vigor, but I find many of his paintings just decorative, and that's all. If you go to the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art] now and see these wonderful Japanese screens, the wonderful brushwork on some of them, there's one of bamboos that's infinitely more beautiful and more subtle than a Jackson Pollock. There's a wonderful German expression, a Berlin slang, **Er kann vor Kraft nicht laufen**: "he's so strong that he can't even walk." That's what I feel about Jackson Pollock.

SMITH: How did you come to meet him?

RODITI: Oh, the good old days of **View** magazine.

SMITH: So through Charles Henri Ford.

RODITI: No, I think I met him through Peggy Guggenheim. I might have been a rich man today because once on a Friday, he phoned me to ask me if he could see me. I said certainly, and he came to see me in my apartment, and could I loan him \$250 because he was desperate for money for marijuana, I think it was, or liquor, I've forgotten which. I didn't have \$250 on me, and the banks were closed, and he was willing to give me a picture about this size for it. I sent him to a friend who had it and got the picture and sold it for \$80,000 some years later.

SMITH: Now, you've also written that you felt that abstract expressionism lacked an interior reality.

RODITI: Yes. I feel that, especially with a painter like Franz Kline, I just cannot see, I cannot perceive a human being in it, an individual. I can see a trend, that's all. All this claptrap about Chinese writing, Chinese writing. The fact is that Chinese ideograms have a meaning, whereas these black things crammed on a white background have no meaning.

SMITH: What about the industrial landscapes of Pennsylvania that I've heard some people interpret them as?

RODITI: I don't think so. [pause] I feel that what has corrupted abstract expressionism has been the nonsense written about it by the critics who propagated it, and what I distrust is that the painters swallowed that nonsense hook, line, and sinker. They accepted it and really believed that they were doing what the critics said they were doing; they weren't.

SMITH: Now in **Dialogues On Art**, the choosing of the artists that were in that book, were you trying to bring a selection of artists, European artists, that you thought would be of interest to American readers? Was that a concern of yours?

RODITI: Yes, but I mean the selection was partly guided by my editor and partly by the occasion that I had to

interview them. For instance, [Marc] Chagall, I knew that I could interview, and of course they leapt at the idea. Miró, I knew I could interview, and they leapt at the idea; [Ossip] Zadkine, well, actually, I sold that to **The Observer** in London, not to an American editor. Hanna Höch was my suggestion; Niki de Saint-Phalle was suggested from New York. [Giorgio] Morandi, I don't think I sold to a magazine, but I happened to have a chance to see him, and nobody had ever interviewed him. Marino Marini was one of my most successful interviews, because when it was translated into German, it caught the attention of [Carl] Jung, and it's quoted in that last book of Jung's. Now I've published a long one on Carlo Carrà, an interview of Carlo Carrà, who was one of the founders of futurism and had been completely neglected, and it contains a lot of historical material which is difficult to find in English anywhere else. I was concerned mainly, I guess, with bringing to American and English readers knowledge of the evolution of modern art, of certain types of modern art, by questioning some of the pioneers. In my second book [**More Dialogues on Art**], I've questioned a couple of people who were not well-known: for instance, the Greek painter [Nicolas] Ghika, who was a friend of Joan Gris, but who's not well known, but who was able to give some very interesting information, and [Demetrios] Galanis, who was the first of the modern-

ists to do illustrations for **L'assiette au beurre** and then brought his friends Joan Gris and [Franz] Kupka into it, too, so that **L'assiette au beurre** became a source of income for the early cubists. Nobody had gone to interview him on all of this, and there was no way for American readers to know how and why Gris and Kupka had managed to earn a living there, and not Picasso or Braque--Braque didn't need to, and Picasso--well, the editor insisted that one should bring drawings with a caption, and Picasso could never agree on the caption; they were all rejected. It's funny.

SMITH: Shortly after you published **Dialogues on Art**, American art seemed to shift radically to Op art, Pop art. Did that affect the sales of your book at all, the interest in--

RODITI: No, but, of course, Op art is so much derived from European art. One of the best American Op artists, [Ilya] Bolotowsky, who died only three years ago, had been a constructivist in Soviet Russia before coming to America. I mean, Op art had existed in France with [Albert] Herbin, and [Victor] Vasarély before it came to America. Actually, [Piet] Mondrian is a form of Op art too. And [Fritz] Glarner in America was a Swiss; he had come from Switzerland. So Op art is something very European in a way. Pop is something strange. A friend of mine who was an art historian in New York is preparing a paper which he's going

to read next Christmas when the professors of art history and so on meet in New York, a paper on the gay implications of Pop art, based on certain statements of Andy Warhol about how abstract expressionism was so obviously macho, that for the gay artists, it was impossible to be an abstract expressionist; it's a dialectic of sorts. I mean, I'm not willing to swallow that one.

SMITH: Yeah, you've also been involved with the [Harold] Jackman Committee.

RODITI: Well, that's just old friendship. I felt that this special collection at Atlanta University is a praiseworthy cause, and whenever I picked up a book which would be likely to be of interest to them, I bought it and sent it.

SMITH: And you've donated to the Achenbach Foundation?

RODITI: Yes, a long time ago. And to the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, which is a Jewish foundation to which I've donated an enormous archive on Jewish artists of the School of Paris, because I get all these invitations and catalogs and books free, and I don't have room for them. And now the Jewish museum is preparing for next fall an exhibition of Jewish artists of the School of Paris. When I spoke to the curator a year ago, he was thinking of including only ten or twelve, and I said, "This is absurd! With ten or twelve, you can only include Chagall,

[Amedeo] Modigliani, [Chaim] Soutine, and [Jules] Pascin, who are already well enough known in America; they don't have to be shown in a Jewish museum, and, well, you might manage to get four or five who are--three or four who are not known. Actually, there are a good fifty artists who deserve to be better known in America." So finally they agreed to put forty-three artists in the exhibition, and of the forty-three, I think that thirty artists are culled from either correspondence with me or the archive of the Leo Baeck Institute, which he had been consulting and finding extremely useful.

SMITH: Another thread in your life that I'd like to take up is teaching.

RODITI: Oh, that I enjoy enormously.

SMITH: When did you start teaching?

RODITI: Oh, well, I taught at Kansas City. I taught at Berkeley before that; I taught first-year French, which was not very exciting. In Kansas City I taught French, Spanish, and a night class in Portuguese, which was loads of fun, that night class, because I even had two cops in it, and one of them was bright.

SMITH: Then later--

RODITI: One of my best students.

SMITH: When did you start teaching creative writing?

RODITI: Well, what happened was that Kenneth Rexroth

suggested that I be invited to teach at San Francisco State [then College, now University], and I was invited to teach there for a year. I taught English literature courses: a course on Marcel Proust in English for students who read him mainly in English and a seminar for graduate students on Flaubert; there were only two of them who took it, and it was very successful. Edwin Honig then asked me to come and teach at Brown [University], where I taught for one semester in both departments, English and French. Then I taught a course on symbolism in literature, art, and music, late nineteenth century symbolism at Oberlin [College].

SMITH: Now, what years are we talking about with these different universities?

RODITI: If I remember right, '68-'69 at San Francisco State; '70 at Brown; Oberlin a couple of years later. Two or three years ago I taught a seminar, a graduate seminar, in translation at State University of New York in Binghamton. And then I was also-- I was forgetting that I taught a couple of courses at U of C [University of California] at Santa Cruz, I've forgotten which year. That was very pleasant, but a bit disappointing. At that time, the students at Santa Cruz were not exactly easy to handle.

SMITH: In what way?

RODITI: I once had to object and say that there were two things I wouldn't allow in my classroom: one was

masturbation, and the other one was smoking marijuana. Anybody who wanted to do either of those had to go out to the toilet, because that was their private life.

[laughter]

SMITH: Well, you came back to the United States at the height of the "counterculture."

RODITI: Yes, but I didn't want the responsibility of people smoking marijuana in my class. By making this rather abrupt statement, I got them out of the class. I said, "You can come back when you're finished." I don't want to know anything about your private life. [laughter]

SMITH: Did the counterculture, the hippies and that, remind you at all of the surrealist days?

RODITI: No. They thought it would, but it didn't.

SMITH: Why not?

RODITI: Well, there was something of the old tradition of the American hobo in them, which is something which didn't exist in the surrealists. They had a kind of marginality which was more emotional, and in dress and in way of life, less intellectual. And then all this business of strange religious trends among the hippies-- I mean this Hinduism of Allen Ginsberg, and the Buddhisms and all that-- The only person in the surrealist movement who'd been at all interested in all that was a dissident surrealist, René Daumal. He's the one who went to India and came back

practicing all sorts of odd practices and finally died as a result of these odd practices.

SMITH: Did you find any of the counterculture literature or art to be interesting?

RODITI: Well, some of the poetry, yes, not much. Brother Antoninus, sometimes. Some of the early Ginsberg, the early [Gregory] Corso, but Corso's petered out completely; he's a mess now. Ginsberg, I don't think that he's writing any poetry worth reading any longer. The counterculture art was much too close to advertising art, all the psychedelic stuff that one saw in San Francisco, all this imitation of art *déco* and art *nouveau*, of turn of the century art, these curlicues and what have you--trendy, not profound enough.

SMITH: Now in your writing classes, how did you relate to the students?

RODITI: Oh, very well. I had a creative writing class at Brown which did very nicely. How did I relate to students?

SMITH: What kind of things were they writing?

