

FRANCIS BAUMLI INTERVIEWED

January 8, 2006

INDEX

1. THE INTERVIEW AS FAILED ART FORM
2. WHAT VIATICUM PRESS INTERNATIONAL IS
3. THE AGE OF VIDEO
4. VIATICUM'S LOGO AND ITS AFFILIATES
5. BAUMLI AS BUSINESSMAN
6. THE READING PUBLIC
7. THE PROBLEM WITH PUBLISHERS
8. THE PROBLEM WITH EDITORS
9. THE PROBLEM WITH AUTHORS
10. PUBLISHING ANONYMOUSLY
11. BAUMLI AS WRITER
12. PERSONAL QUESTION #1
13. THE BUSINESS SIDE OF VIATICUM
14. BAUMLI AS RECLUSE
15. BAUMLI AND THE LECTURE CIRCUIT
16. THE SHOCKING QUESTION
17. ADVERTISING AND BUSINESS PARTICULARS
18. MEN'S LIBERATION BOOKS
19. RELIGIOUS BOOKS
20. THE WEBSITE
21. COST OF BOOKS
22. VIATICUM'S USED MERCHANDISE
23. SUBMISSIONS POLICY
24. PERSONAL QUESTION #2
25. THE INTERVIEWER HERSELF

Interviewer: Let's begin by referring back to when we were talking out in the hall. You said that the interview is an art form.

Baumli: What I said is that the interview fails to succeed as an art form. I have never read a good interview. The person doing the interviewing

**** ***** THE ***** INTERVIEW AS FAILED ART FORM
--

usually asks stupid questions. The person being interviewed usually responds with answers that are garrulous or inane. Interviews for the printed page are almost always bad. But the plague of interviews—or interviewing—that happens on radio talk shows is even worse.

I: You listen to those?

B: Occasionally, but briefly, yes. Someone, knowing my interests, tells me about a forthcoming topic. I get curious, and somehow I always hope that things will come off well. They seldom do. There are the people who call in. They call in to talk. Just talk and be heard. Not to contribute. Or learn. The people listening, who do not call in, get a vicarious thrill when someone else calls in. The caller is their surrogate tongue. They get to talk through someone else. Thus our citizenry prattles and natters. In case you haven't noticed, it isn't food and drink, or even sex, that gives people the greatest pleasure. Their hedonic apex is endless chatter.

I: I've noticed more and more printed interviews. It seems writers get interviewed all the time.

B: It doesn't just seem that way, it's true. But this isn't because there are people out there eager to interview writers. Writers, once they achieve a small bit of fame, get solicited for articles or essays they don't want to write, or don't have the time to write. So they suggest an interview. It's the lazy writer's way of pretending to write. Someone interviews him, or her, usually by phone. The interviewer does all the work: Prepares for the interview, thinks about the topics, ponders questions, then conducts the actual interview. Next the interviewer types it up, maybe edits it, then sends it to the author for approval. The author plumps it up a bit too, then sends it back, the interviewer makes more changes and then makes all the arrangements for publication. The author—that is, the person being interviewed—puts in maybe three hours, counting initial contact time, the interview itself, and editing the interview. The interviewer puts in twenty to fifty hours. The author gets all the credit; the interviewer gets little or none. Of those interviews you have read, do you remember the name of even one of the interviewers?

I: I guess I don't.

B: Well, shame on you. I say this facetiously, of course. It illustrates what goes on. The lazy author gives garrulous, stupid answers to a nervous but eager interviewer's questions. But no one seems to notice that there isn't much content to the interview. Readers get to have a voyeuristic peek at the author's personality. Of course, in this day and age, people are much more interested in the personality of the author than in his literary output.

I: Well, this interview, at least, is being done in person instead of by phone.

B: And you don't have to type it up. Plus, no one will edit it, except to entirely remove parts in case it turns out too long. This is what we all agreed to.

I: Okay. Let's get down to basics. You don't like interviews. Why are you doing this one?

B: I don't mind being interviewed about a topic, or about somebody else. What I dislike is being interviewed about myself. I am not important. My art is what is important. So ask me about my art. But no, do not ask me about my art, since I think my art should speak for itself.

I: But you agreed to do this interview.

B: I was, shall we say, pressured by my business associates. They seemed to think it would be a good way of personalizing our business. That is how one associate put it. Also, they wanted the interview conducted by a woman. The reason for this made no sense to me at all, therefore I do not remember it. Maybe they thought I would be more respectful toward a female interviewer than a male one. If so, they overestimate my chivalry.

I: So what is the direction you want this interview to take?

B: This is an interview on behalf of Viaticum Press International. Let's stay focused on that.

<p style="text-align: center;">***** **** WHAT **** VIATICUM PRESS INTERNATIONAL IS</p>

I: Explain what Viaticum means.

B: Ours, of course is a focus on the secular, not the religious, meaning of the term. But basically we mean nothing different from what the usual dictionary definitions of viaticum are.

I: I'm asking so people encountering this interview will know what the word means.

B: If they do not know what the word means, then they can look it up in their dictionaries. I do not take upon myself the task of elementary education.

I: You're doing what I was warned you would do.

B: Warned? What am I doing?

I: You speak so formally you sound like you're reading out of a book.

B: Actually I am not speaking formally at all. Why should I care to, with someone like you? Have you noted how I have used several contractions while speaking? And I haven't addressed you by name, have I? I speak, not formally, but like an educated person. I fear that I am one of the last people in the United States who has received a true education.

I: Do you care to explain that?

B: Not for the purposes of this interview, except to state that in the true etymological sense of the word, I am thoroughly educated. I was fortunate. I found some wonderful teachers at crucial periods in my life. Plus I am an incorrigible autodidact.

I: So why did you start Viaticum Press International?

B: By accident, I would like to say, except nothing of this nature happens by accident. I began it somewhat by default. That is to say, the default of others. New Atlantis Press flourished for a few years, and they published my book, Men Freeing Men. When they folded, I acquired their stock for the sake of keeping my book in print. The investment was miniscule, monetarily speaking, but huge, emotionally speaking.

I: Do you care to explain that?

B: There is little to explain. Taking over a business is like adopting a child. You never know what you're getting until you have lived with it for a while. And always, always, you find out that the demands on your time, and on your emotional energies, are much more than what you had anticipated.

I: But Viaticum Press International is much more than New Atlantis Press.

B: Yes. New Atlantis Press at this time has in print only my book. New Atlantis Press exists, or persists, primarily as a financial entity. It is the superstructure and conduit for the financial operations of VPI.

I: Which has gone far beyond the modest beginnings of New Atlantis Press?

B: It's trying to. After acquiring New Atlantis Press, I acquired Primrose Press from the estate of its founder. This was an act of, shall we say, veneration. The founder of Primrose Press had put so much energy and time into building it up from nothing. I did not want its literary legacy to disappear.

I: And now you are acquiring more presses?

B: By now it isn't just me. There are other people involved. Now we are not acquiring, we are founding. The work is being done, and frankly, the business is burgeoning. I can't keep up with it.

I: So you anticipate success?

B: We have already achieved success. Can we remain successful, as a literary conglomerate, in this Age of Video? One can not be sure, but we are in process right now of setting up a press for video screenplays and plays for the theatre.

I: And the name of this press?

B: Theatre, Video, Screenplay Productions. Or TVSP. I am leaving the workings of that press largely to others. I know very little about the business side of video.

<p>**** ***** THE ***** AGE OF VIDEO</p>
--

I: What is your favorite movie?

B: Oh my God! Why couldn't we get through this interview without that question?

I: Why do you take offense to the question?

B: It seems that movies, and TV of course, are about the only thing in people's conversational repertoire these days. I get sick of hearing people talk about movies so much. And I myself am averse to talking about movies. Ask me what my favorite book is. I'll tell you it's Plato's Symposium. Or ask me about my favorite painting. My favorite opera. My favorite work of architecture.

I: I really do want to know what your favorite movie is.

B: Okay. I'll indulge you. My favorite movie is one that hasn't yet been filmed. It's called Lips, and it is based on a piece I myself wrote—with a

dual purpose: as a theatre piece, and as a screenplay for a movie. There you have it. My favorite movie is Lips.

I: So what is this movie, I mean, this screenplay, about?

B: At the end of the play I have a brief appendix wherein I write that the plot is an exercise in examining the three guises of vanity: narcissism, conceit, and arrogance.

I: Conceit and arrogance? What is the difference?

B: Narcissism is vanity looking in the mirror. The narcissist is in love with himself. He wants other people to love him too, but the preening goes on even when other people are not watching. Conceit is vanity before others. The self is esteemed more than other people, but others are valued insofar as they are looked upon as potential or social allies in the exercise of admiring this person who is so vain. Arrogance, however, is vanity which does not value, or scarcely values, other people. The self is esteemed, that is to say, the self is esteemed by the self, in a way that does not require allies, but requires inferiors.

I: I don't think I understood any of that. Except the part about narcissism.

B: Conceit is vanity which presumes companions in the game of admiring the conceited person. Arrogance is vanity which presumes, not companions, but inferiors in the game of admiring the vain, this is to say, arrogant person whose self-admiration is largely an exercise in scrutinizing other people with contempt.

I: What they said is true.

B: What? Who is they? What is true?

I: Those people who said you talk like you're reading out of a book.

B: Trust me, I would state all this much better if I were writing it out systematically as part of a book.

I: Okay. You told me the theme of this play. Or screenplay. But you didn't mention its plot. Its storyline.

B: That is much too complicated to go in to here. Suffice it to say that it is a plot of many colors, with a tight weave and much breadth, rather like a first-rate tapestry.

I: Your ego is speaking again.

B: Actually I am being very humble right now. If I were not so humble, you would be hearing me speak ever so much more highly of my beloved screenplay, Lips.

I: Are you trying to sound like Oscar Wilde?

B: No. But I suspect that Oscar Wilde often aspired to sound like the Baumli of the future would sound.

I: You really are an egomaniac.

B: Actually I am capable of irony, jest, and being facetious. Like most Americans, you fail to discern these qualities. Fortunately, there are people, a select few who happen to be my peers, who are capable of discerning such blatant subtleties.

I: That kind of talk: Are you playing a game with me?

B: I play only the game of pretending that I play no games.

I: Are you making fun of me? I mean, is this some kind of paradox?

B: I was just having a little fun with Gödel.

I: With what?

B: Gödel is not a what, he is a who. But don't worry your pretty little head about all that. Let's get back to terrain you know something about.

I: I'll ignore everything you just said, since I do conduct myself as a professional. However, regardless, I mean, I do think Lips is a very odd title.

B: No more odd than the subject-matter. Someday, when you see it, you will understand. I suspect that it then will be your favorite movie too.

I: Do you like writing that sort of thing? Plays. Screenplays.

B: Like? I will not answer a question, the entire thrust of which, depends on that simplistic word, "like." But I will comment. Writing a play is part of a long tradition. If one has read many plays, and certainly I have, then it does not seem like an odd art form to ply. However, writing a screenplay is an odd way of creating. For me at least. Which means, I suppose, that for me it is a new way of creating. The writer is erecting a structure for someone else to transform into a concrete spatiotemporal work of art. It is rather like

being an architect, a composer, and a playwright all at the same time. As a playwright, the author is dealing with human characters. And with plot. But one is doing architecture too—setting forth a vast blueprint as to how to take this set of words and turn it into something visual and aural that can be filmed. But one also is working like a composer because there is the temporal reality of the work and, just as important, the pacing or rhythm of that temporality. How it unfolds. The speed at which it unfolds. Combining legato with rubato.

I: What? What's that?

B: Let me put it this way. When writing a screenplay, one is a playwright, an architect, and a composer all at the same time. In all three roles one is at risk. The producer of every play seems to presume the right to make changes at will. Movie producers are even more presumptuous—that is to say, they are even worse. An architect's plans are at the mercy of an engineer's capabilities. And a composer runs the risk of the conductor skipping his repeats, not following his directions, or simply doing it badly—as, for example, in the realm of conducting, Barenboim does Beethoven abysmally while Karajan does Beethoven splendidly.

