

A VIEW FROM ACROSS THE SEA: AN INTERVIEW WITH  
THOMAS E. KENNEDY

by *Melanie Tortoroli*

Thomas E. Kennedy's fiction has been highly praised by Andre Dubus, James Carroll, W. D. Wetherell, Duff Brenna and many other outstanding contemporary writers. According to the *New York Times Book Review*, his writing is "shimmering with emotional honesty," and the *Kansas City Star*, in nominating one of his novels as a notable book of 2003, observed, "No one writes about the lives and loves of men better than Kennedy, including their relationships with their children." *The Cape Cod Voice* listed his novels among its "favorites of the year" four years in a row, and his work has been praised by reviewers in Ireland, Chile, Denmark, Tokyo, Italy, and in many U.S. periodicals. In 2007, a panel of five contemporary writers and editors will gather to present their views of Kennedy's contribution to American fiction at the Atlanta Conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs.

The author of more than twenty books and hundreds of stories, essays, interviews, poems, and translations in a wide variety of American and European anthologies and literary journals over a span of twenty-five years, Thomas E. Kennedy has most recently published the four novels of *The Copenhagen Quartet* (2002-2005), a book of essays on the craft of writing (*Realism & Other Illusions*, 2002), a collection of travel essays co-authored with Walter Cummins (*The Literary Traveler*, 2005), the novel *A Passion in the Desert* (2007) and the short story collection *Cast Upon the Day* (2007).

In 2004, a DVD documentary film was produced and released by Harper College about the novels of Kennedy's *Copenhagen Quartet*—an article on which appeared in *The South Carolina Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Fall 2005. Together with Walter Cummins, Kennedy co-edits two columns at [www.WebDelSol.com](http://www.WebDelSol.com)—*Writers on the Job* and *The Literary Traveler*. He serves as advisory editor for *The Literary Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Absinthe: New European Writing*; as co-editor of *Best New Writing/The Eric Hoffer Award*; and as a contributing editor over the past fifteen years with the *Puschart Prize* and, for ten years, was international editor of *Cimarron Review*. A past recipient of the O Henry, Pushcart, Angoff, Gulf Coast, Frank Expatriate Writing Award and other prizes, Kennedy teaches fiction and creative nonfiction in the MFA Program of Fairleigh Dickinson University. He holds an MFA from Vermont College, where he also taught for some years, and a PhD in literature from Copenhagen University. Born in New York City, Kennedy has lived slightly more than half of his sixty-two years outside the United States.



**MELANIE TORTOROLI (hereafter MT):** Would you characterize yourself as an "expatriate"? What does that term mean to you? Have you ever written about this experience or thought of writing about it? What made you want to write about it, if you did? What makes you not want to write about it, if you have not written about it?

**THOMAS E. KENNEDY** (hereafter **TEK**): It would be difficult for me not to think of myself as an expatriate since I have literally been expatriated, out of my home country, for more than half of my life, but I continue to think of myself as an American, continue to carry an American passport. However, as do many Americans, I also identify with the national background of my family, so I think of myself as Irish-American—and slightly as French-American; my mother's heritage is French (Alsatian), but she and her family did not foster French traditions or language, while my father sang Irish songs and read Irish poems for us, even if he was fourth or fifth generation. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that one of my main publishers has been an Irish house or that the Irish people have received me warmly. I had some substantial business contacts with Ireland over the years, felt trusted by them, mostly understood their humor (although it gets esoteric at times). And the Irish Embassy in Copenhagen has taken me in as one of their own—the last Irish Ambassador here once affectionately referred to me as the Embassy's Irish Writer in Residence, and they have asked me to give presentations and readings on Irish literary occasions, invited me to be one of the main speakers on Bloomsday 100 here, to devise Irish literary quizzes for them, introduced me to Seamus Heaney and John Banville when they came to visit, and set up occasions to launch some of my novels. I am very grateful to them for recognizing this Irish strain of my character, for validating it instead of treating me like a "narrowback." J. P. Donleavy once squared off on Duke Street in Dublin with Brendan Behan because Behan had called him a narrowback in Davy Byrnes pub—a narrowback is an Irishman who moves to America and doesn't work with his body, that's how Donleavy explained it to me. Incidentally Donleavy is a trained pugilist and apparently Behan noticed this as they squared off outside the pub and said, "Ah why should we carry on like eejits for the sake of this grubby crowd," and stuck out his hand.

James Joyce's writings have had an enormous influence on my development, and I have visited Ireland dozens of times and made a pilgrimage to Joyce's grave in Zurich.