RODITI: Well, it was an eastern campus, so that some of them were being very traditional. I only had one counterculture student there. He came from Florida and was a rich boy who'd gotten all hepped up on **Naked Lunch**, and he was churning out pages and pages of bad imitation of [William] Burroughs. I kept on saying, "Yes, but can't you write

something that is more yourself? You don't have to imitate Burroughs. To begin with, you don't have his experience; I don't think you're a drug addict, you're certainly not a homosexual. Here you are imitating somebody who is writing about his own experiences of these two areas in which you have no experience." [laughter] I finally got him to snap out of it. Then it turned out that he didn't have much to say.

SMITH: When you were in San Francisco, you started work on a novel, your second novel, "Sonny Boy and the Queen of Spades."

RODITI: Yes, never finished.

SMITH: What was that about?

RODITI: Oh, it's very difficult to say what it's about. It's about a lunatic [laughter] who has hallucinations.

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RODITI: I'd rather not talk about it until the book's finished.

SMITH: You're still working on it?

RODITI: No, I'm not still working on it, but I plan to pick it up again.

SMITH: Another person you met in San Francisco was Tom Sánchez?

RODITI: Yeah, and his wife Stephanie [Sánchez].

SMITH: And you've been, I guess, helping him with all of his novels from the very beginning.

RODITI: No, I've been guiding her as a painter much more, and I think that she has much more talent as a painter than he has as a writer. I mean, Tom has vigor and ambition, but I'm not so sure that he will achieve much as a novelist. His first novel, *Rabbit Boss*, had some very fine passages in it, but was confused in its structure, so that when he sold the movie rights, they were quite incapable of making a movie out of it because there was no continuity to it. They paid through the nose for it and did I don't know how many different scripts and still couldn't make a movie out of it. His second book, *The Zoot-Suit Murders*, was a great disappointment. He's been working for three years on his third book and seems to be suffering from blockage or

something of the kind, and his marriage is going to pot over it, because he goes off to Key West to write it and abandons his wife and daughter in Santa Barbara. Fortunately, she's a very gifted painter, and she's progressing and producing more than he is. I'll have to interrupt and make a phone call. [tape recorder off]

I enjoy teaching. I'm an effective teacher, the students like it, and I feel that I should have done more of it, partly because I feel more and more as I grow older that you can't take it with you. I feel that much of my experience, knowledge, and my ability to help people to understand art or literature should not be limited to writing, that I could have achieved more as a teacher, but you can't do everything. I've had a very busy life as it is. [tape recorder off]

Well, I feel that I can't do everything in life. I've done plenty, but I've also wasted a great deal of time on things which I haven't really enjoyed and which in my opinion were not as useful as they seemed to be. I've worked, for instance, for over ten years constantly as interpreter for the European Common Market, and it is difficult to think of a more stultifying occupation than interpreting this endlessly repetitious discussion of a reduction of trade barriers, when one realizes that practically every delegate is busy trying to maintain his own

trade barriers while reducing those of his neighbor. They're all trying to flood each other's markets with their own products and getting nowhere. And I've attended, for instance, over years, meetings which were concerned with common market regulations on such dangerous materials as asbestos: the use of asbestos in certain industries, and so on. This went on and on and on for, I think, ten years, and the progress was at a snail's pace. Finally, they did agree on something, and they are ahead of America as far as that is concerned, but I think this kind of administrative work, interpreting that kind of administrative material, is terribly frustrating for a mind like mine. I've very often felt that although I was earning a good living doing it, I might have been enjoying teaching more; but I also realize, now, that many of my friends who have been teaching all these years have become just as sick with teaching as I became with interpreting. The only advantage is that when they retire from their teaching jobs, they get a pension, whereas I, as a free-lance interpreter, don't get a pension, but have to live on my own savings, for what they may be. I would enjoy, from now on, occasionally teaching. I would enjoy it. Not in the immediate future, let's say, not this coming year or the following one, because I want to finish my memoirs; I feel that that is more pressing. But if my health permits, I would gladly accept teaching

jobs, suitable ones for short periods, beginning, let's say, in '87--seventy-seven I'd be then.

SMITH: One of the things that I found interesting in your career was that you were involved in the ground floor of **Antaeus**, a magazine--

RODITI: Yes--

SMITH: --contributing editor, European editor.

RODITI: I've been involved with a great number of little magazines. Now, Paul Bowles and I were involved with that. And Dan Halpern has become more and more independent, and he's a very successful operator in his way, and he no longer consults me at all. I don't suppose that in the last five years he's published anything except one contribution of mine for which I could claim any responsibility. He-- Of course, the thing is that the moment a magazine grows or gets to be at all known, the editor no longer needs contributing editors, especially if he is a writer like Dan Halpern, because he gets involved in--I'm going to say something very rude now--in the politics of what I call "kiss my ass and I'll kiss yours," which means you publish one of my poems and I'll publish one of yours. All the editors of little magazines do that, and after six or seven issues, you have so many contributions coming from the editors of other magazines and from their friends whom they recommend to you-- And while their

friends are not too bad, I mean why not publish them, since in any case the editor who recommended them to you, is going to publish something of yours or something by one of your friends. This goes on and on and on, so that you don't need contributing editors any longer. I'm now contributing editor of **Conjunctions** and **Frank** in Paris and a couple of other magazines, but I have fewer and fewer illusions about this. I know that it's perfectly possible to be of assistance for the first three, four, five numbers, and then after that they no longer need you; you've got your name on the masthead, and that's all.

SMITH: How did you get involved with **Antaeus**?

RODITI: Well, through Paul Bowles. Dan was visiting Paul in Tangier, and I met him there. He was very anxious to get certain contributions, European ones, and I scared them up for him. Now, well, his European contributions are mainly things that he gets through publishers who want some writer in whom they're interested to be publicized in **Antaeus**.

SMITH: Was he at all familiar with your work at **Das Lot**?

RODITI: No, he doesn't know a word of German; he simply knew who I was, partly through Paul. Well, actually, at the moment, the only little magazine with which I'm concerned to any great extent is **Frank**, which is edited by a friend of mine in Paris, though he [David Applefield] is

going through a crisis, financial. And then I have a friend [Uri Hertz] who edits a little magazine here called **Third Rail** and with whom I had dinner the other evening; I make suggestions to him without being a contributing editor. It's a rather pretty little magazine.

SMITH: Now, you've been involved in the past with **Deliria**.

RODITI: Oh, god! That was lunacy.

SMITH: **Shantih**.

RODITI: **Shantih** was fun; the editor with whom I became involved then-- She teaches at the University of Southern California now. What's her name? I've forgotten her name, [Gloria Orenstein] but she's loads of fun--and it was organized by students at NYU [New York University] with whom I was in contact for other things, and it lasted for a while. **Deliria**, only one issue came out, and I then realized that the editor with whom I was dealing was literally a psychopath and a drug addict. He ended up in and out of institutions. But he was there in Paris and seemed to be very enthusiastic and full of ideas. Actually, I scarcely knew him when we put that issue together. Later, he got himself into jail in Thailand in an absolutely amateurish business of drug smuggling, and then ended up in psychiatric hospitals in Florida, and just completely vanished, as far as I know. Hangs around Key West, I'm told.

SMITH: But you are still involved in **Conjunctions**?

RODITI: Oh, yes. I translated the few known poems of Luis Buñuel for them. I helped a lot on the first issue, the [James] Laughlin issue, scared up contributors, and I still occasionally find something for them. It's difficult because Bradford [Morrow] is in New York. Of course, he's under great pressure from publishers and so on to publish all sorts of authors that they're interested in. I finally convinced him after a long time that Gustaf Sobin is not an interesting poet and is not worth devoting ten pages to. He's a bore, and it took--why-- Laughlin was publishing Sobin and had talked Brad into publishing him, and I feel that Brad's choice of poets isn't always felicitous, to use a nice word.

SMITH: How would you compare the small magazine, in the United States in particular, today with the surrealist magazines and the advanced-guard magazines of the twenties and thirties that you were involved with?

RODITI: I feel that there isn't any real advanced guard any longer. I mean, now that they teach you abstract art in art schools, and in creative writing classes at universities dadaism is taken seriously as a form of expression, there is no such thing as advanced-guard art any longer. In my opinion, there is such a thing as advanced thought, which is something different. Advanced-guard art and advanced-guard literature have both tended to degenerate

more and more into trendiness, and they've become closer and closer to such things as *nouvelle cuisine* and the rag trade, fashion industry; see what I mean?

SMITH: Not exactly, no, but--

RODITI: Well, if you go into the-- The spiritual relationship between the show windows of Neiman-Marcus and the galleries of Soho is much closer than the spiritual relationship between dada and Bergdorf-Goodman was in 1920. You see what I mean?

SMITH: Okay.

RODITI: The show windows are trying to be dada now, and art is trying to be fashionable.

SMITH: Do you think these little magazines serve any function for the writers?

RODITI: It's very difficult to generalize; I mean there are some little magazines which certainly serve a function, a couple of those which are published by universities. There's one published, I think, in Georgia, which is good. There are some published here and there which are quite good, which have-- I judge the quality of little magazines now by the quality of the prose that they publish. Those which publish predominantly poetry, publish predominantly crap, because nobody has any notion any longer what is good poetry, no editor.

SMITH: Could you elaborate on that, I mean that's such a broad blanket statement.

RODITI: I mean, you just open any issue of **Poetry, a Magazine of Verse**, which has been in existence since 1912, and look at five consecutive issues now and five consecutive issues published, let's say, between 1920 and '25, and you will see that the poetry that they published between 19--1912 or anytime up to 1935, and obviously they had certain critical standards. They had certain notions of what they considered good poetry and what they considered bad poetry, and they made their selection. Now, it's a totally haphazard thing; nobody has any strict criteria any longer.