I: I'm afraid this is all outside of what I know about.

B: Then it probably is just about right for most people who are hearing, or later, reading this interview.

I: You never pass up a chance to insult a lady, do you.

B: Actually I never pass up a chance to compliment a lady. What you fail to understand is that I never pass up a chance to insult an editor.

I: So which am I? Mainly. To you I mean. An editor or a lady?

E: The answer to your question, I am quite sure, will become obvious as this interview proceeds. Something I am hoping it will do presently.

I: Well, I can see that this line of questioning didn't get us anywhere.

B: Oh, I think it did get us somewhere. But neither of us likes that somewhere. Cease and desist with this topic so we can go on to something else. Like, for example, talking about Viaticum Press International. Which is what this interview is supposed to be about.

I: Okay then, tell me something about your logo.

B: Haven't you seen it?

I: Yes, but I don't understand it. Those three symbols on the right side of that book. They're very simple.

<p>***** * VIATICUM' S * LOGO AND ITS AFFILIATES</p>

B: Simple symbols, yes, for complex referents. I'm surprised you don't recognize them. The three symbols, on the right side of that book, in—shall we say—descending order, are: philosophy,

science, art.

I: Philosophy, and ... what?

B: Philosophy, science, and art.

I: Oh. So do you call your press VPI for short?

B: No. We don't do that. A few people just call it Viaticum for short. Most bestow due honor by using the name in full.

I: It does, I admit, sound, uh ...

B: Patrician.

I: Patrician? That wasn't ... well, yes, I suppose it does.

B: Patrician. And precise. As this interview proceeds, you will better understand why the name is so fitting.

I: So what are some of the other affiliates in Viaticum Press International.

B: We have a website. People can go to that for a listing of our affiliates. For example, we are setting up Baby Buddha Press. This press will handle children's works. I don't mean works by children. Rather, works for children. I am quite excited by this press. Children's stories, the traditional ones like those by the Brothers Grimm, contain a wealth of literary riches. Oscar Wilde wrote gorgeous stories for children. And of course the best of the stories for children appeal equally to adults.

I: Tell about the other affiliates.

B: It would take too long to describe them all. The website does that. Or I presume it does. I do not pay much attention to the computer part of this business. That is Mister Sudvarg's dubious distinction, and domain.

I: Tell us about one more then. What about the meat poetry press?

B: Its name is Hot Dead Meat Press. And yes, it publishes meat poetry—as the genre is accurately called. It will publish both poetry and prose. We are having trouble getting the books out though. The authors are, shall we say, a difficult assemblage of elusive personalities. That is a polite way of putting it. But I need not worry about offending them in stating this. They will, one and all, take my words as a compliment.

I: It sounds like you aren't as excited by this press.

B: I am very excited by what we are preparing for publication. But, as I say, the negotiations are difficult. The legalities are almost overwhelming too. I am hoping to publish several authors anonymously. In this day and age, even if an author is published anonymously, that author can not legally remain anonymous as a financial entity. Lacking anonymity in that realm means that the author's identity can easily be discovered by those who want to do a little sleuthing. So I am exploring ways of insuring an author's anonymity while keeping everything legal. It isn't easy.

I: You seem too cultured to like meat poetry.

B: I think it's because I am cultured that I am so drawn to meat poetry. I spend most of my reading time with the likes of Plato, Turgenev, Dickinson. Now and then I need a break from those heavy-duty immersions. Meat poetry is lighter fare. More gruesome fare, admittedly, but not so demanding.

I: Is your meat poetry, the meat poets you publish, going to be better than what other presses do?

B: Of course. Much better. Relax. I am being facetious. I don't think our writers have more quality than the best of the meat poets. For example, they aren't better than Charles Bukowski. But what we will publish, in Hot Dead Meat Press, is meat served in a five-star restaurant, under glass. Well, no, I suppose the meat is not under glass, and the platter has a chip at the edge. But still, it is a five-star restaurant, its clientele possessing that noble charm which only the most degraded of aristocrats can exude.

I: I'm afraid you're getting garrulous.

B: Obviously you fail to note that I have not yet succeeded in not being garrulous.

I: Do you like the production part of publishing? You know, the nitty-gritty business side of putting a book together, selecting bindings, font, stuff like that?

<p>***** *** BAUMLI *** AS BUSINESSMAN</p>
--

B: No I don't. It's all a miasma of practical details, and when one is dealing with the practical world—the material world—it is always recalcitrant.

I: What is hardest about this for you?

B: How slowly it goes. We have set up Viaticum Press International as a consortium of smaller presses. But I am embarrassed to admit that, given the amount of production work involved in doing these books, it will take a long while, maybe years in some instances—in some of the subdivisions—before we have titles in book form and ready for sale. It's almost depressing, I concede, but still, it isn't as difficult as dealing with other publishers and editors.

I: Let's talk about you being an artist and a businessman at the same time. You are primarily a writer. Writing is your art. How can an artist hope to succeed in business?

B: In Book Seven of his Republic, Plato states that the best ruler is a reluctant ruler. I think he is correct in that observation. Maybe something similar applies to me here. I detest turning my attention to business matters, but when I do, I am amazingly successful. Maybe I am good at business precisely because I hate it. My attitude is: Hurry up and get it over with so I can get back to my art. So I do it right and make no mistakes.

I: Would you describe yourself as a ruthless businessman?

B: No. I would describe myself as a ruthless artist. I will let others describe who I am as a businessman.

I: Suppose someone described you as capricious and arbitrary.

B: Capricious and arbitrary? That describes gambling, not good business. Malicious and contrary? That could describe successful business from a strictly financial point of view. I like to think of myself as industrious and fair. Also ... but, as I said, let us leave these descriptives to others. I am sure they will be generous with adjectives. Especially inaccurate ones.

I: So what makes your company different from other publishers?

B: We have uncompromising literary standards. The rest of the publishing world right now is a fiasco, and fast on its way to getting even worse. Everything is wrong. Readers, editors, publishers, even the authors.

I: What could be wrong with readers? Isn't that what you want? Readers?

B: The main thing wrong with readers is that they don't read enough and they don't read the right things. They read the swill they are given in

<p style="text-align: center;">**** ***** THE ***** READING PUBLIC</p>
--

newspapers and magazines, but they don't read books. Certainly not good books. I have seen statistics which claim that the average person in the United States reads only one book a year. And the average college graduate reads only two books a year. These averages must be the result of some odd pairings of subjects. My mother, when she was alive, read cheap romances. The pulp stuff. Harlequin romances. That sort of thing. She read about one a day. So if you average her three hundred and fifty a year into that equation of one book per person per year, that necessitates three hundred forty-nine people who read no books at all. Which is quite believable, if you simply look around and notice what people are doing. Or not doing. But stop and consider a very telling point here. If the average person reads one book a year, this does not explain the fact that, in the United States, there are billions of books sold per year. What does this mean? It means that the books being sold are not being read. I wish I could find an article I read in The Wall Street Journal—I think that's where I read it—back around 1990. It reported on how so many more books are sold than are read, and made the astonishing claim that, for certain new titles, even those on bestseller lists, the proportion of books sold to books read is as alarming as one-hundred thousand to one. The books most likely to have such an ungainly proportion were the pop-psych books. The author promotes them on all the talk shows, people buy the book on impulse, put it on a shelf with vague intentions of reading it, and two years later can't even remember why they bought it.

I: Surely you own books you haven't read.

B: Of course I do. Amongst my personal library of thousands of books, there are several hundred I haven't read. I recently bought a new translation of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. I haven't yet read that. I just bought Tennessee Williams' collected short stories. I haven't read that book either. But I do read all the time. Some books on my shelf I have read as many as fifty times.

I: How do you find time for that?

B: I have mastered the art of working fifty hours a day. It is one of the many miracles attributed to me. The Vatican calls weekly for an update on my miracles.

I: You know, being an editor, it's in my own best interest to see books sold. But I sort of have the attitude that if people don't want to read, that should be their business. It's their right to not read if they don't want to.

B: Of course it is. As far as I'm concerned they have a right to kill themselves if they want to. And they are, in fact, committing intellectual suicide by not reading. This is, I emphasize, their right. But if they want to be educated, if they want to experience beauty in literature, if they want to have enjoyable conversations with people like me, then they have to read. Read good books, that is, not trash.

I: What business is it of yours if people want to read trash?

B: Well, it can not but be my business since I am a member of this society we live in together—for better or for worse. Let me try to explain. Actually, let me first give an analogy, using a small incident which has been very vivid in my mind—I'm not sure why—ever since I encountered it. Once, during travels, when I was sitting in an airport lounge waiting for my flight, a family of four was sitting beside me. Mother, father, a child maybe one year old, another child about, I would say, eight or nine. This latter child was unlike most children of today in that he was only a little bit obese. His father handed him two candy bars. Huge candy bars. The kid sat there beside me and eagerly tore into those two candy bars, ripping the paper off, then greedily chewing and gulping. He finished those two huge candy bars in less than two minutes. I was appalled. It was gross. Then with no words even being exchanged—this is how much it was expected and understood—the child turned to his father, who handed him money, and the child hurried off to a snack shop to buy more snacks. More junk food. Well, tell me. How long do you think that boy carried a memory of those two candy bars he ate? How long? That memory had to be very brief. Maybe he never thought about those two candy bars again. He consumed them so quickly he could not have gained much pleasure from them at the time, and I'm sure he forgot the candy bars and the pleasure almost immediately. Well, that is how people behave with the trash they read today. They consume it. Quickly, maybe absentmindedly, but greedily and quickly. It is vague entertainment while they are devouring it, but after they are finished, they simply put it aside. They discard it. They throw it away just as that child discarded the candy bar wrappers and in a day or two defecated the remainder of those two candy bars. That child's experience produced nothing but trash and feces. Nothing was retained even in his memory. The same is true with the reading public today. A magazine, a newspaper, a mediocre book, gets read. It is taken in, then discarded, and—here is the sad part—it is entirely forgotten! The content of what was read does not persist as memory. A mind without memory lacks content. A soul unfilled with the emotional aura of what has been absorbed from the world is like a bouncing balloon. It has no weight, no substance, no core. People who go through life without absorbing memories, without being uplifted by beauty, without valuing what they experience, are hollow, vacuous, empty. "Soul shells" I call them. If all you read is trash, your literary soul will never become beautiful because it has never ingested

anything that is beautiful. Why do I care about all this? Because as a member of this society, no matter how reclusive I try to be, I still have to interact with people now and then. Soul shells—empty souls—are boring because they give nothing, they are dangerous because they are starved and therefore are nasty, and they are suicidal because they are the stupid sheep who follow demagogues blindly.

I: All these dire consequences, just because people are greedy about what they eat? Or just because they don't eat, I mean, don't read good literature?

B: Yes. It is a strong claim, but I believe it utterly. Moreover, I do think I quite sufficiently reasoned my way to it just now.

I: Okay. Actually I think you did. I wasn't sure where you were going with all that at first, but I think you're on to something. Actually I would be interested in seeing you write a book on that subject.

B: Who knows? Maybe I shall. But the creator knows not what will come next.

I: Please consider whatever company I'm working for, if you do write it, as your potential publisher.

B: Thank you, but no. I doubt that I would. I have problems with conventional publishers. That is the main reason I began Viaticum Press International.

I: So what do you have against what you call the conventional publishers?

B: Have against? What does that mean?

I: What do you think is wrong with their methods?