So who am I, what am I? An American, an Irish-American, an Irish-American Dane, an American Expatriate Irish-American Dane? What is it for that matter to call oneself American? Is a fellow from Queens the same as a fellow from Kansas City, say? I've spent a good amount of time in the American northwest and the American southwest and the American midwest and in California. Is there a single quality that identifies an American? An American can be so many different things, have so many different cultural strains woven into his or her character. I suppose you could say that I am no longer quite completely American but neither am I quite completely Danish and never will be, nor could I really pass as a hundred percent Irishman, even if I can start picking up a trace of a brogue pretty quickly when visiting Dublin's Fair City, and I think there are probably some French traits in me too.

You ask if I have written about being an expatriate. Yes, I have. In various directions. For one thing I've published my *Copenhagen Quartet*—a ten-year project consisting of four separate novels about the souls and seasons of the Danish capital. In all, some twelve hundred pages. In the first two novels, the main character is an Irish-American expatriate trying not to fall in love with a Danish woman (two different ones—the 58-year-old Terrence Einhorn Kerrigan and the 48-year-old Patrick Bluett—and of course two different Danish women and the tone and subjects of the two books are vastly different). In the third novel, the main characters are a Danish woman and a Chilean expatriate torture survivor—that was the first novel I ever wrote that had no Americans in it. The fourth novel

of that *Quartet* has twelve characters, but only one of them is an American—there are Danes, Persians, a Pole, Irishmen, etc., and the focus is on fathers and sons. Clearly, this is writing about expatriatism. The first and the third of the four *Quartet* novels are both very much about Denmark—well, so are the second and the fourth but in different ways. But that’s only four out of my twenty-plus books—the four set in Denmark, and another is an anthology of translations of contemporary Danish fiction. I’ve translated a good deal of Danish poetry and prose myself, did a mini-Danish anthology of *Cimarron Review*, and have been invited to guest edit a 2008 issue of *The Literary Review* on contemporary Danish writing.

I also wrote a lengthy essay in which I discussed being an American in Denmark—it is called “Life in Another Language.” I built it from the experience of having been invited to address a group of young Danish and American elite university students in Copenhagen in a program called “Humanity in Action.” They were studying each other’s culture. The response to my first lecture seemed so positive that I expanded it when they invited me back again the next year, and finally I had written about a 10,000-word essay that was published in a joint-issue of the literary journals *The Literary Review* (published in New Jersey) and *Frank* (published in Paris). The essay was written from a point of view of great satisfaction with Danish society and a certain dissatisfaction with American society just after the Clinton-Bush changeover. It had been my plan to use this as the title essay of a collection titled *Life in Another Language: Looking Back at America*. But, unfortunately, when the current government took power in the U.S., even worse factions gained force in Denmark. Now thirteen percent of the parliamentary electorate are outright xenophobes who have done destruction to this great social democracy which has one of the most advanced social systems in the world. This small political group is akin to the Nazi party that slowly came into power in Germany in the 1930s, relentlessly enlarging and tightening the hold of its xenophobia, sounding a brass similar to the thirties brownshirts (here they started in the early 1990s with less than a percent of the electorate—now they have 13 percent!) As a result, if I were to rewrite my essay, I would have to make major changes. I don’t want to do that. I want to wait until those miscreants are out again—I believe in this country’s basic humanism. I do not believe that that 13 percent of the people who are whipped up by fear and racism will continue to allow themselves to be used by the cynical leaders of their party. Just as I do not believe that the U.S. will continue to behave as it has been doing on the world scene now that we have some congressional moderation in place again.

**MT:** What would it mean to you to “have roots” in a place? Where do you see yourself as having roots?

**TEK:** My strongest roots are now in Copenhagen, but there are myriad tendrils connecting me to so many places—as mentioned above, New York, Queens, Dublin, the American northwest, the American midwest, and actually to a number of cities that I have visited often and feel a kinship to—Paris, Helsinki, Edinburgh, Amsterdam. . . . Of course, both my children were born and raised in Denmark, so that is a very significant factor in my roots here. My current partner, with whom I have been together for ten years and have known for thirty, is also Danish and that is another important factor. I would not leave my children or my Alice. I would certainly not describe myself as rootless, but perhaps rather as multi-rooted—with primary, secondary, and tertiary roots.