SMITH: Is that a by-product of the success of the advanced guard?

RODITI: Yes, a by-product of the success of the advanced guard in destroying the validity of all previously acknowledged criteria. When I flew over from Paris early in March, I unfortunately had seated next to me in the plane some kind of neo-hippie musician who got very drunk on the plane, and at one point when he was drunk, he started reciting to me poetry which he considered great. And he was reciting to me some of the very worst poetry of [Robert] Creeley. Creeley's written some good stuff, but what this bird was quoting was practically like Wilhelmina Stitch. It was rhyming quatrain, which was like Ella Wheeler Wilcox, or these lady poets of the First World

War: "My son, he is a lanky boy/ but, ah, he is his mother's joy," that kind of thing. It was incredibly bad, and yet that goes by as poetry nowadays! And nobody protests! It's signed Creeley, and Creeley's become a brand name, so to speak. He can get anything he wants into print, because it's Creeley. There's a sort of oversimplification. I may sound very bitter, but I'm not the only one. Kenneth Rexroth agreed with me all along the line on things like that.

SMITH: To tie this back to your work, in the development of your career, it seemed that for a period of time, a distressingly long period of time, I'm sure, it was almost impossible for you to get your poetry published in these magazines.

SMITH: Yes, well, I wasn't trying hard. I wasn't trying. I don't know why. Well, I was too involved with interpreting, had lost touch with them, was too rarely in America. Even now I submit very little to magazines; only recently I took the bull by the horns and submitted a bunch of poems to the **New Yorker**, and I was told by a friend that I should have been doing it years ago. I haven't had a reply yet, but--

SMITH: During that fallow period, you continued to write.

RODITI: Yes, but from the--in the fifties I wrote very little poetry. I mean, I'd had this unhappy relationship

with [Alexander] Koval, who was so negative. He was one of these people who, whatever you start doing, he will discourage you, because he thinks you should be doing something else. So as long as we were more or less living together--because we were constantly parting: he'd be going back to Berlin and then coming back to Paris--he discouraged me. And even now he still, with the best of intentions, is discouraging me.

SMITH: Then, in the sixties you began increasing your output.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Did your subject matter change at all?

RODITI: Well, it does in a way. Some of my poetry's subject matter does change because, in a way, it reflects to some extent day-by-day experience and depends on it. For instance, I have written a few nature poems, believe it or not.

SMITH: Well, you certainly had a major experience when you discovered that you had epilepsy.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: That must have explained many, many things for you.

RODITI: Oh, it did.

SMITH: You wrote a book on epilepsy ["Le mal sacré," unpublished manuscript].

RODITI: I haven't finished it. I wrote one in French

because my psychotherapist wanted me to write it, and I wrote it for him to read. Now there's somebody, a neurologist on the faculty here, who's encouraging me to rewrite it in English, which I may do when I finish the memoirs. It was a very shattering experience to realize that I'd wasted so much time and energy on psychotherapy and seeing doctors of every kind and getting nowhere. A feeling of wasted years and wasted effort and unnecessary anguish. And I must say that once I recovered from the shock of the discovery, I became a much more cheerful man, much less prone to periods of acute depression. I don't have them any longer. It's as simple as that. When I get a bit depressed, I increase my doses, that's all. [laughter] Three pills a day, instead of two.

SMITH: You also in the early sixties wrote **De l'Homosexualité**.

RODITI: Yes. Well, that was a publisher in Paris asked me to do it.

SMITH: That was a commissioned work, then?

RODITI: Yes. And he went bankrupt owing me a great deal of money, because this was practically his only book that sold well; he sold every copy, but he went bankrupt on another venture. And this was while I was in America once. When I came back, I discovered he was no longer in business and that he'd gone bankrupt owing me money. Then,

another publisher wanted to reprint it, and I said, "No, there's been so much literature on the subject since that it needs to be rewritten."

SMITH: I was wondering if those two--

RODITI: That book has--actually, it's more--although it begins with a few quips which are funny in French but don't lend themselves to translation, it's a very serious inquiry, because the first part of the book is devoted to a discussion of--a reply to the question which I ask myself: in what species has homosexual behavior been observed? And after going through all the range of literature on the subject, I concluded that the only species in which it has been observed are vertebrates. It's been observed only in a very limited number of invertebrates, and there it takes on such a very different form that it's difficult to say that it's homosexuality. You cannot imagine a lesbian queen bee; what the hell would she do? And arthropods cannot lend themselves to that kind of thing. And then the second question was, after that, under what circumstances does its frequency appear to increase among vertebrates. From observations with rats, mice, sticklebacks, and so on, populations which can be observable (it's difficult to observe it with populations of elephants or whales), it turned out that the frequency increases with anxiety, and the causes of anxiety, of

collective anxiety, can be overcrowding, that is to say demographic explosion, difficulty about feeding, and so on. It can increase in certain species. For instance, in overcrowded populations of mice, one has observed that pregnant females resorb the fetus and become lesbian, that male mice can no longer recognize the female. Apparently, certain species recognize sex by odor and certain species by color. With sticklebacks, the male has a red stomach; with an overcrowded colony, a number of the males lose that color, and they're no longer recognizable as males. The same can happen through difficulties of feeding, with certain species. Other species, like the lemmings, become suicidal, instead, mass suicide. So it seems that it's a sort of population control with a great number of species of vertebrates, but then I came to the conclusion with humans, it's an entirely different problem, because there there's a cultural element, which-- Well, one has some tribes in New Guinea where homosexuality is practiced as being the normal thing, and the men have relations with women only when it is necessary to have additions to the tribe, because, if the tribe expands beyond a certain number, it comes into conflict and warfare with the next tribe. So there are all sorts of cultural elements which intervene in humans and which are not intervening among other vertebrates. And the curious thing is that my book

was taken very seriously by the Pavlov Institute in Moscow, and it was very, very well reviewed in a number of learned journals in Europe, as being, well, practically something like [Konrad] Lorenz's studies of ethology. I'm very pleased, because it never occurred to me that I was doing such pioneer work when I started. Actually, the more reading I did, the more I realized that I was doing pioneer work, and then my publisher never thought that I was going to [do] that.

SMITH: In writing that book and the work on epilepsy, was that part of your self-analysis?

RODITI: Yes, yes. That was all part of solving the problem of my identity in the sixties. Having discovered why I was the way I was, it was like a very belated maturity. I felt, during the first couple of years after discovering what had been the cause of all my troubles, that I'd been kept in the dark for fifty years of my life. And I feel certainly that my epilepsy is one of the causes of my homosexuality, certainly. If I'd known it and been treated properly when I was eighteen to twenty, I probably would not have become homosexual. But this is nonsense, because there was no such thing as proper treatment then.

SMITH: Do you actually think there is such a thing as causes of homosexuality? It's not just--

RODITI: Well, I was bisexual up to a point. My homosexuality was at that time very juvenile. I had an epileptic seizure while with a woman once, and she acted so insanely that she scared me off women for a while. I think that if that incident hadn't happened, I might have continued being bisexual and maybe ceased being bisexual and been married and become-- But then I felt that there was something wrong, something wrong with me that I couldn't put my finger on it. And it was something which discouraged me from ever marrying or settling down. I felt that there was a secret to my life which I had to keep. I didn't know what the secret was, but there it was. Well, there's no use in crying over spilt milk. I mean, at this point, you can't put the clock back; but, in any case, I know enough about epilepsy and the treatment of epilepsy to know that in 1928, '29, '30, '31, '32, which were the key years as far as my emotional evolution was concerned--in fact I became, how shall I say, consciously homosexual and decided that I had made the final choice with F.--in those years the treatment for epilepsy was in its infancy. I mean, it was no good. I don't think it would have done me any good. And after all, it's only since the invention of dilantin (which was bad enough, because it made me lose all my teeth) and then the later invention, what I take now, depakine, that one could lead a relatively normal life,

because before that, on barbiturates and god knows what other things, it dulled one's wits, and that's all. It's a blessing that I was spared the barbiturates for so many years. So I feel that I have a rather healthy attitude to it all now.

SMITH: Now, in the sixties, you wrote "Meditations on Books."

RODITI: Yeah, I wrote that when I was in San Francisco, when I was teaching at San Francisco State and living in Kenneth Rexroth's apartment while he was on a tour around the world; it's a sort of complex poem, or a series of poems. Did you want to ask me any questions about it?

SMITH: Well, how you came to write it and what it meant to you at the time.