B: They have only one method, and that is how best to make money. I do not begrudge them their right to make money. But the ways they do this are

<p style="text-align: center;">**** ***** THE ***** PROBLEM WITH PUBLISHERS</p>

deceptive and wasteful. After many years I finally dropped my membership in Book-of-the-Month Club. Why? Because the books they publish too often have a cheap binding and cheap paper. For example, my copy of Gore Vidal's Palimpsest came from them. I have read it only three times and it is falling apart. Of course, the best—the most exclusive—book clubs have nothing but thoroughly deluxe bindings. They print with the best materials available. But I am not talking about them. My grudge is against the very commercial book clubs, like ... what are they best called? The Blitherings-of-the-Month Club? These cheap, very popular clubs are the ones that

irritate me. But I was talking about the Book-of-the-Month Club, wasn't I? And why I dropped my membership with them. The main reason I dropped them was because of their advertising. I'm not going to say their advertising is completely false, but it certainly is deceptive. I would order a book, start to read, then go back and look at the original advertisement in the flyer which caused me to order the book. The advertising made the book sound amazing, but when I started reading, the book proved to be thoroughly mediocre. Maybe trash. I soon concluded that the best writers in the United States are the ones writing ad copy for selling books. Publishers sell books with hyperbole. Which, I suppose, is how most things are sold. If the big publishers want to do it that way, I am not going to tell them it is wrong, but I am not going to be taken in by them any longer.

I: You said the big publishers are wasteful. You are referring to the books that are sold but not read?

B: There's that. Also there are the books shipped to bookstores which, when not sold, go into a dumpster. Many unsold paperbacks are not shipped back to the publisher. Rather, the seller rips the front cover off and sends that back to the publisher to get credit. The books themselves are thrown out. I've seen thousands of books in a single dumpster outside local bookstores. Their front covers are torn off. That is obscene. It's an insult to the industry, and it is disgustingly wasteful.

I: So how do you relate with other publishers?

B: Usually I don't, but when I do, if politeness doesn't get me by, then I end up being appropriately condescending. Which, I admit, may be just one way of admitting that I can be quite snide at times. But always, of course, in a most compassionate way.

I: It's been said that you're an egomaniac.

B: Of course I'm an egomaniac. Everyone is an egomaniac. A very few egomaniacs—such as myself—do it with style. But I am an egomaniac with an ego that does not need pampering. I also am a recluse. This bothers people much more than my rare displays of altruistic egomania.

I: Let's get back to the publishing industry. You said that editors are part of the problem. Since my work is as an editor, I would like to hear you justify that claim.

B: I won't justify. I will explain and illustrate. Your shame will provide the justification.

I: So what is wrong with editors?

B: You have heard, everyone has heard, that editors are just failed writers. Writers who could not publish. Well, that isn't quite true. It isn't accurate to refer to an editor as a failed writer if he, or she, never wrote at all. And most of them didn't. At least they never finished anything of consequence. The problem with editors is that they could not be writers. They wanted to be, or believed they could have been, if only they had gotten that big break.

<p style="text-align: center;">**** ***** THE ***** PROBLEM WITH EDITORS</p>
--

Which would have been an advance—a monetary advance—for a novel they had not yet written. So now they take out their frustration on writers who are publishing. They wave the whip of control over them.

I: I think you're exaggerating.

B: I heard, on the radio, a special program about editing and publishing. A very elderly editor who had been with a major publishing house for many decades was explaining how difficult her job is. For example, they had decided to publish a book of short stories by a young man. Every one of these stories had already been published in the major literary magazines. "But of course they were all wrong!" she literally wailed. Well, what does that—what does such querulous pontificating—mean? The people at those literary magazines thought the stories were right. Or thought they were right after they had finished with their turn at editing this author's works. I hope the author, at some point, thought those stories were right. But this editor decided they were all wrong. All wrong. Well, if you let her get by with that pronouncement, then you have given her permission to go ahead and do whatever she wants by way of changing that author's prose. This is the most distasteful part of what I see editors doing. They are puny creatures, who know they are puny and worthless. So they try to compensate for their feelings of inferiority by controlling someone else—the author.

I: How is it editors improving an author's prose means controlling the author?

B: They don't improve the author's prose. Ever. Each author, that is to say, each writer who has matured and therefore deserves being called an author, has a voice. A writing voice which is every bit as distinct as the speaking voice. Just as you can recognize the voice of a friend over the telephone, recognize it immediately, so also an author's writing voice is recognizable. It is perverse to try and change this. I say let the voice come through, because that is where the potential for beauty lies.

I: Or the potential for failure.

B: Of course. If the author deserves to fail, then so be it. Better a failure than the feeble attempts of an editor toward resuscitating prose that should have been allowed to die a natural death.

I: Are you trying to tell me that you yourself wouldn't consider being published by one of the big companies?

B: Of course I would consider it. I if they would take me seriously. They would have to grant me autonomy as an author, which means, of course, not meddling with my writing. Not changing it. I would refuse any monetary advance so as to deny them the illusion that I owe them something more than a good book. This "something more" would be the promotional tour they seem to believe every author owes them. If a big company agreed to publish my book exactly as I wrote it, while leaving me alone to continue my work as a creator, then I would gladly let them do the work of producing and promoting the book. But no big publishing company is going to agree to such conditions. You know that as well as I do.

I: I think every writer needs at least some degree of editing.

B: Of course you do. You are an editor, and without that conviction, you would have to admit that your work is useless and parasitic. Or, useless and pathetic. Which of course it is. And which, of course, you yourself admit. But never publicly. Only to yourself, in your most despairing moments. And I am sure there are many such moments.

I: So are we going to interview you or insult me?

B: Being an unselfish person, I try to include everybody in the action. So let's get back to insulting me.

I: I still say that authors profit by an editor's input.

B: Why is it authors are the ones who need help, but not other artists? If a painting by a famous artist is sold to an art gallery, the curator of that gallery does not take it on condition that, before it goes up on the wall, it first goes to the retouching room where a gaggle of third-rate underlings pick up brush and put their touches to it. Can you imagine what a desecration it would be if the curators of art galleries, all over the world, decided to hire a bunch of amateur painters and have them "improve" every painting in their possession? The results would be horrendous. But this is what happens to what authors write. Can you imagine what the results would have been had Plato's dialogues been edited? Or Schopenhauer's essays? Or Dante's Divine Comedy? Or Poe's "The

Raven”? I say leave the author’s work alone. Either it stands on its own merits, or it fails.

I: But writing is a plastic medium.

B: No it isn’t. Not good writing. Not the product of genius. Good writing is neither plastic nor is it a medium. It is an immalleable monolith. Sometimes I think God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on stone so they couldn’t be meddled with by an editor.

I: But the author isn’t God.

B: Actually the author is God. The author is a creator. The creator creates creatures. These creatures are the author’s children. They are to be left as they were made. You as an editor have no more right to alter those literary offspring than a grade school teacher has the right to do plastic surgery on the faces of her students.

I: Doesn’t an editor serve any valuable function?

B: In the practical, as opposed to aesthetic, arts? Sure. If an editor’s job is to have writers write instruction books on how to assemble a ham radio kit, then the editor needs to have technical knowledge of the ham radio, and an ability to direct the writer. Or writers. Better yet, the editor should probably just be the one to write the manual. Maybe an editor also serves a purpose when the publisher is merely bent on serving a public’s need. Or, put more accurately, a need the public thinks it has. For example, if there is a gluttonous need for more romance books, and an editor needs to steward a bevy of prostitute-writers through the process of cranking them out quickly, then I suppose it is the publisher’s right, and the editor’s right, to do that. But as I say, they are filling a practical, albeit decadent, purpose. They are not serving any aesthetic purpose.

I: So don’t editors have any function in aesthetic art?

B: Yes. They should proofread the author’s manuscript for typos. Just as the curator of an art gallery makes sure that a painting is kept clean. They should do the many practical things that are necessary for getting the author’s manuscript into book form, without—need I emphasize?—in any way altering the prose. Just as the curator of an art gallery does what is necessary to keep a painting safe. Yes, the editor has these functions in aesthetic art. They are quite menial, of course. But one must not undervalue the importance, even the nobility, of what is menial when it is done well. And I am not at all being facetious when I thus assert that the menial, when done well, is truly noble.

I: Don't you think editors sometimes have a duty to give a writer some degree of guidance?

B: Okay. I will concede that an editor can be of help to a writer in one very specific way. If the manuscript is very good, but the editor feels something is amiss—and note both stipulations here: it is very good, and yet it feels wrong although the editor can't articulate what feels wrong, then as an editor you can hand the manuscript back to the author and simply suggest to the author that he sit on it a few months and then come back to it. If you have some vague idea of what is wrong, say so. But only if it is a vague idea. If you have a clear idea of what is wrong, then either you as editor are utterly wrong in that idea and should not meddle, or the manuscript is utterly wrong and deserves to be rejected instead of being edited.

I: From my experience, most authors like the input of editors.

B: No they don't. They are merely fawning, because they know that unless they appear to like your input, they won't get published.

I: Authors give me manuscripts that aren't even finished, and they ask me to help them complete them.

B: Yes. That does happen. Shame on them. And here is the true crux of the problem, actually. You think I am being hard on editors? Actually it is the

<p style="text-align: center;">**** ***** THE ***** PROBLEM WITH AUTHORS</p>
--

authors I feel most critical of. They want to publish so badly. They have inflated egos, and they want to publish much more than they want to write. So they think, with their first book, that they will let the editor do what the editor wants. And later, when they are famous, they will get to do what they want. But it doesn't work that way. There is too much pressure from the editors and publishers. So after a while the author just sort of gives up. Why bother spending the hundreds of hours necessary to finish, that is to say, refine and polish and perfect a book, when the editors are going to take it and do whatever they want to with it anyway? I understand the author's sense of discouragement. I have watched them give up. They cease being artists and become mere writers. And the editor feeds on this. The more futile the author feels about perfecting his work, then the more the editor is actually needed for completing that work. Editing makes for poor writing which makes for needing editors. The only solution is for authors to refuse all this. Absolutely refuse to let editors meddle. If editors insist on meddling, on changing the author's prose, then refuse to publish. Get a job as a waiter, but continue being a writer. To hell with fame if its price is suicide—killing one's own genius.

I: Do you think you're a genius?

B: I have never thought about it. Which, I suppose, proves that I actually am a genius.

I: Are you trying to be funny?

B: Trying? I thought I was succeeding.

I: I don't think we're going to agree about the role of editors.

B: I think we agree already. I just think you can't admit it. But let's not quarrel. Think about how authors are treated these days. I mean the ones who become well known. Look at the life they lead. Instead of working as an author, they are busy promoting their last book. They are flown all over the country, from one radio talk show to another, from one TV appearance to another. When the talk show appearances begin to run out, they travel about the country prostituting themselves in the most craven way imaginable. Day after day, night after night, they glue their ass to a chair in a bookstore and do book signings. Maybe they do a reading too. This goes on for a minimum of three months. Usually it lasts nine months to a year per book. Occasionally it lasts a full two years. How degrading to the person. How assaultive to the artist. How wasteful of that writer's valuable time. Imagine Shakespeare saying, "I'm sorry I never got around to writing that Hamlet I intended. I was just too busy promoting my last play." And editors, the publishers too, even require, mind you—that their authors endorse other authors' books. These authors write short book reviews of other authors whom their own publishing company is publishing. They spend a year doing all these things and they have no time to write the next book, or even think about writing another book. They get used up. Sucked dry. If you want to kill an author, just publish him. That seems to be the attitude of the big presses these days.

I: I've noticed that myself. How an author publishes, and then just gets used up. Sucked dry, as you say. I don't understand this way of doing things. You would think that the publishers would look upon the author as an investment. Have him spend a little time, maybe a few weeks, promoting his book. But then let him go home and work on the next book. I haven't figured this out.

B: It's perfectly obvious why this happens. I suspect you, as editor, have done it too. You just didn't see that you were doing the same thing that other editors do.

I: What is that?

B: Making solid your earning potential as an editor. Boosting your salary, and expanding your job prospects.

I: How?