**MT:** What made you decide to pursue writing professionally?

**TEK:** I don't think of writing as a profession so much as a calling and a spiritual discipline. At the risk of sounding precious, I would say that I was "called" to write by the increasing evidence that any possible "doorway" to an understanding of existence lay in the honest work of great writers and by an increasing understanding that it would be necessary for me to attempt to explore my mind (heart? soul?) if I were ever to hope to try to approach any degree of understanding of existence—even if that understanding was nothing but evidence of a suspicion that nothing could really be understood at all. When I was eighteen, I read something that Dostoevski had written in his journals when he was eighteen: "Man is a mystery, and even if one should spend his entire life endeavoring to solve that mystery and fail, one would not have wasted his time." That statement helped make it clear to me that I had to write. (Samuel Beckett put it another way: "to try in vain to say what cannot be said so that it can be tried in vain to be said.") Perhaps even more important to me was the statement by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: The wish "to discover the mode of life or of art whereby your spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom." And, "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: And I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning." And (though to a lesser extent because I do not have the fortitude of a Joyce to carry it out): "I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave. And I am not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake, and perhaps as long as eternity, too." I do not think, however, that I can—or want to be able to—leave whatever. But all the rest of it is what gave Joyce the power to make his great discoveries of the human soul which are revealed in *Ulysses*.

I once left a writer's colony that I was supposed to stay at for a month after a few days because the director, a young woman, pronounced over dinner that *Ulysses* was a useless book no one ever read anyway and that she would take any of Oprah's selections over it anyway. I simply could not bear sitting down to dine with her smug visage across from me each evening. (Also, the food was bad, the building drafty, the view from my room was over the parking lot, and the closest pub was a 45-minute walk downhill—coming back again was a bastard.)

While I would never presume to compare myself with Joyce—for my intellect and my imagination are puny beside his—I would follow the advice of the master and hope to achieve even some tiny measure of the art he gave to the world and, of course, to himself. Thus, this is not something I think of as a profession in the sense of practising law or medicine. Necessary and useful as those practices are (though the usefulness of law might sometimes be questioned even more often than the usefulness of medicine), they do not quite touch the greater realm encompassed by writing. Words won't splint a broken leg, but they can mend a broken life. And *Ulysses* is more useful than most medicines I have tried. Even if, as the great Scottish bard once said, "Whiskey—it stoppeth the mind from pinching," still *Ulysses* lets loose the pinch of consciousness into a great flow.

**MT:** How would you characterize your type of writing—is it subjective? Is it nonfiction, fiction?

**TEK:** I would characterize it as a journey into language because in the beginning was the word and the darkness comprehended it not. My type of writing is subjective, objec-

tive, fiction, nonfiction, creative nonfiction. I write in most forms and a mix of them all—though far less and far less well in the poetic forms—and whatever I write I see as an exploration to discover something—perhaps as (wasn't it Flannery O'Connor who said this?) an attempt to discover what it is I did not know that I knew. Perhaps more to see what the words brewing within are able to tell me.

**MT:** Your view of your profession—how do you see authors in broader popular culture? Is writing overshadowed by other mediums—TV, etc.?

**TEK:** I think probably what I see as “serious literary writing” (writing which fulfills the kind of criteria I describe above) does not have a central place in our culture, although to the credit of the American culture, there are thousands of literary magazines and small presses which help to keep this aspect of the culture alive. I think that most literary authors have no place in broader popular culture, although there are exceptions. Every so often one specimen is plucked from the greater mass of writers for various reasons—among them a degree of excellence—and given special attention and rewards, but the writers visible in the media—those published by New York and reviewed by the *New York Times* etc.—are but a fraction of those at work today. As to other media overshadowing writing—no doubt about it. A book seldom becomes fully “real” unless it is made into a major motion picture with an all-star cast and wins a few Oscars or a TV mini-series, etc. Sometimes, the book is terrific and the film is terrific—I'm not complaining about that, and I am happy for colleagues who have this success, delighted to see the fiction of worthy writers like Andre Dubus II and Andre Dubus III and Gordon Weaver and Duff Brenna being made into films—I am merely making note of the process. I find myself doing it, too. When I want to talk about an extraordinary writer like Andre Dubus II, I'll often make note of the fact that he wrote the story on which the film *In the Bedroom* was based. *In the Bedroom* is a splendid film, but Andre's story was entitled “Killings” and it was about 10 pages long and much more compact than the filmscript. That is not a complaint—that is simply a note that to call attention to Dubus's great story, if you want people to understand what you are talking about, you have to refer to the film title. The same could be said of Gordon Weaver's novel *Count a Lonely Cadence*, made into a film about 20 years after it was published, starring Martin and Charlie Sheen and directed by Martin and retitled, *Cadence*. So if you want people to understand what you are referring to, you talk about Weaver as the author of the book that *Cadence* with Martin and Charlie Sheen was based on. It's an odd wrinkle to our culture—that a book seems to become more real when it is made into a film. I remember when John Huston made *Moby Dick* into a movie in 1956, with the filmscript written by the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury who had never read the book until he was hired to write the screenplay. My father, who rarely went to the movies, said to me (I was twelve), “C'mon, son, we're going up to the Jackson to see *Moby Dick*.” It was important. A great book had been honored on the screen. But really a movie can never do what a great book can do. A movie can be better than some good books (e.g. the movie of *Goodbye, Columbus* was, arguably, better than the novella it was based on—Roth's later work is better), but a movie can rarely do what a great novel can. Look at the attempts to film *Ulysses*. Both admirable, the latest probably less so, because it didn't have Milo O'Shea perhaps and was a tad too erotically literal. But neither of them anywhere near what Joyce did.