RODITI: Well, it's a meditation on the theme of books. Will you pass me the book [**Thrice Chosen**], and I can then explain it best. It's a series of poems, really, rather than one poem. It begins with this absurd choice of titles. I had been reading **Tess of the D'Urbervilles** because I was teaching a course on the English novel. Suddenly one day, I received the visit of a professor at the Jesuit university who thought that Kenneth Rexroth was in the house, didn't know he was away. His name was Graziotti, and he'd written a book on polyhedra, and he wanted a preface for it (it was never published, as a

matter of fact). And I thought that the title **Graziotti on Polyhedra** is so beautiful that I started that poem. Since I was living in an apartment where the walls were lined with books, that explains the whole first poem, "Remembrance of Books Read." Then the second one is on the problem of writing a book and wanting to be understood and not misunderstood, which is another aspect of meditating on books. And the third one, "Homage to Jules Laforgue"-- He's a poet who [T. S.] Eliot had read a lot, and I had too, and there's a poem of his in which he says, **j'ai lu tous les livres**, "I have read all the books that exist." And it's on that theme: Another book! I thought I'd read all that there ever was to read. Then the next one is "Homage to Horace and Baudelaire." It starts off with a reference to a quotation of Horace, "A monument than stone or bronze more lasting." And then I go on, "Is it more lasting?" No, because you burn a book. And then there's this reference to Baudelaire, "like you, my reader, my brother, **hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère**," though that's a pretty short piece. Then, "Minutes of a Committee Meeting," which is a committee to decide which books should be saved and which should not. It's just a parody of minutes of a committee meeting. A committee convened to decide which hundred best books to save. I was thinking of Mortimer Adler: "From total war, could not

agree on any titles essential, which was the preservation of our way of life predicated on the right of each to choose what he believes, even if he neglects to consult . . . " And it goes on and on and on with this standard committee meeting rigmarole. And then there's a poem on the destruction of the great library of Alexandria. The Mohammedan who'd conquered Alexandria said, "Well, if all the books are lies, they'll burn, and if they're truthful, well, somebody will find the truth again." And he burned the library. And then there's this jig for yahoos and hooligans to celebrate the burning of books. I didn't see that there is a progression in it. And then "Written In a Dark Age," it's a sort of lamentation on all the books that have been destroyed or lost, and then the rest is on a parallel between the destruction of books and the burning of the Jews in Auschwitz, the people of the book. So it's a meditation in which the theme always has something to do with books.

SMITH: Now, if we come back to what we were talking about yesterday with "Cassandra's Dream" and the four levels of interpretation that Dante talked about, were you still thinking in those terms when you wrote that poem?

RODITI: Certainly at the end, certainly the end. There are some parts of it which lend themselves only to the two first levels. But the last two poems certainly have their

allegorical and their anagogical levels. The earlier part, only literal and metaphorical.

SMITH: Now you said yesterday that the religious side of you had begun in the thirties and grew. "Meditation on Books" struck me as an extremely religious poem.

RODITI: It is. And it starts without being one, and then it ends by being one.

SMITH: But one that radically redefines religion, it struck me.

RODITI: Well, no and yes. There's this Cabala in it. The Cabala, like other mystical doctrines, compares the creation of the world with the creation of a book. God has created the world which is a book which we have to interpret.

SMITH: Right.

RODITI: Yes. And that is at the back of my mind in the two last poems of that series.

SMITH: It seems to me in you there's an inversion of that sense.

RODITI: Yes. Well, there's an ambivalence rather than an inversion. It can be interpreted both ways, as the Bible being, or certain books being a key to the universe, and the universe being something that has to be interpreted like a book. It works both ways. It should.

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MAY 20, 1985

SMITH: So did you meet Krishnamurti through Carlo Suarès?

RODITI: Yes, that was in 1929 and '30. It was immediately after Krishnamurti had broken with the Theosophical people and liquidated their foundation, Star Foundation or whatever it was, because he didn't agree with the notion of being a messiah, he didn't agree with their notions of an organized church and the sort of authoritarian aspects of it. So I met him in the home of Suarès on several occasions when there would be small gatherings of the few people in Paris who followed him in this breakaway from Theosophy. Suarès had been editing the French journal of the Theosophists, which was called the *Cahiers de l'Etoile*, since all their publications had this name of star, whether English or German or whatever it was. And it was a very limited, small crowd. One of them was Lady Lutyens, the wife of a famous architect; then there was Krishnamurti's secretary and assistant, Rajagopal. And then the French writer René Daumal who came once or twice. They were very informal discussions, and, in a way, they exerted a rather strong influence on me; not that I was converted to anything, but I'd been brought up in a home where there was no such thing as any religious practice at all. I was a bit confused (I was only nineteen) in that I felt some urge

towards, I wouldn't say some religion, but some more firm belief in what was right and wrong, and what was good and bad and so on. My conversations with Krishnamurti, in which I participated in spite of my being so young, partly because he didn't speak French, and he found that I could interpret into French whatever he said in English, so that he became rather more intimate with me than with some of the others, except, of course, Suares. The influence was strange in that I began very gradually to enter upon a very slow evolution, but I could see that that was the starting point, and it has led me through the years, through the influence of Suares, Krishnamurti, [T. S.] Eliot, many readings--I won't say being a religious man, but recently someone asked me if I believed in God, and I answered, with a sort of quip that I'm a bit like Blaise Pascal, in that Pascal wrote that if one doesn't believe in God, and then after death discovers that He really exists, then it's too bad for one, whereas if one believes in God, and after death discovers that He doesn't exist, well, so what? And that is known as Pascal's bet. In my case it's a bit more complex. I believe in living as if God exists, but without believing it and that is because I feel that I am much happier if my conscience is at rest. I believe in leading a kind of life in which one doesn't have to reproach

oneself much. I once said to Paul Goodman something which went into his writing and which was spread far and wide in psychoanalytical circles: there's a saying, a common English saying, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." And I parodied using a Jewish word; I said, "A mitzvah a day," that's to say an unsolicited good action, "keeps the psychoanalyst away." And in a way that's true. If you feel that your conscience is at rest, you don't have guilt feelings, you don't have any of the problems of anxiety that so many people suffer from. And as the years went by, it took me a long time to reach this. I've reached a point of, I would say, relative happiness in which I don't feel much anxiety. Yesterday, I spent the whole day with a couple of old friends of mine whom I hadn't seen for a couple of years, and I was shocked by the unconscious anxiety in them, and the fear of death in them. And I'm not afraid of death--I'm afraid of dying messily. I'm afraid of dying, but I'm not afraid of what's going to happen after death. So that it began with Krishnamurti, this search for some kind of, I won't say faith, but some way of life which filled a gap in my education, and it took me a long time to find it. I mean, it's not easy. And in the long run it has proven to be maybe closer to a certain form of Judaism than of Christianity, but I don't practice one, I don't feel the need to practice a religion, and if I

refer to God in my poems, it's as a kind of allegory. When I refer to him always in the anagogical sense, as an allegory to lead one or my readers, or me as I'm writing the poem, towards a higher interpretation of life and of the universe and my own life, to sort of achieve some kind of harmony. And I think that I've achieved it, up to a certain point, and as far as it's possible within my gifts or character.

SMITH: Is writing a poem a mitzvah?

RODITI: It can be. It depends what kind of poem. It can be a mitzvah if it's a poem which contains a message which can be of some moral use to the reader.

SMITH: But you don't insist that all of your poems be of moral use to the reader.

RODITI: No, no, certainly not. I mean, some of them are humorous poems, some of them explore a dream world; I think that very few of them have a moral message, but in a way, they are probably those which mean most to me.

SMITH: Now, you started publishing again in 1968 when Kayak Press published a book of prose poems [**New Hieroglyphic Tales: Prose Poems**].

RODITI: Yes, they were very old prose poems. They were things that I'd written in the days when I was publishing in **transition** and some of them had appeared there. I was teaching at San Francisco State at the time, and on my way

to San Francisco, I'd stopped in New York and found this file of old poems in a carton in my mother's apartment there. I was quite sure that not a copy of them had survived. I took them along to San Francisco, and I was staying in Kenneth Rexroth's apartment. And George Hitchcock came to fetch me for dinner one evening, and the phone rang, and I had a long conversation with somebody, and when I came back to the room where he was, he'd picked up this file of poems and was reading them, and said he wanted to publish them. I was most surprised, and that's how they came to be published. I did a little bit of revision on them, not structural, but to avoid repetition of words and so on. They were printed practically as they were written when I was eighteen.

SMITH: Then your next book of English language poetry was--

RODITI: **Emperor of Midnight.**

SMITH: How did that come to be published, that selection?

RODITI: Well, there was somebody at Pomona who was doing a doctoral dissertation for Ann Arbor on American surrealism, American surrealist literature. And he discovered my thing in **The Oxford Outlook** and my poems in **transition**, and devoted a whole part of his dissertation to these few texts, and he heard that I was around. As a matter of fact, I think that he believed that I was dead at the

time. His name was Edward [B.] Germain; he now teaches in the east at Phillips Academy in New Hampshire. And he proposed to Black Sparrow Press that they publish a book of my poems, and that's how I met John Martin, and I then put together this book, **Emperor of Midnight**, which contained quite a lot of poems which had never yet been printed, some of them quite recent ones, but a lot of very old ones.

SMITH: I would like to explore a little bit some of the differences you see between your more recent surrealist writing and the surrealist writing that you did as a young man. Is it still proper even to consider what you're doing now surrealist?

RODITI: I don't think that someone like [André] Breton would consider that it's surrealist. I think that what I was writing in 1928, '29, still a bit in '30, I still believed to some extent that it was automatic writing and that there was practically no intervention of reason in what I was writing. Nowadays, I'm playing much more consciously with dream material and symbolism and exploring it almost with a knowledge of psychoanalysis, and also some knowledge of theories of the absurd, of theories of paradox and so on. I think that, in a way, for instance, all my more recent prose fables are much closer to some of the writings of Kafka than to any strictly surrealist writings. The more I read Kafka, especially his short pieces,

the more I'm convinced that that is the kind of exploration of the unconscious for which I would be most gifted. But it's difficult, it's very difficult to remember one's dreams to begin with; they vanish so fast. It's only once every two or three months that on awakening I can remember a dream clearly enough to note it and then work on it.

SMITH: Do you do any research, study the latest dream research that's being done in physiology of dreams?