B: Think about it. The turnover in the publishing industry among personnel is unbelievable. In major publishing houses, there are always a handful of people who have been there, it seems, for centuries. The others usually stay only a few months. Maybe a year or two at most. Think of yourself. How many different jobs have you had in the last five years?

I: Three.

B: And how soon do you anticipate maybe moving on to another job?

I: Actually in less than a month.

B: See? That makes four jobs in five years. You didn't achieve that kind of appeal by investing in an author's lifelong writing career. You invested in his immediate earnings potential. If you had a choice between pushing an author to make a million dollars for your publishing house, or letting him make only fifty thousand so he could keep on writing, you chose the option of pushing him to make that million. In other words, sell more books. Which means making him do all those promotional tours. Be honest with yourself. Which is going to help you get your next raise or your next job? Showing your prospective employers that you were the one who managed an author who sold millions of books, or showing them that you cared so much for this writer's longevity—as a writer—that you encouraged him to stop promoting, book sales be damned?

I: I'll have to think about that.

B: Do. You will discover that we are in full agreement about this matter.

I: Let's get back to the authors themselves. You say authors want to publish because they want to be famous. How do you deal with this desire for fame in the authors you publish?

B: Well, some of our authors are dead. So I don't have to deal with it. And do not conclude that I said all authors want to publish out of a desire for fame. This doesn't describe them all, but it does describe too many, and it is rare to find this desire entirely absent in an author. So yes, it is a problem. It is difficult to sit down with an author whom I truly admire and find myself dealing with a colossal ego. If the ego is based upon achievement as an artist, I don't mind so much. But I do have difficulty

dealing with an ego which is inflated because it got a taste of fame and believes it deserves more.

I: So how do you deal with that kind of ego?

B: At one time my approach was to confront it. Then it was a battle of wills. That never worked. Now I just ignore it. I make sure I play the role of the businessman, let the writer strut his ego, and ignore that ego. I am very good at ignoring a big ego. Actually I am better than that. Usually I don't have to ignore it because I am simply oblivious to it. Only in the last few years have I learned that this, precisely, often is what causes these writers to inflate their egos around me so much. They do not understand that I simply am not impressed by fame. Instead, they think that they haven't yet succeeded in impressing me, so they try harder. Now I try to pretend that I am impressed, just so they will stop playing the vanity game with me. But I am no good at pretending. I can't pretend at anything.

I: It sounds like you have a lot of conflict with the authors you publish.

B: No. Not really. They appreciate my directness, my honesty. When they can't appreciate that, then they need to go elsewhere. Which means they usually end up going nowhere.

I: You say they appreciate your honesty? How do you know they believe you're being honest?

B: Brutality vouches for itself, and I am brutally honest. I tell people what I don't like about them, and what I don't like about their art. When you do that, when you show that you have the guts to do that, then they also trust the appreciative things you say. I do concede, however, that even though the people I work with trust me, I nevertheless bewilder them. Especially with my as yet unrealized agenda: having authors publish anonymously.

I: Publish anonymously? Explain why.

B: As I have already indicated in this interview, and as many people have pointed out, there is, around authors, a cult of personality. The reading public is much more interested in the author's life, especially his private or sexual life, than in his writings. How many times have you heard someone, when speaking to an author about something he or she wrote, ask, "Did that really happen?" And then, "Is this story actually about you?" The average reader is much more tantalized—titillated—by proximity to a personality than by opportunities for beauty. That is part of the reason publishers want their authors to do so much promoting. They know the audience will buy the author's book if the

<p>***** * PUBLISHING * ANONYMOUSLY</p>

audience is interested in the author as person. I, however, do not care about the personality of the author. I am only interested in what he writes. I want the public to be the same way. Back to what I said before, I do not want the public buying a book because the author is interesting and then not reading that book. I want them to buy a book on its merits and then read it. I think this would happen more easily if authors published anonymously. Let their writing stand on its own. This way you avoid the cult of personality. The author is not tempted by the glitter and glamour of fame. The publisher and the public do not get to use him up.

I: What about ... ?

B: Excuse me. Just let me add this: Isn't it wonderful, really, that we know so little about Shakespeare's life? Shakespeare the person—what his personal habits were, his sexual liaisons, his formal studies? That has all faded into the background, and we do not have to be distracted by it when we read his works. And isn't it wonderful that we know so little about the author—the actual author—of The Tale of Genji? Or the author—or several authors—of The Story of the Stone or Dream of the Red Chamber? The result is, those works have to stand on their own merits, not on the unessential flesh-and-blood vagaries of the authors.

I: Who are you talking about? I mean, I know Shakespeare, of course, but those other two—Was it three?—you mention. I haven't even heard of them. Who were they?

B: Don't worry about it. We already discussed the issue of editors being failed writers. We neglected to discuss the fact that editors are also illiterate readers.

I: That's an insult. Besides, isn't "illiterate readers" an oxymoron?

B: I'm sad to report that, no, it isn't. But let's not talk further about editors. The topic depresses me, and it obviously distresses you. Let's get back to our previous topic.

I: What was that? Oh. Yes. Publishing anonymously. What about you? Are you willing to publish anonymously?

B: Of course. The problem is, I don't think I can. I am too well known, if not on the bestseller lists, then to a select few readers who read everything of mine they can get their hands on. I am already too well known, and my style is too recognizable.

I: You mean you don't have any desire to be famous? That's hard to believe.

B: Well, I have matured. Maybe, on this matter, I have even become somewhat wise. When I was younger, I did want to be famous. This dropped away. I don't know whether it happened gradually, or suddenly, but one day I realized that I no longer wanted to be famous and it seemed that I had felt this way already for several years. Such a relief that was. And rather hard to understand.

I: Why hard?

B: Because while I had no desire to be famous myself, there was a rankling desire, still in me, for fame. What I wanted was not fame for me, but for my literary offspring. I wanted, and want, what I write to be famous, but only if that fame garners actual readers. But I would much prefer that every one of those famous books go forth into the world without my name attached. Such a relief that would be, to see the work itself, the piece of art, my literary child, gaining a reputation on its own merits instead of on the quirkiness of my personality. As a literary creator, I am a parent to my creations. I want my children to succeed, but I want no credit from others. My own pride in their success is sufficient.

I: So have you gotten writers to agree with you? About publishing anonymously?

B: I confess that I haven't been successful at all, except with those people who, like myself, already have enough of a reputation to realize that the reputation is a bore which not only interferes with writing but also prejudices the reception given a work of art. The problem is, with these people, it is too late to publish them anonymously. They are already too well known. With the younger artists, those new to publishing, no, I have not succeeded. They are hungry when it comes to fame. Of course, there is a third category of writers who can not publish anonymously because of the nature of their other work. If, for example, you take an author who is bent on social reform, a real activist who, for example, gives speeches, travels about, and so forth, then that sort of person is bent on getting a message across. A book, an article, a folio, a pamphlet, is just one more vehicle for spreading that message. They can't afford to be anonymous. Of course, most of these people, when they write, are putting forth what is called practical art. Not aesthetic art. But practical art has its place, its worth, too.

I: The upshot of all this is clear. You don't like authors.

B: I don't dislike authors if they know when to be humble and when to be proud. I just have a hard time dealing with a writer's desire for fame. But even that I can stand, if the fame is deserved. It's the mediocre writers who

deserve no fame, whose work deserves no fame, whom I can't stand. For example, I received a letter just a few weeks ago from a friend—actually, a professional acquaintance—of yore. He's a psychologist, and is writing three books at once. They are all a vague admixture of psychology, epistemology, linguistics, sociology, put forth as dreary pedantic excursions and ejaculated pseudo-apothegms. All of it—he did send sample chapters—in rough draft. Very rough draft. It was a mess of awkward writing, unfinished writing, tepid thinking, rash excursions into phenomenological territory he knows nothing about. Yet he is convinced that each of these books is unique, and a thoroughly profound piece of instruction for all the world to read. Well, everything he has written so far, put together, does not instruct as much as a single paragraph from the writings of, say, George Santayana. Yet he is convinced that his writing is wonderful. But here is the most ridiculous part. He wants to form a board of editors—board of editors, mind you!—for each book and have that board review, help him rewrite, and polish each chapter as he goes along with his writing. How deluded he is to believe that this haphazard, collective process of writing and editing can turn out anything worthwhile. And how arrogant of him to think that he should be able to get his friends and colleagues to give his useless writing that much of their time and energy. This is the kind of writer I detest. The truth is, this fellow doesn't actually even want an editorial board. He just wants a forum to occur where people come together to admire—he thinks—his writing long before he has to put forth the effort to actually finish it.

I: Did you tell him all this?

B: No. He is lucky. I did not answer his letter. If he queries again, I will tell him. And I won't be polite about it.

I: Talk a little bit about your own method as a writer.

<p>***** *** BAUMLI *** AS WRITER</p>

B: Method?

I: Yes.

B: That's like asking a man to describe the sex technique he uses with his lover. Gentlemen don't tell. And, it appears that I must inform you, ladies don't ask.

I: Do you ever suffer from writer's block?

B: I am suffering from writer's block right now.

I: How did that happen?

B: How could it not be happening? I am giving an interview. I can not write and give an interview at the same time.

I: That's not what I mean by writer's block. I mean, you know, internal things.

B: I think it's ridiculous to discuss that kind of writer's block. Or to even dare call it writer's block. Why do these third-rate writers get themselves in a tizzy because they go through a period when they can't write? What does it matter? If you don't need to vomit, why worry that maybe you should be vomiting? If you don't need to defecate, why worry about it?

I: Is that what writing is for you?

B: I was giving an analogy. A touch of meat poetry, if you please.

I: Every writer I've ever worked with suffers from writer's block. You really don't?

B: You only work with third-rate writers, so I am not surprised that every writer you have worked with has dealt with writer's block. As for me experiencing writer's block? There is the external kind. A flat tire. An interview. An unwanted phone call. But I admit that I do suffer from another kind of writer's block, which although it is largely external, also is partly internal. It happens because, despite my facade of sexual licentiousness, I am basically a prude.

I: I think, for me, you're going to have to describe what this writer's block has to do with being a prude.

B: Writer's block is obviously a most fascinating subject for you. A prurient interest, I daresay. The writer's block I am referring to happens when my privacy, as a creator, is intruded upon. It happens when people start asking me about my writing. "What are you working on these days?" "When are you going to give us another novel?" "You used to write an Aviary every year. When do I get my next Aviary?" When people start doing that, I can't write. At least I can't write, work on, the thing they are asking about.

I: I don't see why other people being interested in your work would make you unable to write.

B: As I said before, it's because I am basically a prude. Realize that artistic creation is not unlike biological procreation. If I have a child, then say nice things about my child. Or say nothing. I don't care. But don't ask me about exactly what I am doing in order to have another child. Don't ask me what type of sexual position I use during the procreational copulation. Don't ask

to stand beside my bed and watch. I am too much a prude for that. I need my privacy with such intimate matters. Maybe other people don't. Maybe they like opportunities for being exhibitionistic, whether biologically or artistically. Not me. If someone wants to watch me while I am procreating, well, I am going to be dysfunctional. Put bluntly—pun intended—I won't get it up. The same goes for writing. Clamor at me, try to voyeuristically watch me while I am writing, and I can't write. So just leave me alone, please. Leave me within the privacy of my dungeon. There I can write.

I: So the only kind of, as you imply it, internal writer's block you experience is when people ask you about what you are working on?

B: That's right.

I: For the purposes of this interview, can you tell me what you're working on right now? I mean, your writing?

B: For the purposes of my creativity, I won't say a word about what I am writing, assuming that I am now writing anything at all. Shame on you for asking. And for smirking as you ask. Your face is most unbecoming when you thus leer. "For the purposes of this interview," you said. Can't you see that my talking about my writing serves no worthy purpose here at all? This interview is supposed to be about a publishing business, not about Baumli the naked writer.

** PERSONAL **
QUESTION #1

I: Before we started this interview, I told you I reserved the right to ask you one personal question, and one shocking question. You laughed.