I'm content and consider myself fortunate that I am able to publish the books that

I write in a culture that does not care as much by far about books as it does about films and music and above all else about sport, the knocking about of balls, kicking them, swatting them, dunking them, smacking them, paddling them, golf-clubbing them. Balls. That's what matters. But I do sometimes feel that the American public is being cheated of an opportunity to read—which might seem paradoxical when you look at all the books available from Barnes and Noble, Borders, Amazon.com, etc. But the book industry has changed, is out for the big money. Years ago, the appearance of a great short story—by a Cheever, a Hemingway, an Updike, an O'Faolain—got people buzzing. The form was important. Today there are probably more short stories than ever being published, but they are not important to the public at large, although many of them will be hugely important to some of the individuals who read them because a great short story, a great novel can change your life. What the public at large have thrown at them all the time are crappy movies, action comedies, proficiently made emptiness—they constitute a cultural diet equivalent to eating almost nothing but McDonalds and KFC, day in and day out. There's no cultural nourishment, no existential nourishment. All of this industrial scrabbling for culture bucks leaves the vast majority of our citizens abandoned on a desert, all alone with their souls and nothing to help them contend with the facts of life—that we are all going to die, that we are alone, that our family structures are crumbling, our religions have stabbed us in the back, that our nation is being run by the worst kind of opportunists. Well, I could go on, but perhaps that is enough.

**MT:** To what extent are there outside influences—publishers, etc.—that are pressures on what you write?

**TEK:** I am glad you asked this. I decide what I write. I will listen to a publisher or editor's advice and if I think it is artistically sound, I will consider making use of it, but I always make the final decision, I always do the creation myself. I decide. And what I write I write because it is important to me, because it aches in me to try to find expression, to try in vain to be said so that it can be tried in vain to be said. If I tried to write what someone else wanted me to write—some agent who thought he could help me find a better “niche” in the market, say—I might as well go back to work as a middle manager. The years I worked in middle-management I made much better money than all but a small fraction of serious writers and it didn't cost me a piece of my soul to do it. A year of my salary then was as much or more as most well-selling books earn. How much do you get if you sell, say, 20,000 copies of a novel, or even 50,000 copies, or more? My salary was at least as good as that, or near as good or better, and I got it again the next year, too, and the year after that, when that book had been remaindered long ago, a black smudge on its page edges and a 75%-off sticker plastered on its face. I mean, completely okay if the author was happy with what s/he wrote—but if s/he wrote what someone else wanted her or him to write, s/he might just as well have been writing speeches for the President of Borden's Milk.

Happily, I no longer need to work—now I can just follow my desire to write, and I write what I want, what I feel needs to be written. I don't let agents or editors or publishers or anyone tell me what they think I should write because they think it will make more money. So you might say I am a happy man. You know, in Camus's play *Caligula*, when Caligula moans to his chief confidant Cherea, “Men die and they are not happy,” and Cherea says, “Yes, but I choose to live and to be happy.” That's how I feel. Let the literary industrial complex do what it wants. I am free to write what I please, and, so far, it con-

tinues to see print. And my words will live—or die—as the case may be. As Socrates said, whose fate is best no one knows. Or Sophocles, in perhaps the darkest comic statement in literary history, “Count no man happy until he is laid in his grave.”

**MT:** Do you participate in writer’s groups? Do you have a network of writers?

**TEK:** I lead various workshops and participate in various writers conferences and I teach—as a core faculty member in the MFA Program at Fairleigh Dickinson University, which I do because I love to teach—it helps me learn—and because I love having colleagues and enjoy the students—they are so bright and eager and talented and want to learn—and it’s also nice to pick up a couple extra bucks. I love being able to contribute a few bucks to a cause I believe in. And being able to say to Alice, “Hey, feel like flying to Dublin?” Or if my kids look worried and I say, “What’s up?” And they say, ‘I have like twenty bucks for the rest of the month,’—to feel easy with saying, “Hey, let me help!” What’s a dad for?