RODITI: No, I don't think that that is the aspect that interests me. I'm interested very much in how dreams sort of metamorphose remembered experience, and give it a meaning which it didn't have at the time that it was being experienced; it's the emotional life which is infused into experience, remembered experience, and also--it's very difficult to say what I mean there. It's transforming experience into almost something apocalyptic, making it into a personal revelation, which the experience at the time it was lived was not. I find, for instance, that in recent months while writing my memoirs, I have night after night dreams about my parents and my childhood, and it's sometimes been rather painful because I realize from these dreams what violent hostilities I had towards my parents, even at a very early age. And then I begin to wonder whether my poor mother and father really deserved so much hostility. Finally, I have come to the conclusion that

they were so totally unaware of what their responsibilities were towards any children, not only towards me, but towards my two brothers and my sister, and they bungled our upbringing so atrociously that--I won't say that they deserved this hostility, but I can't imagine how they could have evaded it. I discovered that my brother who's still alive, whenever I discuss the matter with him, is even more hostile than I am, although he's not a poet and has never been in psychoanalysis. And I can't discuss it at all with my sister, because she shuts up like a clam, and the mere fact that she shuts up like a clam reveals that she's probably more hostile than I am. The other one, the fourth one, is dead, so I can't explore with him. But I see that three of us developed not exactly the same hostility. Three of us felt the need to liberate ourselves completely from this background, and have managed it, each one in a different way, but each one with this load of hostility and guilt, because one feels guilt about the hostility, and each one with a sense of having had a very privileged, but very unhappy childhood. Materially privileged, but unhappy in that everything was wrong about it.

SMITH: There was a prose poem that you read the other day, "A Program For Self-Improvement," that I was quite taken with. Is that a recent work that was based on a dream?

RODITI: That's perhaps less based on a dream, it's a more

strictly satirical poem about, well, the feeling that I could be improved--who can't?--and then making a farce of it.

SMITH: Right. The images that you chose were--

RODITI: Yes, grotesque.

SMITH: Or maybe telling details of our culture today.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Then, seven years later, Black Sparrow published another book of poetry, **Thrice Chosen**. Was that their idea, or did you--

RODITI: It was their idea, and I'd been putting them together, and when I suggested to John Martin that I had another book ready, he said OK. He's been a bit disappointed with the sales, but that's, I think, that's his fault. I was not in America when it was published, and John Martin doesn't know who is likely to review a book. He sends out review copies very much at random, so that it got reviewed only in a couple of periodicals, apart from those to which I sent copies.

SMITH: What's the latest poem in that?

RODITI: I think the last one--

SMITH: When was it written?

RODITI: I think "The Survivors" is the last one that I wrote in that book, and it was written very shortly before the book was published; in fact, it was not in the original

manuscript, but was added more or less at the last moment.

SMITH: Now, you've written that you do quite a bit of revision on your poetry. How does that work? Do you let a poem sit for a number of years?

RODITI: It depends very much on the poem. On most of the later poems, I let them sit at most a couple of months, because I have a much clearer notion now when I start writing on what I want to write. And also I sort of play around with the poem over several days until I feel that it's in an acceptable form and that it says all that I want it to say. Then I just let it stand and look at it again a few weeks later to avoid certain repetitions too. Sometimes I leave it for a year; it depends on chance more than anything else. Like the poem that appeared recently in **Midstream**--I wrote it in no time, in a day, a year ago, and then sort of mislaid it. I knew that it was lying around among my papers, but I wrote it when I at the Djerassi Foundation in Northern California and then stuffed it in a file of papers that I took back to Paris, and I had so much other work in Paris that I never thought of it again. Then I was tidying up early this year to come back to America, and found it where I'd filed it away, and brought it back here and changed four lines because I didn't like one of the rhyme schemes, and sent it off immediately and it went to press. I find that my poems need less and less revision.

SMITH: What is the title of the poem in **Midstream**?

RODITI: It's called, "Springtime in the Yeshiva." I read it the other day.

SMITH: There was one poem in **Thrice Chosen** I wanted to ask you about, "Shechinah and the Kiddushim."

RODITI: Well, that is probably my most obscure poem.

Shechinah is, in Cabala, the eye of god. But if you go back further in Jewish mysticism, it's a kind of, how shall I say, survival of a female deity, let's say pre-Mosaic, at a time when there was a male and a female god. And the kiddushim, they appear on a couple of occasions in the Old Testament as the abomination of abominations, that is to say the sacred prostitutes attached to the temples in Canaanite religions, and one or two kings of Israel regressed to the Canaanite religions, and I've forgotten which prophet had them massacred. But every once in a while, in Cabala, there is something which suggests that a memory of all this has survived in Jewish mysticism, and presumably the kiddushim were originally attached to the temple of this female god, and my poem is based on the notion that after the abolition of this dual religion, the establishment of monotheism, the new single god was bisexual or sexless, so to speak. It's a complex poem, which is based on some interpretations of certain passages in the

Old Testament and the Cabala with a little, how should I say, injection of Taoism, Chinese dualism, yin and yang.

SMITH: I found the juxtaposition of prayer and dance to be most intriguing.

RODITI: Yes, well, that is based on the idea of King David dancing in the temple as a form of prayer. It's based on the few references we find in the Old Testament to a kind of cult that has vanished now for over two thousand years.

SMITH: Is that related in any way to the White Goddess cult that Robert Graves wrote about?

RODITI: Well, I guess yes and no. He's writing about a cult which is in an entirely different context and I'm writing about a cult which is, one might say, in an almost strictly Semitic context of Canaanites, Jews, with an injection from the far east. But when I wrote the poem, I was thinking certainly very little about the Aegean world of Robert Graves.

SMITH: Then, also in 1981 you published a book of poems in French [*Etre un autre*].

RODITI: Well, they're very old poems, things that I wrote at the time when I was associating with Carlo Suarès, and many of them had appeared in French periodicals in 1929, '30, '31.

SMITH: Since you mention Suarès, you also at that time, translated his work *La--*

RODITI: *La nouvelle création.*

SMITH: Right.

RODITI: Well, this is a very strange story, that book, because Suarès had somehow become involved in London with John Middleton Murry and *The Adelphi*, and Middleton Murry wanted to publish a translation of the book, and I translated it. Then the Depression came, or got worse, and *The Adelphi* didn't have the funds to publish it, and it was never published. Then many years later, decades later, a friend of mine in London who runs Peter Menard Press, Tony [Anthony] Rudolf, became interested in what Suarès writes and what was being published here in Berkeley by Shambala, and I said, "Well, I've translated this book which has remained unpublished," and I found the manuscript (god knows how it survived) and sent it to him, and then Suarès agreed on publication on condition that he be allowed to rewrite completely one section of it, so that I had to translate that again.

SMITH: As a young man translating it--you seem to have put quite a bit of work into it--were you much influenced by the ideas, the seven days of creation, each one having one of the capital sins?

RODITI: Well, yes and no. I was very easily influenced at the time, all this was a bit beyond me at the time. I guess I was influenced for a while, but--

SMITH: Is it, say, reflected in "[The Complaint of] Jehuda Abravanel"?

RODITI: No, no longer. A couple of years later, I'd parted with Suarez, partly because I found that he was getting involved in more and more mystical, and I want say-- Now, I would say obscurantist views, and also because I found that he was getting himself involved politically in the oddest things. I mean, some of his writings in which he talks about the necessity of a political revolution and seems to be almost in favor of communism. I had the feeling that he was, he just didn't know what he was talking about. And when he became involved with certain, very leftist literary groups in Paris, I felt that these people, when they talked about the revolution and about Russia, they simply didn't know what they were talking about, so I maintained a distance with them. I'd had occasion to know about the extreme violence of the Stalinist regime, and I was, I've never been in favor of any kind of physical violence or persecution of anybody.

SMITH: How did you come to be aware of the Stalinist violence?

RODITI: Well, we had, occasionally, people who escaped from Russia to Paris, and then I did know a few very liberal White Russians who were still managing to get information from Russia, phoning, receiving letters. Then

there was a remarkable book by a Yugoslav, called Anton Chiliega which was published in French in the thirties about--in which he already revealed what was going on prison camps in Siberia, because he'd been in one. And I knew the writings of Victor Serge, who'd broken with them, and then I knew Boris Souvarine, so that all this between 1932 and '35 turned me very much against communism. And after all, Souvarine was marvelously informed about what was going on in Russia and had been very close to Lenin till he broke.

SMITH: I don't get the sense that you had actually been in any sense a leftist.

RODITI: No, I've never been, but I'd been associating, whether consciously or unconsciously, with people who were leftists or who became leftists, and when they became very leftist, I broke away. I was very unpolitical, partly because I was rootless. I was an American living in France; I mean, no French politics really affected me that deeply. There was no reason for me to have any political activity, except when Hitler came to power, when I did become, in a way actively antifascist, but not a communist for that.

SMITH: Getting back to the present, you've also had some chapbooks, one would call them, published by Red Ozier Press. How did those come to be?

RODITI: Oh, well, that's Bradford Morrow; he knew them and, when I was in New York a couple of years ago, told me that they knew my work and were very anxious to have a little book of mine. So I gave this little chapbook, for which they printed a hundred copies and which sold out almost immediately. They were sort of fun pieces, most of them.

SMITH: That was the--

RODITI: The **New Old and New Testaments**.

SMITH: What about your relationship with Cadmus Editions?

RODITI: Well, that goes back to Santa Barbara. My first relationship with Santa Barbara was with John Martin when he was still here. He published **Emperor of Midnight** when he was still here in Los Angeles. Then I published a very little chapbook in Santa Barbara with Capra Press, **The Disorderly Poet**. Nowadays it's out of print. It's very funny, the other evening I had dinner with friends, and after dinner they said, "Oh, let's go over to the bookstore across the street and see if they have anything of yours," and there there was a copy of **The Disorderly Poet** still selling at \$2.50. And I know that collectors are paying \$15.00 and \$20.00 for it now, so they snapped it up at once.