B: Personal questions are usually silly. I don't know why you even want to ask such questions, although I am aware that this is what interests most people. As for shocking me, good luck.

I: Well, I'm going to ask you the personal question right now.

B: Go ahead.

I: I want to know why you never refer to yourself as a Ph.D.

B: That is personal. Touchingly so. I fear I am going to lacrimate.

I: Well, I do want you to answer it. Do you have one of those cheap Ph.D.'s? I mean, you've got a Ph.D. in English Lit. You obviously are an accomplished writer. Reader too. That counts. Yet you never use your Ph.D. as a title.

B: Not never. Sometimes I do, when it behooves me, or rather, might profit my cause. For example, when I write a letter to the editors of a newspaper and I think the Ph.D. as a title might give my case more veracity. I also sometimes use it when what I have written is quite scholarly. But you are to be corrected. My Ph.D. is not in English. It is in philosophy. As an undergraduate I focused on the history of Western philosophy. Later, as a graduate student, I specialized in metaphysics and aesthetics in formal study, while focusing on phenomenology outside the classroom.

I: Are you proud of your Ph.D.?

B: Proud? I'm certainly not ashamed of it. My degree is not what you were suggesting. It isn't one of those cheap, fake Ph.D.'s that are given out with the student merely paying tuition and going through a few rituals. I received my Ph.D. from the University of Missouri at Columbia. It is now considered a very good philosophy department. It was even better—much better—back when I received my Ph.D. Back then, to receive the degree, I had to pass five days of grueling comprehensives. Also I passed rigorous testing in both Latin and French. But where I received my Ph.D. is not important. In my scheme of values, that counts for almost nothing. It is the people who are one's teachers who are the measure, or should be the measure, of a degree's worth. To illustrate my point here, note how this is also true of classical singers. The voice, you see, is my favorite musical instrument. During the Golden Age, as it is called, of voice, if you look up information on the great singers, you will discover who they studied with. If you look up information on modern, or contemporary, singers the notation will tell you where they studied, not who they studied with.

I: Did you have great teachers?

B: Yes. As an undergraduate, I studied under Robert Nagle and William Bondeson. The former was a brilliant man who could both arouse and impart the sense of philosophical wonder. The latter was, if not the scholarly heir, then certainly the pedagogical heir, to Richard McKeon, although I don't think he ever quite realized this. As a graduate student I continued to study under Bondeson, but I also studied under Wilcox, who was a formidable logician and an amazing epistemologist. As for my most impressive teacher, I stayed away from him for a couple of years. This was partly because I was still immersed in studying the history of philosophy. But also, I have to admit, I was afraid of him. There were all these stories about Berndtson's high standards—impossible standards, according to many people. And then there were the myths around his supposedly idiosyncratic personality. I was actually quite intimidated. I felt I wasn't worthy. But finally I took a class with Arthur Berndtson, and I was successful in that class. And I realized what a coward, what a fool, I had

been. Here was the greatest aesthetician who had ever lived, and the best metaphysician since Bergson, and I was not availing myself of this opportunity for studying under him. How careless of me. From then on I studied with him as much as I could. I did my dissertation under him, and we became friends. We remained friends until his death. He is a perfect example of ...

I: What? I almost interrupted you.

B: I was about to say that he is a perfect example of how the worth of one's degree is mainly measured by who one studies with. I could have gone through two Ph.D. programs in your average philosophy department—and yes, they are average—and not received, in the eight to twelve years of study required for those two degrees, what I received in even two seminars with Berndtson. I refer to how Berndtson moved me in the direction of sharpening my philosophical curiosity, helped me gain an orderly and eclectic knowledge of what philosophy is, and stimulated me in the direction of making a creative contribution to the field.

I: How can a teacher help you be creative?

B: That is likely a much more profound question than you realize. I will merely say that he insisted upon mastery, not mere acquaintance of, the foundations of philosophy. He insisted on good craft in writing, and helped me become more organized, clear, and terse in my writing. I confess I still struggle with trying to be terse. Maybe more than anything he taught me humility. I was bright, eager, and already writing fiction. I was inclined to believe that my energy and enthusiasm, along with intelligence, were enough to formulate new philosophical theory. He counseled me otherwise, many times. Eventually, from him, I learned that an indispensable ingredient for philosophical creativity is philosophical maturity.

I: Philosophical maturity?

B: Let us say that it involves having enough acquaintance with the history of philosophy that one does not go forth toward charting new philosophical terrain unless one is absolutely sure that it is new terrain. This requires maturity, which is made up of several things, including humility and caution. In the rash enthusiasm, even vanity, of my youth I had difficulty listening to him at times, especially when he would caution me that I was not yet ready to be creative in philosophy. But now I realize that those early warnings were correct. My early forays in philosophy were visionary, sometimes even inspirational, and always informative. But only minimally creative. It took me years to realize that Berndtson's advice had been correct all along. I consider myself vastly fortunate in having been able to

study with him. I also consider myself fortunate in having attained the necessary humility for profiting from what he taught.

I: I've never even heard of him.

B: That is your loss. Now you have. Go forth and read everything he wrote. He was the finest philosopher of the twentieth century.

I: If you're so proud of your Ph.D., why don't you use it as a title?

B: Oh. Yes. That was your original question, wasn't it. Didn't I answer it? Didn't I convince you that I am not very concerned about it? Maybe I neither answered you nor convinced you. So hear me now. I don't use the title because of pride. There it is, plain and simple. Pride. Let me explain it this way. I like to tell people that I received a black belt in karate, and a Ph.D. in philosophy, back in the days when they counted for something. Let's consider karate. My master had been teaching for about fifteen years. When I left him he had given only one black belt in his whole life to anyone. Ever. I was the one who received that belt. Frankly I don't think I deserved it. However, my point is, that is how strict he was. He had high standards. But just a while back I saw a picture in the local newspaper honoring a local dojo. It was a tae kwon do academy—academy they call it. There was a group picture of that dojo's members, and in that picture there were about twenty black belts. I was just astounded, until I remembered how people I know who today take the martial arts seriously tell me there is a saying about these small martial arts academies. It's, "You pays your money, you gets your belt." There were kids not ten years old in that picture who had a black belt. Well, a black belt is supposed to mean that you are able to defend yourself from just about anyone in just about any situation. Where firearms aren't involved, of course. In that picture, with all those black belts, I doubt that a single one of them could have defended himself—they were all male—against your average Saturday-night drunk. It's a joke. The same is true today with people who receive a Ph.D. They have the title, but they don't have a true education. I talk to them and I am truly embarrassed by their ignorance. So you see, I don't use my title, not because I am ashamed of it, but because I am proud of it. I have a true education. I have my deficits, some big voids in my learning, but I am truly educated in the etymological (Can we say etiological?) meaning of the word. But the title Ph.D. has become meaningless because it is overused, misused, abused. I've pretty much stopped using it because I feel embarrassed being associated with all those other people who use the title. And yes, there are exceptions to the mediocre norm which those creatures define, but the exceptions are not sufficient in number for me to go out of my way counting myself among them.

I: So you don't let people call you Doctor Baumli?

B: It's fine if they call me that. Many do. Sometimes, depending on the situation, I think it's a bit droll. But really I don't much care. However, I myself rarely use the title.

I: Does that explain the nickname?

B: Nickname? What nickname?

I: All these people who call you Saint Baumli.

B: Oh. That. I don't think my dissociating from the title, Ph.D., explains why people call me Saint Baumli. Besides, it is too much of an ironic title to be termed a nickname.

I: Ironic?

B: You heard me right.

I: Explain.

B: I won't explain. If you want an explanation, then ask the people who address me as Saint Baumli. I will, however, comment. I remember who started it. That woman—she is probably the only person really qualified to refer to me as Saint Baumli. I confess that I don't exactly remember how other people caught on to using the name. All I know is that at first it seemed people were joking, but then one day I realized they were serious. Some were serious in that they actually consider me a saint. Others were serious in that they had merely adopted the title, from others, without thinking about it. Some people do consider me a saint. They, of course, are wrong. Actually I am a very evil person. Even so, perhaps I deserve the appellation, "Saint," because my evil personality is so thoroughly, repugantly, horrifically evil that it inspires other people toward the good and the holy.

I: What do your close friends call you?

B: Saint Baumli. Francis. Usually they call me by the name I most appreciate: Baumli. Just Baumli.

I: You come across as an academic. So it seems you should use the Ph.D. title more. Surely you know you're worthy.

B: I most certainly do know that I am worthy. The problem is, as I tried to explain, all those other Ph.D.'s are not worthy. They do not deserve to be considered my peers. So I will not use a title which, for other people, serves as indecent, obscene plumage.

I: That certainly sounds like the words of an egomaniac.

B: Thank you. I readily admit that I am egomaniacal, but my attitude about my education is anything but that. I am very humble about my education. I wish more people were as well educated as I am. Then I would feel less lonely. I would have more companions. If I take but little pride in my Ph.D., I do take pride in my education. But even here I feel humble. There are gaps I should have filled long ago, and still haven't. I think even my best teachers should have made me work harder.

I: What's an example of your lacks?

B: I don't know Russian. I know little about the South American visual arts. I've never really understood the symphonies of Shostakovich. The list goes on.

I: Some people say you're a renaissance man.

B: You can't be a renaissance man by yourself. There has to be a renaissance going on, a social milieu which breathes the spirit. I am merely an educated recluse reluctantly trying his hand at the publishing business.

I: And succeeding, it seems.

<p style="text-align: center;">**** ***** THE ***** BUSINESS SIDE OF VIATICUM</p>

B: It seems. One of the first things you learn though, as a businessman, is that success can evaporate quickly. So you never feel quite successful.

I: We talked earlier about why you got into this business. Was self-interest part of your motive?

B: Definitely. I have written very much, and published so much, and yet I have come to realize that I have spent, actually, that I have wasted, too much of my time fighting with editors. Getting published is a huge amount of work. All that time spent submitting. Over and over. For example, many years ago, during the course of about three years I submitted an academic article more than fifty times. It got rejected, that many times. At last it was accepted by a journal so prestigious I had not previously submitted to them, convinced that they were so exclusive they would never publish me. This was in my younger days. But they published the article, the published

article then won a very important award, and as a result it was republished in a folio edition. So you see, that article received much attention and some nice accolades, once published. But first it was rejected by more than fifty philosophy journals. What a waste of time that was! Do you know how many hours it takes to submit an article more than fifty times? Even worse, though—much worse, in fact—are the problems that come up when something is finally accepted for publication. One has to fight with editors to keep them from changing your prose. Then there are proofs to be read, interminable phone calls, dealing with other people’s procrastination and tantrums. The process of publishing, with others, consumes more of my time and energy than publishing myself. Publishing oneself is more expensive, but spending money so that other people can appreciate beauty isn’t such a bad thing, is it?

I: But you are publishing other authors too.

B: Alas, my generosity undoes me.

I: Seriously, why the appeal of other writers?

B: Now you witness the antithesis of my egomania. I want to feel that I am part of a group. A group of people, all of them, each of them, in their own different ways, as good as me when it comes to writing. Publishing these people is a way of naming my companions. Acknowledging my peers.

<p>***** *** BAUMLI *** AS RECLUSE</p>
--

I: I thought you like being a recluse.

B: I do. But even recluses want to feel that they are not alone, even though they do not want to actually associate with other people. In fact, that is the beauty of the people I publish. It is the beauty of the best minds. We are satisfied knowing that we exist as a group. When we interact, it is intense and vigorous. But we seldom interact. We are too busy creating. Think of the great meditatives. When two Eastern sages come together, their disciples crowd around to hear what they will say to one another. The disciples are invariably disappointed. The sages say almost nothing. They prefer to sit together and meditate together—silently. Writers are not meditatives, but the best writers do not spend their time in bars, or coffeehouses, talking late into the night. They are alone, in their caves, writing.

I: You don’t strike me as a recluse. Other people don’t describe you as a recluse.