But to get back to your question, I am not a member of a writers group that holds regular meetings and such. I do however have a rather extensive network of writer friends around the world and if I am in doubt about something I’ve written I do not hesitate to ask their advice about it, just as they will occasionally ask me what I think about something they have in draft. Mostly, you want them to say, “Wow, this is terrific!” But sometimes they say, “This is really good, but on page 3, I think....” And that is good. Everyone needs a little bit of that. Writing is a lonely pursuit. No doubt about that. And if you don’t have writer friends, it can be hard. I know. I went for the better part of twenty years without writer friends, and it was tough.

Anyway, that’s how I feel. Perhaps others feel differently. But I cherish my network. And I love being plugged in to people in a few dozen different cities around the world. This is one of the wonderful things about the internet. There are people who hate computers and email, members of the Pencil Club. But I’m all for this e-stuff—I think it’s terrific. It cuts so much drudgery.

I mean, do you know the great ancient monument at Newgrange—the passage grave through a little niche in which the sunlight enters on every winter solstice day and slowly lights up the inner grave chamber? This is about one-and-a-half hours ride outside Dublin. It is around 5,000 years old. It is built of very heavy blocks of stone that was transported from far away, and this was a time when this particular culture did not yet have the wheel. So their achievement is quite fabulous—all that stone, carted and shipped in canoes, and dragged up hills in leather slings. Marvelous. But can you imagine any of them saying, “Wheel? We don’t want no stinkin’ wheels around here! We do it the good old-fashioned way. We break our backs because that is the ‘natural’ way to do it. It’s ecological. We will not stoop to using wheels to get this sacred monument built! Wheels make people crazy and lazy and fat and stressed out. No way. We need the exercise. No wheels for us, thank you very much.”

**MT:** Would you consider yourself a part of an expatriate community?

**TEK:** Rather of a world community, I think I would say. In Denmark there are something like ten thousand Americans living—perhaps I know a dozen of them, maybe two dozen. I suppose I know about as many, or more, Danish writers, journalists, booksellers, teachers, etc. I know quite a few American writers in Paris, very many in Geneva and that area from teaching in the Geneva Writers Conference, where about 150 people assemble

for three days of workshops every other year, mostly Americans. I have a very close American writer friend in Oslo, one in Geneva, one in Galway, one in Tokyo, a close Anglo-Irish writer friend in Cambridge England. My closest writer friends live in New Jersey, Paris, Chicago, Boston, Cape Cod, Sun City (California), Delaware, Portland (Oregon), Kansas City.... I am not trying to recite this to impress, but to give an idea how my closest friends and colleagues live all over the place. Is that a community? Yes, but they just don't all live in the same place. Is it an expatriate community—well, it is a few expatriate communities and a few non-expatriate communities all linked together, and, little by little, we all get to know each other and each others' friends, etc. I like this. And every so often some of us manage to get together in person, too. This is a boon for the vodka industry.

**MT:** In your perspective, is the cliché true—is it only when you are abroad that you are aware of who you are as an American?

**TEK:** I guess most clichés are true. Living in another culture, learning another language provides a healthy confrontation to one's previously unquestioned identity. It makes the idioms of one's own language suddenly show themselves in all their idiosyncratic foreignness and the genius of the idioms of other languages (which the native speakers consider cliché) fresh and exciting. And it startles us in a profitable way. I've seen young Americans in Paris annoyed at the "up-tightness" of a French café waiter who wanted them to take their filthy, ugly running shoes off the elegant café chairs—clueless. Little epiphanies like that are daily occurrences when you open yourself to another culture. When a Dane responds with quiet composure to a foreigner's rage, it is an education. And watching a Frenchman squawk like Donald Duck makes you feel sad that you offended him by forgetting that in Paris a cab driver is "*le patron*." When we visit countries other than our own we become privy to a spate of cultural epiphanies every day—we can either be huffy about them (Well, where I come from this would never...) or we can observe and see and follow suit.

**MT:** To what extent would you say that place—geographical location—is a part of your work?

**TEK:** To a considerable extent. When I moved to Europe, I was writing from an accumulated mass of experience and knowledge that was being generated into stories that naturally took their setting (or at least most of them did) in New York. In time, I had pretty well depleted that store of material, but of course was building up a new store in my new setting—in France and Denmark and the other European countries I was experiencing. The problem was that I did not know enough about the culture of these new countries (I say, "new," although I am talking about the old world) to set much of what I was writing here. Occasionally I succeeded in doing so, but, more often, I had to "translate" the setting from Europe back to New York because I knew how New York "worked" much better than I knew the new places I was living in. But in time, I had lived away from my native city long enough that it began to change, and I could no longer be certain that what I described of it was still accurate.