SMITH: Was it the only copy left?

RODITI: The only copy left. And they had a copy of **Thrice**

Chosen, which was sold immediately. Well, **The Disorderly Poet** has a strange story to it: Noel Young, who runs Capra Press, wanted me to edit a whole series of these chapbooks, and I scared up two which actually got into print, that and the stories of Mohammed Hamri. And then he'd already published another series, which was not selling well enough, so he gave up the whole idea. I'll be seeing him next week on another project, god knows whether it will work or not.

SMITH: Do you have any forthcoming books?

RODITI: Well, the one with Cadmus Editions, which moved up from Santa Barbara to the Bay Area.

SMITH: And that's the Yunus Emre?

RODITI: That's the Yunus Emre book, and then I have a book coming out in Paris, the French translation of Horace Walpole's **Hieroglyphic Tales** with an introduction on Walpole, and then there's a tiny little thing, not even worth mentioning, being published by my friends, Victoria and Bill Dailey, here. They discovered an extremely rare nineteenth century French book a year ago by [Jules] Barbey d'Aurevilly; it's an unlisted first edition of a prose poem of his, which in all bibliographies is ignored. The second edition is always referred to as the first. This was printed in a small town in the provinces of France, and oddly enough with a verse translation in English by an English lady, who was apparently a friend of his. It's so

rare that they decided to reprint it, and asked me to write a little introduction. I corrected the proofs the other day, and it's going to press now. I think that my introduction will be at most three pages.

SMITH: Now, there's one other book that you were connected with that we haven't talked about: the letters of [Eugène] Delacroix [**Les plus belles lettres d'Eugène Delacroix**].

RODITI: Yes, well, that was a job which I did for Calmann Lévy in Paris. They had embarked on--I seem to have had luck in this kind of thing--they'd embarked on a program of doing several volumes of letters of famous men, and they approached me to do those of Delacroix, and I was going to do his selected letters in two volumes, two or three. Then they were so disappointed with the sales of all the previous volumes that they'd published before getting around to mine, that they published only one volume and never published the second volume of selected letters. And then I had a contract with a London publisher to translate the lot, but as the centenary of Delacroix's death approached in 1963, such an avalanche of new books on Delacroix came out, that the footnoting of my English translation alone was a task that I could never do properly to meet my deadline, because each time I thought I was up to date, then another book would come out which would require some new footnoting of identification of things, so I gave it

up. My London publisher was most astonished in that I refunded the advance I'd received on the book, and he sent me back my check, saying that no author had ever done that in the history of his firm. So subsequently I published some occasional letters, the letters from North Africa in **Antaeus**, and I may publish the letters on English art, which would be quite interesting, because he went to England, and wrote some letters on English art, and then much later in his journal were a couple of passages. That would make a nice little booklet.

SMITH: In going through your manuscripts, I came across one poem which was entitled, "International Statistical Institute Conference," and it struck me how little you had actually written that was inspired by your (quote) "professional life," at least that appeared in the manuscripts.

RODITI: Well, that was written, believe it or not, in Sydney, Australia, where I was interpreting this conference. The poem was subsequently published under the title "Heraclitus on Statistics." [laughter] I think I wrote it on the letterhead paper of the conference. Actually, there are more poems than that which have been inspired by such activities; not many, because it's very difficult to write any poetry on, for instance, the meetings of the European Common Market on, let's say, breaking down French import duties on the importing of Dutch cookies. [laughter]

SMITH: Now the other day at the poetry reading, you read "Words of the Bird," and you commented on the difficulty that you were facing now in terms of deciding how complex you wanted that poem to be. Has that been a problem you've had to face? You don't footnote as Eliot does, or in some of the Pound editions.

RODITI: I wouldn't know how to footnote that poem. As a matter of fact, I had a serious problem with that poem, in that I wrote it, and was perfectly satisfied with it, and wrote it rather fast, and fortunately didn't publish it immediately. Some months later I looked at it and discovered that one of the lines was a line of [William Butler] Yeats; it had come up without my realizing it. I had to replace it. A complete line of Yeats, very strange.

SMITH: Of course, many poets do quote.

RODITI: Yes, but it wasn't even a conscious quote.

SMITH: Do you often play, since you're multilingual, with the different meanings of words from language to language; you said, "the sea is not as white as they say"?

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: To me, that line is perfectly fine, not knowing that the Turkish name for the Aegean Sea translates as the White Sea. It still makes sense, because often I feel that the sea is white on a very hot, sunny kind of day.

RODITI: Well, since the person who is speaking in the poem

would be someone who normally would be speaking Turkish rather than English, this is one of the little keys to the poem to reveal that it is spoken by a Turkish character. This is the kind of thing that Byron did in different ways in **The Giaour** and many of his poems, but--

SMITH: Your average reader would not know that.

RODITI: No, but that has to be explained when I publish it. That's one of the poems which would require a footnote at the end. But in my poetry in general, sometimes I use knowledge of German because it's so much closer to English. For instance, in one of my very early poems I refer to wild foreign features; well, the German **wildfremd** is a common expression, meaning totally foreign. And I thought that this sort of gives a new meaning in a way, or at least gives a new twist to the meaning. But I don't do that very often.

SMITH: What about French/English transpositions?

RODITI: It doesn't lend itself much.

SMITH: Even though there's so many "false friends"?

RODITI: To begin with, French in my opinion is not a very poetic language. It's a very threadbare language as far as poetry is concerned, especially now.

SMITH: You had mentioned the other day, that if you had written in French, you would now be a more famous poet than you are.

RODITI: Yes, well, that is because it's relatively easy in France to make a career as an advanced-guard writer. I've forgotten who it was; it was someone, no, it was Kenneth Rexroth who once wrote that if Paul Goodman had been writing in French, he would now be world famous, and this was said twenty years ago. And the fact is that--

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RODITI: The fact is that the kind of advanced-guard literature that Paul Goodman was writing in those years, or had been writing for twenty years, had it been written in French would have been highly acclaimed in Paris, and the news of it would have come to America, and he would have been translated by Richard Howard or somebody and would have had a great reputation in America. There is a small, but enthusiastic market for a certain kind of advanced-guard literature in France, and it's much easier to break into it and into the similar market which is much greater here in America. Had I continued writing in French, by now I would be a member of the French Academy perhaps.

SMITH: There's another poem that I wanted to ask you about an image, a recent poem, for "Meditations in a Museum," where you refer to art as a sleeping beauty. Is that a felicitous phrase that came to you, or something that you have lived with for a long time?

RODITI: Well, the whole poem is about art as arrested motion. It starts off with this description of a mosaic pool with mosaic fish swimming in it, in which the water is made of stone and the fish are made of stone, and this pool I've seen. This mosaic, it exists, if I remember right in the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, or someplace like that.

Then it goes on to a vision of Perseus and Andromeda in which she remains chained to her rock, and the monster comes no closer, nor does Perseus. And actually, after writing the poem, I saw this new Van Dyck which is in the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art] representing it. The monster almost disappears into the background, and Perseus too; they're both very small. There's a huge nude in the foreground. But they're the arrested motion. Then there's the Guido Reni painting of Atalanta racing with her golden apple and getting no closer to her goal in the painting, and in the back of my mind throughout was the absurd idea of the Greek sophist, Zeno of Elea, about the tortoise and the hare, if I remember it was. And the arrow dividing, dividing the distances-- Whereas Zeno is talking about motion in real life, I'm talking about arrested motion in art and then finally concluding that art is a sleeping beauty, like the palace of the sleeping beauty, where everybody was like a statue until the kiss, god knows what it's going to be, you're going to revive her.

SMITH: Do you have a series of poems on art that parallels your poems on books?

RODITI: No, this is a very recent poem. I was sort of surprised that I wrote it. I then decided that maybe I should write a few more.

SMITH: That would be a pendant to your series on books. Has it been published yet?

RODITI: No, I wrote it at most five weeks ago. As a matter of fact, I submitted it to the **New Yorker**, but one never knows what the **New Yorker's** going to do.

SMITH: Let's move on to the recognition that you've received; the most prominent, I guess, is the [Marjorie Peabody] Waite Award.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Did that come as a surprise to you?

RODITI: Oh, a complete surprise. Well, yes and no, because the [American] Academy [and Institute of Arts and Letters] had written to Ross-Erikson asking for a certain number of copies of my **Dialogues on Art**, saying that I was being considered for an award. This came as a great surprise, and then I didn't hear any further news about it. I was back in America a year later and moving around, and when I came back from the West Coast and was staying with a friend in Washington, I got a phone call there from my sister-in-law in New York, that the Academy had phoned her to find out where I was, because they'd written me in Paris, cabled me in Paris, and had no replies, simply because I had nobody in my apartment at the time to forward mail. So I phoned them and then discovered that they were having this ceremony two weeks later, and I was going to be in New York in any case the following week, so I stayed on in New York two weeks longer in order to attend the

ceremony. And it was for me rather satisfying to get this recognition.

SMITH: Do you have many old friends and acquaintances who are on the academy?

RODITI: It turned out far more than I thought. You see, I haven't lived in New York for a long time, but at the reception there were masses of people that I've known for many years: Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, Hortense Calisher; Ned Rorem was not there that day; he couldn't be there; David Diamond the composer. Oh, I can't remember them all, but there were a good dozen people whom I've known for many years and who are members of the academy one way or another, or the institute.

SMITH: So you might have been a beneficiary of all this good will--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: --that you've built up over the years.

RODITI: As a matter of fact, it has been hinted to me that I am being considered for election, but there I have to wait for a certain number of people to die, because there are a limited number of members. So, if I survive long enough.