B: Actually I am a recluse, but nobody knows it. So I suppose it's more accurate to say that I am a closet recluse. (Laughs.)

I: Be serious. How is that possible?

B: Actually it is possible, because of the effect I have on people when I come out of my study. My cave. I make most people nervous. Or at least put them on high alert. I have a strong effect on them. I don't know why. But this means that I can see certain people only once or twice a year and they actually think we see each other every couple of weeks or so. They actually tell me this.

<p>***** *** BAUMLI *** AND THE LECTURE CIRCUIT</p>
--

I: Are you on the lecture circuit? Do you give lectures?

B: I'm not on any circuit, if you mean that I have an agent who actively gets me work as a lecturer. I do occasionally give lectures. But I try not to. I manage to keep them to a minimum by charging very high fees.

I: Why do you hate lectures? Do you get stage fright?

B: Stage fright? No. I hate them because I hate to travel. I hate to meet people who are eager to meet me instead of meet my art. And always, I mean always, they try to get you to do a workshop too. A workshop. It's a concept I detest. I can't even stomach hearing the word "workshop" said.

I: Why not? Let's talk about this.

B: No. Really. I can't stomach the subject. Let's talk about art, not about pseudo-intellectual group gropes.

I: Do you think you're a good lecturer?

B: I never fail to get a standing ovation. In my scheme of values, that means that I am a very bad lecturer. After all, they are applauding me, instead of sitting there so stunned by my ideas that they are unable to move.

<p>**** ***** THE ***** SHOCKING QUESTION</p>
--

I: I think I'll ask you my shocking question now.

B: Odd, your quaint choice of words, "my shocking question." Why so possessive?

I: In your division called Folio Editions Limited, you're going to be publishing something by this French bimbo named Vanessa, uh, what was her last name?

B: The name of the woman you so aptly fail to characterize is Vanessa Vyvyanne du Pré. Bimbo you call her? Surely you can come up with an insult more imaginative than that.

I: Word has it that she is your mistress. Is that true?

B: You said your question would be shocking. This is almost boring.

I: I think you're being evasive. Is it true?

B: Is what true? That I am being evasive? No. That Vanessa is French? Yes. Although she has spent quite a few years in Great Britain, and some years in the United States. That she is a bimbo? No. She is more intelligent than a dozen of you put together. She also has a temper. You are fortunate she is not here to chastise you for your flippant tongue. Is it true that we will publish her? We intend to. Is it true that she is my mistress? No. Even though I am only a little past middle age, a woman as young as her would, I fear, look upon me as her geriatric gigolo.

I: Since when does age stop a man?

B: Well, I guess you're right on that score. But I think of her as much too young for me, in that way, and I am sure she thinks of me as much too old for her. Too old to ever consider herself my mistress. No. I am fortunate in that Vanessa and I have a close friendship which is based on several things. She considers me a mentor, while I do not consider myself worthy of being her mentor. The woman has amazing intelligence. She is an accomplished musician. I am, shall we say, an accomplished appreciator of music. The two of us lovers? We rarely even see each other. She travels a great deal. I try to stay at home. But that young woman has the best head for business I have ever encountered. What I wouldn't give for her to take over this business.

I: Okay. We'll leave that one to the rumor mongers.

B: I daresay they don't need any help from you.

I: Of course, she could be your mistress. Men lie about such things.

B: They do? I thought men brag about such things, while women are the ones who lie about such things. But no, she is not my mistress, and shame on you for suggesting that I am lying. As I said, Vanessa would consider me much too young ... I mean, too old ... for her. Besides, there is another impediment to our ever being lovers. I suffer from, shall we say, how can I put it delicately? A certain affliction. A malady.

I: Malady?

B: Yes.

I: Malady? You mean you're ... ?

B: Go ahead.

I: You mean you're impotent?

B: (Laughs.) Hardly.

I: So what is this malady?

B: I am afflicted with an extremely rare condition called voluntary monogamy.

I: Voluntary monogamy?

B: I'm not surprised that you've never heard of it. I can explain.

I: No. It's not that. Monogamy? A malady? Explain.

B: I was being facetious in calling it a malady. You really do show amazing finesse in your ability to remain consistently dense. I am married, and I am monogamous.

I: So you've made a monogamous commitment. People break those commitments.

B: Sure they do. But for me monogamy is not a commitment. It is my actual attitude. I feel monogamous with my wife.

I: You mean you're never attracted to beautiful women?

B: Of course I am. Most of all to my wife, who is extraordinarily beautiful. But am I attracted to other beautiful women? That is the thrust of your question, isn't it? Of course I am. In the same way I am attracted to beautiful paintings in an art gallery. I look. I behold. That is all. The sign beside the painting says, "Do not touch." That sign is for other people who are stupid or careless or arrogant. I don't need that sign. In my relationship with my wife, monogamy is more than a commitment, it is how I feel. It is fervor. Even devotion. Something much more than commitment.

I: Explain.

B: A monogamous commitment happens when the beloved demands, or requires, it from the lover. Monogamous fervor occurs because the lover gives it willingly. Or even, in a sense, gives it unconsciously because it is a defining part of the lover's love.

I: That's really beautiful.

B: Thank you. Indeed it is. And, as I suggested, rare.

I: Yes. I suppose. Yes.

B: You have tears in your eyes. Are you upset?

I: No. Well, yes. I was remembering something.

B: You mean, don't you, that you were remembering someone. I'm sorry about what that memory means.

I: That's all right. I mean, we didn't come here ... but thank you. I appreciate your saying that. Your sympathy. It shows you're human.

B: Being occasionally human is one of my most unfortunate defects, I fear. It makes me disgustingly endearing. But I am sorry—truly—for the sad memory.

I: Well, yes, thank you. But now is not the time for talking about that. Let's get back to your business.

B: Yes. I suppose that is what this interview is supposed to be boringly about.

I: Let's see. Oh, yes. If you aren't sending your authors on promo tours, if you aren't having them do book signings and that sort of thing, how are you promoting your books?

<p>***** * ADVERTISING * AND BUSINESS PARTICULARS</p>

B: There is our website, which, from the moment we established it, and that was only a few months ago, seems to be doing much of the work for us.

There is word of mouth. And among intelligent, educated people, that does count for a good deal. Organizations contact us. Sometimes we contact organizations.

I: Does your website actually help with promoting sales? Websites don't seem to help the big publishers much.

B: Well, our website is certainly helping our sales. But the world of the Internet also slows sales down, for many companies, and I think that is a wonderful thing. If someone is looking for a book, they can find so many used copies listed on the Internet. This way, instead of buying a new one, they can get more use out of a used one. And readers can keep on doing this until that used copy is finally used up. I like this arrangement—knowing that used books do not languish unread, but can be found, and imbibed.

I: So you like losing sales?

B: I prefer that sales of new books be lost if this means that books already sold are actually being read. I do, surely you have figured out, have an abhorrence for waste.

I: What part of this business has come as a surprise to you?

B: The mailing, or shipping, expense. I had not realized what a large percentage of our expenses that would be. And it keeps going up.

I: What is the most difficult part of your business?

B: Dealing with people's dishonesty. Discovering, however, that in the business world, you are much more likely to be screwed by people's incompetence than by their dishonesty. They have figured this out too, of course. So when they are being dishonest, they often try to disguise it, or excuse it, as incompetence. It's depressing dealing with such people. There have been more than a few anxious moments.

I: Why do you have so many titles that deal with issues of men's liberation?

B: Partly to fill a gap. There are so few books which actually deal with the men's perspective on men's liberation. Most books about men deal with men from a feminist perspective. They fail to address the feelings and needs of men as men. But, to answer your question thoroughly, realize that it's also the case that we have several titles on men's lib simply because

<p>***** **** MEN' S **** LIBERATION BOOKS</p>

we started out that way. It is an interest of mine, of course, since my book, Men Freeing Men, is in that field. Also I have published articles on that topic for years. So our beginnings have made us look like we're a men's lib press. But actually we will be publishing a great deal in the area of, for want of a better phrase, social and political philosophy. And our main focus, eventually, if we can reach that goal, will be fiction. Meanwhile, we are preparing some titles which have to do with religion.

I: You don't strike me as a religious man.

B: I am about as completely an atheist as you will ever find. But I tell people I am a devout atheist. I was raised in the Catholic Church, I remain steeped in the beauty of its theology even though I hope I have escaped the oppressiveness of its doctrine. We plan to publish certain books which, let me put it this way, ruminate about topics that have to do with religion. I want to allow people to follow these lines of thought. It's interesting that people who buy books on religion almost always read them. They don't buy them on impulse and then forget about them.

** RELIGIOUS **
BOOKS

I: An atheist, wanting to cater to the religious public? So you've got to be in that line strictly for the commercial gain.

B: I'm not in any publishing line strictly for commercial gain. Believe me, I am good at making money when that is what I set out to do, and there are better ways to make money than by stewarding a publishing consortium. And the fact is, I suspect our religious titles will be the least likely to make money because of the expense in preparing them.

I: Why so much expense?

B: Religious books require tough bindings because they are used so thoroughly. And it seems that such books are read over and over. Tough bindings are expensive.

I: So none of your books will have cheap bindings like the print-on-demand books?

B: Definitely not. Print-on-demand books usually, not always though, are little more than pulp paper, full of acid, with a cheap cardboard binding. They are an insult to the buyer.

I: I examined your website, quite a long time ago, and there is something there which I think is an insult to the buyer. Payment options. You don't allow credit card buying. This happens to be the twenty-first century.

***** THE *****
WEBSITE

B: Yes. We discussed that option a good deal. Being idealistic about some of these matters, I am the one who has been most opposed to our website allowing credit card purchases. It's because, again, we discourage impulse buying. People can buy on impulse with a credit card. We feel, or at least I feel, that if people have to write out a check and send it by post, then they truly want the book.

I: That means a longer wait for the merchandise.

B: Probably not. The check may take a few days to reach us, but we don't wait for a check to clear before filling an order. We usually fill any order the day it comes in. So actually we get merchandise into people's hands sooner than most companies which allow credit card payment.

I: So why do you ... ?

B: Excuse me. I should add, regarding credit card payments, that this has changed since you looked at our website. We encountered understandable difficulties with foreign sales, since payments from abroad were often difficult to transfer. Expensive too, for us. So primarily, for the sake of foreign sales convenience, we now allow credit card payments. Actually it is done through something called PayPal.

I: Another thing on your website is weird. Some of your books, your new ones, are priced so cheap. Are these remaindered titles?

B: No. Not at all. Some of the titles can be offered cheaply because of print over-runs. You are in the business, so you know what that is. The cost of printing twenty thousand copies of a book may be only slightly higher than printing two thousand. So sometimes we, and other presses also, do that. The price then is cheap, but that price later goes up as stock runs low. Plus, we are exploring, and utilizing, ways of saving money which none of the big presses seem to pay attention to. Shipping, not printing, is the main cost in dealing with a book. Books with a generous number of pages, with good paper and fine bindings, can be printed for not much more than a dollar per copy in large quantity. The real cost comes with shipping. The publisher has the books printed, and then they have to be shipped to the publisher's warehouse. The books then are shipped from there to the big distribution warehouses. They ship to individual bookstores. Sometimes bookstores order titles, ship them back to the distributors, then those books go to another bookstore. I would estimate that by the time a book gets purchased it has been shipped a minimum of three times. This can easily add up to half the retail cost of a book. That is where the main cost is for producing books, and that is where publishers lose money. We are trying to cut that cost. We usually ship twice. Once from the printer or main seller to our own warehouse. Then from the warehouse to the purchaser. One day, if we get that ambitious, we may even erect a printing facility that is conjoined with a warehouse, and thus have to ship but once. That would be a tremendous savings in money. And we would pass this on to the purchaser. As I have made clear, our intent is to put books into the hands of readers, not to make big profits.