Finally, in 1996, after having lived 20 years in Copenhagen, it occurred to me it was time to learn everything there was to know about my new hometown. So I started studying—I read history and literature and maps and guidebooks and histories of bars ("serving houses"), etc., and I started writing novels set in Copenhagen. Not that I had not written the occasional story set somewhere else—be it Copenhagen or Kruger Park in South Af-



rica or Madrid or Venice or on a Greek island or wherever—but I knew that the time had come to shift my foundation as a fiction writer—or at least to expand it. And I wrote my four Copenhagen novels and even if they were written in English (my Danish suffices for daily conversation and for letters, but not for literary endeavors), the Danish newspapers and TV and radio opened their hearts to what I was doing. A lot of Americans I know might become testy if a “foreigner” began to describe their own country to them, but the Danes received my presentations of their country very positively. Now I feel free finally to write Danish settings and American settings and Irish settings, for that matter, and, on occasion, the short glimpse of a bunch of other settings.

So, in brief, yes, I think setting, geographical location is definitely a part of my work. It doesn't have to be. You can write stories that are set nowhere, but that identity-lessness of setting had better be an important part of the aesthetic of the piece, or it will fall on its face. That is just my point of view and my way of working, of course.

**MT:** Do you have a specific place that you work? Or a specific location that factors into your stories/writing?

**TEK:** I have a nice office at home, fairly roomy with lots of shelving and places for manuscripts, etc. On the walls are hung the framed covers of most of my twenty or so books and some posters from readings I gave, a couple of drawings that were done of me by the Canadian writer and artist Heather Spears, pictures of my kids, of Alice, of some former students—so, if I want, I can look up and, out of the blankness of the creative pit, remember that I have written some books, that I have children, that I have a woman whom I love and who loves lucky me. In this office is my computer, so when I type up my stories and novels, I sit in my burgundy-red Arne Jacobsen armchair and type.

But when I write—when I create first drafts of fiction—my favorite place to sit is in the living room, on the right-hand side of one of our two terra-cotta red sofas, leaning my pad on the broad flat arm of the sofa, my back to the window, possibly with the television set on, hopefully with my partner, Alice, in the room with me, doing something or other, writing herself, or reading, or organizing one of her many projects. That's the best place to write—with my Montblanc pen, medium nib, black ink, on lined white pads—yellow if necessary. Virtually everything I have written in the past dozen years or so has been written with that Montblanc. I love that pen. It is the only good pen I have ever owned and cost about \$250. I wrote the entire *Copenhagen Quartet* with that pen. Who cares? Well, I do. And I will leave the handwritten manuscripts and the pen to my kids when I kick off, and they can decide whether they have any value or not. They can dump them in the trash if they want.

Anyway, I love to write in my living room, but I have also learned through a lifetime of having to make a living doing other things that it was necessary to write whenever I could wherever I was for whatever time was available. Even a scrap of ten or fifteen minutes can produce a useful paragraph. So I write on planes, on buses, in cafés, in hotel rooms in the evening, . . . whenever. Especially when observation and insight are fresh, I write.

**MT:** In your opinion, what is the literary scene in America like today? What is the literary scene like where you are living now?

**TEK:** The literary scene in America today seems to me to be characterized by excessive commercialism. Many novels that were published twenty-five or more years ago—some of them damn fine ones—would have a much tougher time of it today. Most of the experimental novels of the 1960s would be ignored, I think. And there have been

experiments in which people typed up, say, a novel by Faulkner and gave it a different title and a different author's name and sent it out to thirty different houses, all of whom rejected it—I think there was only one editor who caught on. Then, too, books travel on contemporary streams. Who today would publish William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* if it were written out of the context of the spirit of its time? I wonder. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is an eternal masterpiece—would an equivalent book today be supported even to the extent that it was then, when Joyce was writing it? I wonder. Yet, difficult as *Ulysses* is to read, had it not been written, had it not been published, had it perished before anyone ever even knew about it, our culture would be horribly more impoverished. What great works might we be missing out on today? Would *Finnegans Wake* have any chance at all in today's market where agents routinely tell people—as one just told one of my students who has written a wonderful book—“Adoption books are out; play that aspect down.” Do readers really only want to read or most want to read John Grisham and Stephen King and Danielle Steele and the current how-to trend? How to get rich, how to get skinny, how to get sexual satisfaction, how to fuck your neighbor in the assessment of the property line.... There are certainly some fine novels being published today, but how many fine novels are being cast aside in favor of, pardon me, crap—or just amusement instead of intellectual and spiritual involvement—and by “spiritual” I am not talking about finding the Lord, be he called the Christ, the Buddha, the whatever? Do we have a generation of people who never learned what intense pleasure there is in a novel, in a short story? I wonder. Poems are quite another thing. So much poetry being written today is so elitist, so inaccessible, that probably the majority of people can't find their way. I'm not saying those poems are bad, I'm just saying that—what I'm saying is that I quoted Edwin Arlington Robinson to an excellent poet friend not too long ago, and he made a face. I said, “What? Don't poets read Robinson anymore?” And he said emphatically, “No!” Okay, Robinson is not Wallace Stevens, but a lot of Robinson is gorgeous. Why turn our noses up at him? Is Fat Boy Slim any better? Okay, maybe *Counting Crows* is more satisfying for our time, but Robinson is still fine. As is Jacques Prevert and, for that matter, T. S. Eliot, who is suddenly much more accessible than he was thirty or fifty years ago. And why is that? Because he elevated the language of the tribe. (And maybe because I've read him so many times.)