SMITH: Kind of ghoulish.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: You also were on the panel of the Neustadt

International Prize for Literature.

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: Could we go into that a little bit? The politics of award-giving as you witnessed it must have been a very new experience for you.

RODITI: Yes, well, you see, that is a very peculiar award, because it has a different jury every year--every other year, because the award is given only every other year. And since they recruit their jury from all sorts of places--included an Indian lady who lives in England, a Hungarian poet, a Polish poet who is a professor at Harvard, and so on--you never really know how it's going to work out. Each one has submitted a candidate, and I had had certain misgivings. I'd originally wanted to submit as candidate a Portuguese writer called [Miguel] Torga, who I feel has been terribly neglected. I don't think that he's absolutely great, but I thought it's high time that a Portuguese writer gets an international award, and he's certainly greater than Pearl Buck and a number of others who've had international awards. Then I was told that unfortunately too little of Torga has been translated into French or English. There's only one book in French available, and the jury members would be able to read only in French, English, or German, and there was none in German and none in English. Then I was really on the spot,

because I thought of suggesting Yashar Kemal, but that would cause another uproar in the Turkish press if he got it, because Yashar has certain enemies who always claim that his world celebrity is due to the fact that he has a Jewish wife, and that his Jewish wife has a Jewish cousin, yours truly, who helped translate. I felt that let him get the Nobel Prize someday, because I'm not on the committee, but if I propose him and he gets it, there'd be all hell to pay again in the Turkish press. So finally I proposed Ernesto Sábato, who's a great Argentinian writer, not realizing that somebody else was proposing [Jorge Luis] Borges, and that Sábato would have very little chance as long as Borges was being proposed. So that my candidate was eliminated fairly soon, and Borges remained in the discussions until practically the end, and we finally gave the prize to a Finnish poet, believe it or not, who practically none of us had ever read--who reads Finnish?--but we had some German translations and some English translations of him.

SMITH: Paavo Haavikko, right?

RODITI: Yes, I don't know how it managed to come out on top. I think it was to a great extent because so many members of the jury felt that Borges has had enough honors and enough prizes, and then one member of the jury pointed out that Borges still hoped to get the Nobel Prize, and

that if he got this prize, it might reduce his chances of getting the Nobel Prize, which is nonsense, because [Gabriel] Garcia Márquez got the Neustadt prize, and then got the Nobel Prize; I think [Giuseppe] Ungaretti got both. It's possible to get first the one and then the other. Anyhow, there was so much controversy about Borges at the last minute that it went to this Finnish poet.

SMITH: Whose candidate was he?

RODITI: Oh, a Swedish writer from Finland who was a member of the jury.

SMITH: Do the awards have to be unanimous, the jury votes?

RODITI: Well, the way it works is by a series of votes in which the one who gets the least votes is eliminated, and then you go around again, and in the end there were only two, and it was the Finnish poet who came out on top.

SMITH: How long were the deliberations?

RODITI: Four days.

SMITH: I'm curious as to what the tenor of the discussion is, the argument is. What are the criteria? Are the writers' works discussed only--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: And their contribution?

RODITI: No, each one of us presents his candidate. But it was a very peculiar jury, because it included this excellent Polish poet--what's his name, Michael Baranczyk, who

was a friend of Czeslaw Milosz--and his candidate was a very good Polish poet called Zbigniew Herbert. And it included, the native American writer, the American Indian, F. Scott Momaday, and his candidate was, of all people, the English poet Christopher Logue, who's scarcely material for an international literary prize. He's a very pleasant person, F. Scott Momaday, but obviously he didn't have much knowledge of the work or the importance of some of the other candidates. I think that the tenor of these discussions would vary from one year to another, depending very much on the jurors who'd been selected, and on the candidates that these jurors had submitted.

SMITH: Were you enthusiastic about participating in this jury?

RODITI: I was interested, I won't say enthusiastic. I know **World Literature Today** and its editor very well, and I've been contributing to that magazine on and off--it used to be called **Books Abroad**--since about 1940. I'm the oldest contributor but one. And, well, I'd been to the University of Oklahoma many years ago, it's a rather strange place. It's a huge campus; it has expanded a great deal since I've last been there. They have some quite interesting things there: they have a couple of rather good specialized libraries (because at one time they had a great deal of money from oil and have been able to build up

rather good specialized libraries), and masses of buildings; some of them, the older ones, are very charming in their way, sort of Western Gothic.

SMITH: You've written your Nobel Prize speech already ["A Most Magnificent Oration"], I understand.

RODITI: Yes, I published that in the first issue of **Conjunctions**. It's a very tongue-in-cheek speech, in which I discovered at the end that I'm speaking in an empty hall, nobody's listening.

SMITH: What was behind writing that particular piece?

RODITI: It was a kind of surrealist satire. Have you read it?

SMITH: Yes.

RODITI: It was fun writing it, I wrote it like that one day in San Francisco, for the hell of it, just for the fun. I didn't even think of publishing it for a couple of years, and then when this special issue was being published in honor of James Laughlin, and I discussed what should go into the issue, and Bradford Morrow felt that most of the material he was getting was rather heavy, I said, "I'll contribute something which is light and fun," and I sent that to him. He was delighted with it, and James Laughlin was delighted with it when he read it. I've never had occasion to regret publishing it.

SMITH: Is that the speech you'll give if you're awarded

the Nobel Prize? [laughter]

RODITI: I doubt it, because, first, I don't think I'll ever get the Nobel Prize, and I'd have to make a speech which would be--I would in such a context have to make a slightly more topical speech. In addition, I would not be facing an empty hall.

SMITH: I also wanted to ask you how it came that all of your papers are at UCLA?

RODITI: That's a very long story. In 1945, when I was working at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library on the book on Oscar Wilde, I had occasion to meet Lawrence [Clark] Powell several times, and we got on very well. I had a load of papers that I didn't want to take back to Europe ever, which--I didn't know what to do with them, they took up a lot of space. And I decided a few years later, rather than take them back to Europe when I moved back to Europe, to deposit them here. Why here? Because I felt that Yale, Harvard already had too much in the way of papers; they'd be lost in the amount that they have there. This was an expanding campus, an expanding library, and, in a way, thanks to Larry Powell, organized on a much sounder basis than Berkeley, so that it could expand in a more rational way, whereas Berkeley's library at that time was a bit of a mess. And so I started donating here, and I don't regret it. I certainly find that it's much easier to

keep house at home. [laughter] I have a very small apartment. I'd be smothered under the paper if I'd kept it all.

SMITH: You've mentioned that your poetry is very much influenced by your reading of philosophy.

RODITI: Yes, I would say it's influenced in a way negatively. If I hadn't read so much philosophy, I would probably have written much more poetry. I refrain from writing a lot, because I know that it would be absolute nonsense philosophically.

SMITH: Well, there's a tension I find in your work between a defense of traditional values and advanced-guard thought. You seem rather to plop down on the traditional values side of things.

RODITI: That's age, sir, age.

SMITH: Well, going back to "Cassandra's Dream" even, or--

RODITI: Yes, well, I mean, I've been living in a world where I've been very conscious of the fact that some of these traditional values were worth preserving and were endangered, and I've become aware of this, especially since about 1934, more and more. Well, I'm not the only one to feel that they're endangered, and I would like to do what I can to, I won't say protect them, but to inspire a bit more interest in respecting them.

SMITH: Your philosophical essays are neither numerous nor lengthy, but you have written somewhat on Spinoza, Lev

Shestov, and [Benedetto] Croce--

RODITI: Yes.

SMITH: --[Giuseppe Antonio] Borgese.

RODITI: Yes, well, I have these two essays on Shestov, which are still unpublished, which were going to be published. And then I wrote this absolute demolition of **Crowds and Power**, that dreadful book by [Elias] Canetti, and he'll never forgive me for that.

SMITH: Why did you write on that book? And why did you write about Shestov?

RODITI: Well, Canetti, I'd been asked to write an article on him before the Nobel Prize, by his German publisher, and I reread **Crowds and Power** and decided it was absolute nonsense. I wrote this article, in which I pointed out what Canetti's virtues are and what his flaws are as a thinker and as a writer, and I sent it to **Midstream**. My friend Joel Carmichael, who was the editor of **Midstream**, wrote back that it was a very good essay, but who the hell was Canetti? I wrote back telling him who Canetti was, and then he said "Well, I'll keep it on file. We might use it someday." And then about a year later, Canetti gets the Nobel Prize, and Joel wakes up to realize that Canetti is not as unknown as he thought, and promptly cables me, "Can I alter the conclusion and add a paragraph?" And it went to press, but it still went to press criticizing Canetti as

a philosopher, which he certainly isn't.

SMITH: Now, Lev Shestov?

RODITI: Well, Lev Shestov is someone who has been admired so much by certain existentialists that I decided to read him again; I've read him a bit in the days when [Carlo] Suares was reading him, and all my friends in Paris before the war; I was much too young to understand him then. And then now in rereading him, I discovered that the poor man had very peculiar notions of the nature of philosophy, since he felt that there were only three philosophers who deserved his respect: the first being Nietzsche, who's a sort of oddball philosopher; the second one being Dostoyevsky, who certainly isn't one; the third one, Kierkegaard, whom I just cannot really tolerate, I find him a muddle-headed, perverse bore. I started reading Shestov again and tried to pin down what's wrong with his thought. I discovered that throughout his life, he was constantly quarrelling with Spinoza. And the more I read Shestov, the more I discovered that each time he disagreed with Spinoza, he had misread Spinoza and misunderstood him. My two essays are basically on Shestov's misunderstandings of Spinoza, in the defense of Spinoza. It's going to be difficult to publish these essays, because nobody reads Shestov to speak of, and who cares how wrong he is about Spinoza? I'll find somebody to publish it sooner or later.