<p style="text-align: center;">***** ***** COST ***** OF BOOKS</p>
--

I: Are there other ways you save money that the, let us say, conventional publishers don't?

B: One other way, at least. We don't give advances. Advances to authors are ridiculous. Some authors, even first-time authors, get a six-figure advance. For a book that is not even written. The publisher likes the idea, has seen sample chapters, so they pay the advance. For established authors, the advance can run to several million. This sets the author up as an indentured servant. He is under the absolute rule of the publishing house and its editors. Every time the author protests what the publishing house wants him to do, they remind him, "You were paid this advance, and in your contract there are such-and-such conditions. If you don't want to follow those conditions, fine, but you will have to refund the advance you were paid." Well, the author very quickly realizes that his mandated role is to be a willing slave and let the editors do with his manuscript whatever their incompetence dictates, and also to let the publishers push him around when it comes to promoting. We don't believe in promoting writerly mediocrity by setting up that dynamic. So we pay no advance, which does save money for us. At the same time this has the astonishingly pleasant effect of preserving a writer's artistic integrity.

I: Well, that's all very interesting, and maybe we'll come back to it. But before I forget, I was going to ask: Why in the world would an elite, one might even say silk-stocking, publishing company like yourself have a selection of used merchandise for sale? Not even all of it, I mean the used stuff, books?

B: Partly it's an attempt to not be so elitist. Those of us who work with the company often have books—used books—we wish to part with, and we

<p>***** * VIATICUM' S * USED MERCHANDISE</p>
--

want those books to get into the hands of worthy readers. Some of us have children. All of us have our private world of not-so-intellectual proclivities. We wanted a way of sometimes getting rid of the paraphernalia—Do you mind that word?—which accompanies our peripheral tastes. One of our best writers collects old fishing reels, and now and then wants to sell certain ones. If he lists one on our website, well, so be it. Those people, with a prurient desire for discovering things about the private lives of our writers, will be learning, not the sort of thing they want to know, that is to say, not the lurid and the sordid and the morbid and the sexual part of these people's lives. Instead they will get a glimpse of the mundane. The human. The ordinary. The part of these people which is, not titillating, but—Why not just admit it?—charming.

I: Earlier you spoke of your generosity. About how you are publishing other authors. What are you looking for?

<p>***** * SUBMISSIONS * POLICY</p>

B: I am not looking for anything by way of submissions from authors. We are overcommitted, in terms of both time and finances.

I: So in this respect you're just like every other publisher.

B: Almost, but not quite. Other publishers take submissions from the high-power agents. We won't even talk to those parasites. We publish what we find, and what we find presents itself to us when we are not looking for it. One might say the spirit of the Buddha guides us on this. We do not want to see submissions.

I: So in that sense you are like other publishers.

B: Yes. But in that sense we are much worse than other publishers. Or much better, depending on your perspective. We do not want any submissions. From anybody. Is that clear?

I: Isn't that a rather callous attitude toward the author who is trying to get his or her foot in the door?

B: Yes. But I prefer to think of it as a policy of protecting our privacy. There are authors out there who want to publish, and deserve to publish. But for every one of those, there are ten thousand who want to publish and do not deserve to publish. Is it my job to sort through all those manuscripts so I can find that one deserving person? No. Simply because I don't want to. In this sense, I understand perfectly the closed-door policy of the big publishers. If they don't want to take on new authors, that's their right. Maybe it isn't generous, but I don't exactly want to hear unpublished authors complaining about a publisher's lack of generosity. Let them look to themselves and see how they could be more generous. Would each of those unpublished authors, in exchange for getting his manuscript read, be willing to devote a part of his own house for a homeless person to sleep in? No. He values his privacy too much. So an author should not ask me to give his homeless manuscript a home. I don't want to sacrifice my privacy, my own private reading time, for his manuscript. Thank you, but I would rather be reading Shakespeare than reading your manuscript.

I: But you could sample a few, couldn't you?

B: It doesn't work that way. Back in the late seventies, Michael Korda, head of Simon and Schuster, said that they were receiving more than twenty thousand unsolicited book-length manuscripts a year. Twenty thousand,

mind you! Each a book! They had two people working full time doing nothing but sending those manuscripts back. That was very generous of them. I don't want to get into a position where we are sending back even twenty a year, much less twenty thousand. And how can editors read that many? It can't be done. The only solution, of course, is for virtually all writers to read more and write less. But I don't think that's going to happen.

I: They can start out by trying to publish in the little literary magazines.

B: Not unless they start one. These magazines, in case you haven't noticed, are started by people who want to publish themselves, and maybe publish a few friends also. They don't want to publish any other people. They can't even afford to. I knew of one such magazine which was doing print-runs of only six hundred. Writer's Market Guide—Is that what the book is called? Actually it's just Writer's Market, I think—phoned one of the little publishers they were going to list, and did an interview. One of the questions was, "What are you looking for?" The young woman responded with a description of the sort of material they intended to publish. She did not think to point out that they were not accepting submissions. But when Writer's Market published their little blurb about this press, they listed what the magazine was looking for. That little magazine started getting literally hundreds of submissions a month. The post office required them to rent, instead of their little receiving box, a huge bin which cost them a considerable amount of money. They had to fold, just because of that blurb in Writer's Market. A blurb which was written, in case you haven't figured it out, for the sake of selling a useless book—a book written, or I should say, compiled, for the sake of giving amateur writers the idea that there is hope for being published. It's a false hope, and it is most unkind to the writer, as well as to the publishers of these small magazines, to pretend that there is a mechanism in place for getting published there.

I: How did you first get published?

B: A combination of luck, talent, knowing the right people at the right time, and evincing impeccable craft in my writing. I am not boasting. And I will be the first to admit that genius is more important than craft. But show craft, command of the language, care about your end product, and editors will be drawn to you because they won't have to work hard at editing you. They will still try to meddle, of course, but as a writer you will appeal to them because editors, like most people, are lazy, slothful, irresponsible. Even though they want to meddle and control another person, that is to say, the author, they want to do it without having to work very hard.

I: So basically you're saying that it's impossible for most new authors to get that big break they dream of, and you aren't going to take it as your mission to help them.

B: Correct. I am terribly callous, aren't I? But maybe it isn't callous at all. Instead I am acknowledging the reality of the writerly and readerly worlds. If someone believes they deserve to publish, then they can take it upon themselves to do like I am doing. Devote a part of their lives, a precious part during which they would rather be reading or writing, and spend it publishing themselves. Or raising the money to publish. If those writers don't want to put that kind of work in on their own behalf, what right do they have to expect me to put that kind of work in on their behalf?

I: It almost sounds like you hate writers as much as you hate editors.

B: No. I hate editors much more. Deny that at your peril. And really I don't hate writers. I just detest most of them. What I hate is when the mediocre ones—mediocre writers—don't have enough sense to keep their writing to themselves.

I: Who's to say who's mediocre?

B: Apparently editors know who is mediocre, since they unerringly find such people and publish them.

I: I'll ignore that. Why do you think every writer should keep their light hidden under a basket? Why do you think writers should keep their writing to themselves?

B: Most writers have a skewed judgment of their abilities. How many writers have you known, have we known, who write maybe three or four short stories, or start—just start, mind you—a novel, and they begin looking for a publisher. That is crazy. If someone has been playing the oboe for six months, they don't go ask for a tryout with the New York Philharmonic. If someone has been taking figure skating lessons for a few weeks, they don't assume that they're ready to try out for the Olympics. If someone does half a dozen watercolors, they don't assume that they are ready for their own exhibit in a major art gallery. Yet writers seem to think that the moment they have penned a few things, they should trumpet their wares to the public. A housewife writes eight poems in a year, and she starts looking for a publisher for what will soon be, she is sure, her exquisite book of precious poems. Well, matters don't work that way when it comes to artistic stature. That is, aesthetic achievement. Yet you can't convince writers otherwise. Why? I am not sure, frankly, but I suspect there is both confusion and self-delusion involved. People learn to speak, and they believe that because they can speak, then of course they speak well. And therefore, anything they say should have an audience. So they go about speaking a great deal to any audience they can find, and people are too polite to tell them that they are stupid or boring or just plain intrusive.

So the conviction these talkers have about their ability to speak, their conversational self-esteem, let us call it, is never challenged. The attitude these individual talkers have about their own conversational merits is the very same attitude they are capable of subsequently taking with regard to their writing ability. They learn to write. This means they can write down a few sentences quite adequately, compose a simple letter, that sort of thing. Not many of these people think of themselves as an avocational writer, as someone who could write for the public. But those who do want to write, as a profession, take the same attitude about their writing as they do about their ability to speak. They know they can write adequately. So they assume that because they can write adequately, and like writing, and want to write, that is to say, want to be known as a writer, this must mean they can write well. And because they write well, then of course what they write is something the public deserves to read. So they go forth, convinced that the ability to write is automatically an ability to write well, and just as convinced that the ability to write well is license to impose their writings upon the world. But the fact is, these abilities—the abilities to speak and to write—do not vouchsafe any ability to speak or write well. The truth is, most people who speak do not speak well. They speak atrociously. Commentators and hosts on public radio seem to actually adopt an intentional stutter in order to appear conversational. You yourself, in fact, seemed to be doing something similar during our brief chat before this interview, until you noticed my benign scowl every time you did it. Or maybe you stopped when you noticed that I do not indulge such verbal tics. And it was actually very easy for you to stop being so slipshod with your speech, wasn't it? Poor speech is not always a matter of ignorance or poor education. Sometimes it is nothing more exotic than sheer laziness, or self-indulgent carelessness, or admiring and thereby imitating the peasants. A little adrenaline, being alert, can bring about a marked improvement in the speech patterns of someone like yourself. But we were talking about writers, weren't we? As I was saying, most people who speak do not speak well. Most writers, despite their convictions otherwise, do not write well. They write no better than they speak. If they want to show their writing to their indulgent family and friends, fine. But they should not litter the world, much less presume the right to contaminate my mind, with the detritus of their pen. Or, in these days, the wordage and verbiage of their word processors.

I: Don't you think first-time writers are ever any good?

B: Of course. But rarely. If a writer can convince me that he, or she, is directly descended from the seminal coupling of Alexander Pope and Emily Brontë, well then, maybe I will be convinced that here, these first words dripping from this writer's pen, are worthy. Otherwise they probably aren't. But if they are, the best proof of the publishing worth of a writer's first output is simply that this writer goes on writing. Writing more works as

good as, or better than, the first, instead of being so affixed to the idea of getting that first creation published.

I: Alexander Pope. I haven't even thought about him in a long while.

B: Which means you haven't read him in a longer while. You are shameless, with your craven admissions.

I: Why should I be ashamed?

B: Do I really need to explain? You haven't even thought of Alexander Pope in a long while? He is ... this is unbelievable.

I: I really got you flustered this time, didn't I? Score one for me.

B: Flustered? Yes. I admit it. I am. More, I am flabbergasted. Score one for you? You take pride in a score that is an index to your ignorance?

I: Why do you care about all this so much?

B: Because I care about great literature, great writers. Because ...

I: For once, Baumli the renaissance man seems at a loss for words.

B: No. Not at a loss. I am curbing my tongue, trying to be polite.

I: Why do you care so much about these things? Pope is dead. His literature is dead.

B: Pope is dead. His literature is alive. You are brain-dead. That is the problem. Why do I care that you haven't read Pope? I'll put it this way. The only English—that is to say, British—writers I would put above him are Shakespeare, Milton, and Wilde. Maybe not Wilde. And you shamelessly admit you haven't even thought about Pope? You, who work in the world of publishing? Any person who works with literature, in any capacity, has a duty to constantly renew his, or her—what shall I call it?—credentials. If you have not read, or even thought about, Alexander Pope in a long while, then you have not renewed your credentials. You lost them. And in my judgment you lost a lot of other things too. It's a wonder you didn't commit suicide a long time ago. But then, you are an editor. I suppose that means you did commit suicide. Intellectually.