As to the literary scene in Denmark, it must be remembered that Denmark is a country of 5.2 million people—one thirtieth the population of the U.S., one sixth that of California, a fourth of Texas, a third of New York and of Florida, just about equal to Missouri, larger than only 20 states of the U.S. Many Danes even jokingly refer to Denmark as the 51<sup>st</sup> State. But, it must also be remembered that Denmark is a country with a history of more than a thousand years. Some of the bars in Copenhagen are older than the U.S. of A. It is a country with its own language, and thousands of books are published each year in that language. There is a distinct and nuanced culture and identity that would be difficult to find, I think, in a great many of the American states, and I say that with all respect for the history and cultural history of America. But why don't we have a ministry of culture? We're one of the few countries in the world that doesn't. Is it because culture should be mediated by the TV?

Even more important, Denmark is a country that decided decades ago that ALL of its inhabitants would have comprehensive medical care without paying anything out of pocket, where all children and young people would have an equal right to educa-

tion without payment right up through university, medical school, etc.—even with a small salary for university students, a country which has applied what our Oliver Wendell Holmes suggested long ago and the U.S. never took to its heart: “With taxes you build civilization.” The United States is based on individualism—what can the individual get for himself and his family to raise himself up above others. In Denmark, the dominant philosophy is, “Do we have it good?” No one here minds having a little bit more than the others, but no one wants others to be in misery, to be without medical care, to have rotten teeth, to have no opportunity for education, to be doomed to flap hamburgers in a greasy MacDonalds or Burger King for the rest of their lives.

Neither does the Danish state shrink from encouraging the arts. Someone like Jesse Helms would not get far here. (Once, when Helms was at his NEA-destructive height, I was giving a reading at a Texas university and told my host—an excellent poet—that I wanted to dedicate my reading, which was not very orthodox, to Jesse Helms. My host got kind of a sick look on his face and said, “That’s pretty funny, but you’ve got to be careful around here.”) Kind of frightening.

Here in Denmark the media pay attention to what is being done in the arts, including what is referred to as “small literature.” Literary journals in Denmark are regularly reviewed in the Danish press and clearly considered an important contribution to the nation’s culture. This is ironic. In the U.S., where there are thousands of literary journals, the culture as a whole pays them little mind. Go into a Barnes and Noble or a Borders and ask where the literary journals are, and the answer is, “What do you mean by literary journals?” Here they are reviewed in the daily press. Even some issues of *The Literary Review*—which have included translations of Danish writers—have been reviewed in the general press—a literary journal published 5,000 miles away with a circulation of 2,000 is reviewed in this little country. Does that happen in the U.S.? If it does, I am not aware of it. Occasionally, perhaps, the Pushcart Prize will be reviewed in a large-circulation newspaper—and that is a good thing—but that is about it. Or someone will rouse himself to write about *The Paris Review* because it has that “Paris expat” aura, even if it has not had much to do with Paris for a good many years. Now I am not implying that your average Dane actually reads literary journals, but at least there is an opportunity for him to know that they exist and what they are doing via the newspapers.

Danes and the Danish media also show interest in what is being published throughout the world. For example, Paul Auster was for years better known in Denmark than in the U.S. The last issue of the Danish literary journal *The Blue Gate* included a translation of a piece by Gertrude Stein, some poems by the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer and an interview with him by Robert Bly, six poems by Henrik Nordbrandt (one of the best North European poets at work today) alongside poems by a young poet picked out of the slush pile. Another magazine, *Wheat Grain*, published several debut poems by a twenty-one-year-old which were picked up by the daily press and reprinted there. And these magazines are published by two of the larger Danish houses. When I suggested I would like to translate that debut poet’s work and maybe publish it in the U.S., I was showered with copies of the magazine and permissions—and I stand a good chance of getting a grant from the Danish Arts Council to do the work.