SMITH: Now you studied briefly under [Max] Horkheimer. To what degree did he, or [Theodor] Adorno for that matter, or the Frankfurt School in general influence you?

RODITI: Not much--guided me in readings. Horkheimer perhaps more; Adorno is a very extraordinary man, a very abstruse and complicated thinker. I knew Herbert Marcuse too, but I don't think they ever influenced me. I read them with interest, that's all. By that time I'd become very independent, in a way, uninfluenceable.

SMITH: You seem, actually, rather skeptical about all modern trends in philosophy.

RODITI: Except [Ludwig] Wittgenstein.

SMITH: Now, why do you exempt Wittgenstein?

RODITI: First, because he writes such beautiful German, and secondly, because I keep on finding in Wittgenstein passages which leave me dazzled.

SMITH: Are you referring to his first work [**Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus**], or are you also talking about his truth tables, his work in the theory of truth tables?

RODITI: It's no individual work, it's individual passages in all his works. Suddenly, I find something which is so luminous. He strikes me as being a very dangerous thinker, if one wanted to swallow it hook, line, and sinker, because he's totally contradictory; I mean, there are two different philosophies in his works, but one which destroys the

other. But ultimately, if one takes the two contradictory philosophies and his other writings, too, one discovers that he's-- Basically, he should have been a Socratic philosopher. He should have been someone like Socrates in the dialogues of Plato. A tease, in a way. And every once in a while, there is something that is so luminous and sometimes so funny; and then in his life too, he's such a remarkable man, who tried his hand at architecture, at sculpture, composing music. He was really a remarkable man.

SMITH: Had you ever met him?

RODITI: Oh, no, too young, and too far, at the time when he was alive, too far from the world in which he was living.

SMITH: Now you write in your book on Oscar Wilde that for Wilde aesthetics and ethical criteria are more important than politics and economics. Do you share that? Is that something that could be applied to you as well?

RODITI: I suppose so. There's very little reference to economics in Wilde, except in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," and then he scarcely touches on it. I think Wilde was very ignorant of economic problems. He vaguely hints at the existence of poverty in certain passages in [The Picture of] **Dorian Gray** in the whole description of the East End, but then it's sort of sub-Dickensian, his

description of slum life and so on. I guess that I feel that if we had a sounder sense of ethics, there would be fewer political and economic problems.

SMITH: What about aesthetics?

RODITI: Well, there too. I feel that perhaps a course in aesthetics wouldn't do our present president much harm. On occasion, he displays rather bad taste.

SMITH: But then they say John F. Kennedy was a very well read president.

RODITI: He wasn't as well read as that. He made a great display of being well read, but he wasn't. I think he read his hundred best books, and that's about all. [laughter]

SMITH: Going back to the sixties, I wanted to pick up with Paul Goodman. In the sixties, he suddenly shoots from obscurity to becoming a media star in some respects. How did that affect him from your perspective? You were very close friends.

RODITI: I think that it was something he'd expected, or hoped for, all along. Paul had been very frustrated about having so little audience, having such great difficulty getting published. And when suddenly, after **Growing Up Absurd**, the success of that book, he became a media star, he felt very gratified, and he felt that it was certainly his due. In my opinion, it was, but it had come perhaps a bit too late, or later than it should have. But he was

very much at his ease as a media star, and he made no compromises; he went on saying exactly what he thought, no matter what his audience was, whether it was over radio or TV or at a high level meeting in Washington. He never adapted his thought to his audience; it was just take it or leave it.

SMITH: There's a poem I ran across, "First Meeting"--I don't know if it's a draft or a finished poem--in which you talk about old friends meeting, and you know they're old friends because of the silence. It's only new people who are becoming friends who have voluminous conversations. Does that in some ways reflect your relationship with Goodman?

RODITI: After a while, certainly. The last few times that I saw Paul, I suppose our conversation was limited to the exchange of news about old friends, that's about all. And we didn't have much to say to each other. We were very much at peace with each other, there was no conflict, no unexplored territories.

SMITH: You had talked earlier about his unorthodox self-analysis. Could you give any more details?

RODITI: Well, I wasn't seeing him much at the time when he claimed to be going through the self-analysis. In fact, there's a lot of, how should I say, controversy among the few people who know anything about it. He claims in his

writings to have been undergoing the self-analysis, to have begun it during the Chicago years. There was certainly no evidence of it when I was in Chicago with him. Maybe after '38 when I left Chicago and he was still there. But then Isad From, who is a psychotherapist and who worked with him as a psychotherapist at the Gestalt [Therapy] Institute and was as close to [Fritz] Perls and Laura Perls as Paul was, claims that Paul's self-analysis was a rhetorical device that he uses in his writings, and he believes that there was no such thing. Now, it's very difficult for me, because I'm not a therapist nor a Gestalt therapist to decide to what extent Isad can be believed there. As he saw Paul as a therapist almost daily for a long while, because they were practicing together and discussing questions of therapy, techniques of therapy, I'm sure that Isad knows more about it than I do, but I still have a suspicion that probably what Isad would call a self-analysis would be something in very strict Gestalt terms, and what Paul said was his self-analysis occurred before he'd formulated the whole business of Gestalt analysis with Gestalt Therapy [Institute] with Perls, so it was something quite different. I have an idea that From may be talking about something different which Paul didn't do, and god knows what it is that Paul did, because I wasn't there to witness it.

SMITH: We're coming to the end, and this is a big broad question, but I wonder if you could make some kind of assessment of your generation of writers that yourself, [Charles Henri] Ford, [Paul] Bowles, [Kenneth] Rexroth, Goodman, Josephine Miles, I guess American writers primarily, the impact you made.

RODITI: I'm going to make a very pessimistic assessment. The other day when I gave my poetry reading here, I already stated that we all belonged to what historians of American literature are beginning to call the Second Generation of American Modernists, and I think that what has characterized the Second Generation of American Modernists has been the legend that the media tended to propagate about the more spectacular members of the second generation. I think that there they've been very much influenced by such things as the [Ezra] Pound trial in the first generation. Pound was a controversial figure, a scandalous figure. After the Pound trial, the media expected poets to be controversial, scandalous figures, so those who had the most impact in my generation were people like [Robert] Lowell, [John] Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, and [Randall] Jarrell, because there was something about their lives, their drunkenness, their suicides, their divorces, et cetera, et cetera, their despair that made them material for the media; whereas people like Goodman, Josephine Miles, or Jean Garrigue, or

Kenneth Rexroth, or I, who led, on the whole, relatively quiet lives and didn't attract much attention and often led very studious lives, did not have the same kind of impact. I have a feeling that some of us, I won't say all of us, and not necessarily myself, are beginning to have much more impact, and are likely to have much more, because the legend of people like Lowell after a while becomes less and less interesting, and they have to survive on the basis of their writing rather than on their biography. There are plenty of strange characters in the literature of the past whose legend is great, but what they left in the way of writing is not as great, and I'm very dubious about the survival of some of those who've attracted the most attention as writers. I think that someone as quiet in her way as Josephine Miles may be remembered as being one of the greatest poets of that generation.

SMITH: It seems also that the whole generation, of course, was overshadowed by the First Generation.

RODITI: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: Partly that's because of the great amount of novelty that was introduced. Is there also something in the nature of the work, of the considerations that you had to deal with, of the world that you had to deal with?

RODITI: I think we believed that we were living in a much more difficult world, and, after all, with the exception of

Pound, most of the American poets of the First Generation of Modernists had already matured and adopted their whole stand before such things as World War II, the Holocaust, et cetera. Our generation formed its philosophy to a great extent while living through all that. [T. S.] Eliot modified his philosophy; Marianne Moore was not at all affected by it; and so on. Pound was the only one in that generation who came out on the side of fascism and made a fool of himself. William Carlos Williams, in some of whose early works one does find an occasional anti-Semitic remark, never made any after that. They were mildly affected by all that. Our generation has lived through much more difficult times in terms of intellectual and moral decisions, and I think that this is reflected to some extent in our complex relationship to tradition, which is much more complex than that of Eliot. Eliot returned to certain traditions, partly because of his Anglo-Catholicism. Kenneth Rexroth and I--well, of course, Kenneth did convert to Catholicism on his deathbed--we have come out in favor of certain traditions without being converts to a religion, out of a conviction that certain things have to be defended, certain values, moral--ethical rather than moral--and aesthetic values, in that both Kenneth and I were opposed to the extreme vulgarization which seems to be rampant in our generation.

SMITH: What do you mean by vulgarization?

RODITI: Oh, the sort of crap that was fed us over TV and the media and so on. There is something there which is so rotten.

SMITH: I thought you might have been referring to something within poetry, specifically.

RODITI: Well, yes, [Charles] Bukowski. [laughter]

SMITH: I decided to ask that question because going over your poetry again, "The Carplings of Saint Polycarp," to me seemed to me to be asking that question.

RODITI: Yes. Well, Saint Polycarp, according to--I've forgotten; I think it's Flaubert, I think mentions, as he was about to be martyred--he questioned the wisdom of God in choosing that he, Polycarp, should live in this particular age in which this kind of thing was possible. [laughter] And I thought that that was a point of departure of sorts.

SMITH: Why do you comment at the end, "the elusive enemy is ourselves?"

RODITI: Well, the temptations that there are, are in us, and it's very difficult to live up to one's ideals.

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