I: If I did, I don't remember.

B: Of course you don't remember. Brain-dead people have no memory. No memory for having committed suicide. No memory for Alexander Pope.

 ** PERSONAL **
 QUESTION #2

I: I think we've said enough on this topic. Let's get back to essentials. I already asked you my shocking question. Now I want to ask you my personal question.

B: I thought you already asked me your personal question. I said I would allow only one.

I: But the one I tried to ask—about your Ph.D.—ended up not personal at all. So now I want to ask you a personal question.

B: I'm in the mood to be amused. Go ahead.

I: What do you consider your greatest deficiency?

B: As a writer?

I: No. As a person.

B: As a person? My greatest deficiency is my unassailable conviction that I have no deficiencies.

I: Be serious.

B: Okay. My greatest deficiency is my unassailable conviction that I am nothing but a gruesome assemblage of detestable deficiencies.

I: Can't you be serious with this?

B: I think you fail to appreciate how serious I was being when, earlier, I said that I am not interested, as a writer, in promoting the cult of my personality. I want no writer we publish to have a cult following. And I admit that, a few years ago, I had amassed, without at first being aware of it, a cult following. But I am not proud of this. I certainly do not want to spend any time displaying my personality. I only want to display the fruits of my creativity. Your questions about who I am, or who I fail to be, should be of no interest to prospective readers.

I: But what about giving something of yourself to your readers? I mean your loyal readers?

B: I will give them the one thing they most deserve. More of my writing.

I: Don't you secretly want fans?

B: No. I want my books to have fans, not me. A serious writer doesn't have time for fans. Fans, by the way, can be dangerous. Most are very nice, of course, but some are crazy. They come expecting you to be the guru who will solve all their problems. Usually, though, they are just excited people wanting inspiration to help them with their writing. Which means they are uninspired, or lazy, or unfocused. I do not consider it my lot in life to inspire lazy or unfocused writers.

I: Do you still have fans? That cult following?

B: To some extent, yes, but not as much.

I: How did you change things?

B: By avoiding people. By becoming a nasty person. Or trying to. I failed in this attempt. My saintliness, you know. Actually I did it by becoming more devoutly devoted to being a recluse. It's still a problem though. It still happens that I answer the doorbell, or am just leaving my house, and outside there stands a troupe of young people wanting to talk to me. Or a lost soul, half crazy, lonely or depressed, thinking Baumli the saintly writer will somehow save him, or redeem him, or just give him sympathy. I say "him." The person presuming that Baumli the writer is also a guru is just as often a female as a male. It's very hard. I don't even go out of my house anymore without checking to see if someone is standing on my front porch, or sitting in their car in my driveway. In fact an awful situation happened when I was at a funeral a while back. A certain fan figured out that I would probably be there. So he showed up, drunk on his butt, and accosted me effusively. I tried to shrug him off, but he wouldn't leave my side. I tried more than shrugging him off; I took him over to a corner and told him quietly, but firmly, that both his presence and his talking were inappropriate. I even explained why. His response was something like, "Well, yeah, okay, I'll be going, but first I just want to say ... ," and of course he did not stop talking. Finally, when I left the funeral home, he walked with me all the way to my car and stood there talking even though I kept saying politely—too politely—that I really needed to get going. I finally backed out of my parking space while he just went on talking, and all the while I was so considerate, so saintly, as to be worried that I might drive my car over his toes. At last, as I was driving down the street, I thought I had escaped him. But damned if he didn't come to the funeral reception too! Which was at someone's home. There he was. Uninvited, still drunk, and still drinking. It was very embarrassing to me. Terribly embarrassing. And yes, I am quite capable of feeling embarrassed when social proprieties are breached that boorishly.

I: When he was standing beside your car, why didn't you just get out and knock him down? With you knowing karate?

B: I suppose I am just too kind-hearted. Or maybe too cowardly to do such things unless I am physically attacked first.

I: How did you finally escape him?

B: It wasn't just him. He had a bimbo of the female variety with him. His wife, I think, or maybe a woman he was living with. I don't remember now. They had to be somewhere else, at a certain time, and she finally pulled him away. I was grateful, believe me.

I: Did you tell her that?

B: No. I was wanting to get away from her too. Like him, she was talkative, although certainly not as bad as he was. Also she was the vapid, voluptuous sort. More curves than brains, you know. But she did me the favor of getting that intruder away. I hope I never see either of them again. And the truth is, this fellow was very intelligent, and despite being drunk, quite articulate. I just didn't want him around. Other people didn't either, given the circumstances. Do you see? Whether intelligent or unintelligent, articulate or dumb, I do not want followers. I want disciples. Most of the time I don't even want disciples. I just want to do my work, which is to write.

I: You really get upset talking about this, don't you.

B: I guess I do. Truly, it is one of the greatest problems of my life. People coming to me, bothering me, interrupting me, wanting to talk. They always say they want to ask me questions about myself. Or about something I have written. But invariably they end up doing all the talking, and that talking always, I mean always, is about nothing but themselves. On and on. More and more and evermore talk about themselves. It drives me crazy. If you ever hear that Saint Baumli committed suicide, be sure to note that someone was talking to him when he did it.

I: But what about people who just want to meet you. Surely you take time for that.

B: Meet me? Meet me? I hate that word, "meet." And I don't understand why people so want to meet somebody else—just to meet them. The word itself sounds trite. "Meet." People who want to meet someone famous, or someone they think is famous, are just imposing themselves. Wanting to be able to brag to their friends, "I met Francis Baumli!" Well, I don't want to meet people. I don't have time. People who have fame rarely deserve it. But when they do deserve it, there is something else they deserve even more, and that is privacy. So my message to my fans is: Read my books. If

reading my books makes you want to meet me, then instead, do something much better: Read my books again. But don't seek me out for the sake of meeting me. Let me have my privacy so I can spend more of my time writing. Besides, meeting me would be a disappointment, since I am a thoroughly boring and uninteresting person.

I: You're never quite serious, are you? You said something earlier like this too. It was, I guess I would call it, ironic. I can't remember right now what it was. But it reminded me of The Simpsons.

B: The what?

I: The Simpsons. The television show.

B: I know nothing about that. I don't watch TV. Ever.

I: How can that be? Ever?

B: The last time I watched TV, it was the second of the Presidential debates.

I: Well, that wasn't so long ago.

B: It was the second of the Presidential debates between Mondale and Reagan.

I: Mondale and Reagan?

B: Yes.

I: That was back in ... when?

B: You figure it out, since this gruesome topic seems so important to you.

I: You mean you didn't even watch any of the O.J. Simpson trial?

B: I heard about it. No, I didn't watch it. Actually I did see maybe three minutes' worth of it. I was in a hardware store, talking to the proprietor who was standing behind a counter, and a television was turned on directly behind him. You can't always avoid those television machines, you know. They are so ubiquitous. What I saw involved something about gloves. A photographer showed some pictures of him—O.J. Simpson—wearing some black gloves at a football game. I seem to remember it was a football game. They then brought up another photographer who had photographed him at the same game, and in that photographer's prints, the gloves looked brown. So what? Black. Brown. I used to do some black-and-white

photography. How the prints come out, black or brown, can depend on whether they are developed properly. I have no idea why any of that was important. Especially why they cared about the color of his gloves.

I: I can explain.

B: I don't care to know. Let's talk about important things. Not the offal of the pop culture you are marinated in.

I: Well. Okay. Whatever. But you obviously miss out on a lot of entertaining things. Do you realize some people speak of you as highly entertaining? Don't you think you could allow yourself to come down off your pedestal, at least for the purposes of this interview, to be just a little bit entertaining? You know—jovial? Humorous?

B: I think, given the nature of your questions, that this entire interview has been unremittingly entertaining. Which means that it has failed to serve its intended purpose. As for me coming down off my pedestal? What you mean is you want me to come up out of my dungeon. And you tell me that people find me entertaining? That is news to me. My friends would certainly never tell me that. I do not care to entertain anybody. Especially not in a public forum. I am not available for public consumption. This I can not emphasize too much. There is a consumerist attitude out there in our society about entertainment. That consumerism is a gluttony. It is a yawning, yawning, bored public maw constantly craving more and more cheap nourishment. Well, that public can damn well go to hell. I do not want to entertain. I want to provide avenues toward beauty.

I: What is the difference between entertainment and ... and ...

B: You mean between entertainment and aesthetic art? Think of the etymological meaning of the words. Entertainment merely serves as a means of keeping the beholder and the object together by providing a constant dose of, or promising to provide more, pleasure. Mere pleasure. Beauty is something more than pleasure. Beauty is the experience of joy in what Berndtson—yes, back to Berndtson—called beholding emotion embodied in an object. This is a very complex psychical event. I would be glad to explain it thoroughly, if indeed that is what you want.

I: You've already said more than I wanted. I was just wanting a simple answer.

B: In my world there are no simple answers.

I: I think we're about out of time.

B: Of course we are. Those questions you asked about my personal life took up a great deal of time, which, predictably, ended up being a boring waste of time.

I: So are you satisfied with the way this interview went?

B: Of course not. Anything that keeps me from my writing is most dissatisfying. But since this interview is nearly finished, let me now ask you a question. Some people would say that you have made a name for yourself in the publishing field. Or rather, the editing field. Despite that handicap, you agreed with my business associates to interview me. But you stated that you would decide, after the interview, whether your name would be associated with it. And if you did not want your name associated with it, then we would have to list you as anonymous. Why not, instead of waiting until after this interview, decide right now?

<p style="text-align: center;">**** ***** THE ***** INTERVIEWER HERSELF</p>
--

I: I'm afraid, I just ... I can't let my name be associated with this interview.

B: Why? Why have you decided that?

I: I'm an editor. I have my job to protect. My career. I can't let my professional possibilities be, I would say, put into question by what you've been saying about editors.

B: Isn't it clear that I'm the one who said those awful things? You made no indication of agreement.

I: I can't risk guilt by association.

B: You editors do worry.

I: It's a competitive field.

B: Competing for what? Who can evince the most garish display of professional psychosis?

I: Psychosis?

B: Of course. So busy editing, you are out of touch with the real world. The world of genius, that is, which, in case you haven't noticed, is the only real world when the issue is good writing.

I: I think I live in the real world. I know I need to protect my job. Otherwise I won't have a real job.

B: One day this real job will plunge you so thoroughly into an abyss of despair and anguish that you will quit it. Then you will come to me, begging for a job. And since I am such a compassionate and forgiving man, I will probably give you one.

I: I don't think you could afford me.

B: We could certainly afford what you're worth. Besides, at that point, I don't think you would be in a position to bargain. And I seem to recall that we were able to afford the exorbitant fee you charged for doing this interview.

I: If you thought it was exorbitant, why did you agree to it?

B: I didn't. My business partners voted against me. You see? Even though I am president—commander-in-chief of this company—I do try to be democratic.

I: Now we really are out of time. Somehow, the whole direction of this interview, I mean, what I thought we would do, it took a weird turn.

B: That turn happened when you decided to ask me a personal question.

I: I think you're right.

B: Which segued into my commenting upon how it was only your adrenaline, released so copiously in my presence, which caused you to avoid the speech habits of the peasantry. I think you took that as an insult. Actually it was a compliment. To both of us.

I: I didn't expect that we would have so many differences of opinion.

B: I would think differences of opinion would be inevitable, therefore anticipated, and always welcome.

I: Not difficult differences of opinion. I think giving, I mean, doing an interview is a lot harder than doing good editing.

B: We don't have a difference of opinion on that, since good editing, actually done well, involves doing nothing at all.

I: You never pass up a chance for getting in a job against editors, do you?

B: I am addicted to the truth. And do remember: I warned you that I am admirably deficient when it comes to chivalry.

I: I think it best that we end now.

B: I think it better to realize that this interview ended several minutes ago, but has now proceeded much too long after it ended.

I: You're the type who always has to get in the last word, aren't you?