Happily, what the U.S. and Denmark do have in common is a proliferation of café and bookshop readings. I am not unfavorably comparing American literary possibilities

with those of Denmark. As I mentioned already, the U.S. has a wealth of literary journals and small presses, not to mention writing programs (in Denmark, there is but one). The subculture flourishes, and thank the gods and goddesses for that. Otherwise, we would be abandoned to Bruce Willis and junk food.

**MT:** What does the word “home” mean to you? What images does it conjure and is it a geographical place or a certain sentiment, smell, etc.?

**TEK:** I am divided on this. On the one hand, home means the sound of a baseball game being reported on radio through an open window on a summer afternoon, or the vision of it on a TV screen in a bar. It means Thanksgiving turkey and pumpkin pie and having the Friday off the next day, supermarkets with aisles as big as your average European freeway lane, and a choice of anything you can imagine to eat, drink or consume in some other way and other things you can't imagine, too. It means the voice of Frank Sinatra or Tony Bennett or Bob Dylan or Getz's or Coltrane's sax and Miles Davis's horn (all of which, however, can be heard throughout the world) and magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Harper's* in waiting rooms. It means the availability of just about anything and everything twenty-four hours a day—delivered to your door. It means killer martinis in stem glasses you have to hold in two hands. But it also means malls. I loathe malls. It also means the disease of MacDonalds, Burger King, 7Eleven, KFC, etc. A disease which has spread here, too. It also means working yourself to death with a week or two vacation a year and the threat of getting fired from day to day.

Here in Denmark, home for me means magnificent family lunches, three days of Christmas, six or seven weeks vacation a year, not having to worry whether an illness is going to flatten you financially. It means you don't have to take out a second mortgage on the house when each child comes of college age, and it means you have certain rights as an employee. It means eating fresh smoked eel on dark rye bread, ten kinds of herring with ice-cold aquavite to make it swim.... And it means walking through the city without being considered odd for doing so. People walk and ride bikes here. It is normal. I don't even own a car—you don't need one. There are buses and city trains and the underground. Aside from the big cities (New York, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle...), where do people walk in the U.S.? A lot of places don't even have sidewalks.

But all this contrast gives me a pain between my ears. I love both places. Both lands are opulent and wonderful. I want to live everywhere at all times. And you can do that today—with email, the net, jets.... We've got a pretty good world. If only we could stop killing and torturing and exploiting each other.

**MT:** How do you see the connection between your craft—writing—and American society?

**TEK:** I use the only arms I allow myself—silence, exile and cunning.

**MT:** When writing, do you keep in mind a national mind—are you writing to America as a society? Do you take into consideration your intended audience at all?

**TEK:** Well, occasionally, when I am writing, the face of someone I know will flash into my mind, and I will see him or her chortling with appreciation or wrinkling up her nose in distaste because I used the C-word, but generally not. Usually I write out of an internal linguistic eruption. Something, as Neruda put it, happens in my soul, fever or forgotten wings, and I find my own way, deciphering that fire.

**MT:** To what extent do you think your national identity—as an American, etc.—has



influenced your writings? Has it made you want to write?

**TEK:** “The Declaration of Independence” and “The Bill of Rights” bring tears to my eyes. Phrases like “When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people...” and “there shall be no law abridging the freedom of speech...,” and the ruling of the Honorable Judge Woolsey, from 1933, that “*Ulysses* may therefore be admitted into the United States...” These things are a deep and important part of my identity. That very idea that a young nation would pronounce and elaborate that all human beings have certain “inalienable rights...” These things should not be taken for granted. Yet they should also be taken for granted. Because an inalienable right cannot be taken from you —not legally so. (Yet what is happening today...? But I won’t go into that here.) So there is no doubt that my being American has not only made me want to write but made it possible for me to feel free to write. However, I think it is too simple to call my identity “national” or “American.” My identity is also American, but it is also regional, it is also local, it also has roots in the countries from which my parents’ ancestors came and in the religion that they inherited and which I was force fed. The first ancestor on my mother’s side who came from Europe was a fellow named Frederick Volk. He left Baden Baden in 1869 to escape conscription in the Franco-Prussian Wars. He was sixteen years old and did not want to have to fight his French brothers. In the new world, in Brooklyn, he married a French woman from Belfort, France, named Rose André. I have a picture of him taken in 1881, in Brooklyn, when he was twenty-eight years old. He looks prosperous and happy. The war that he escaped having to serve in, maybe having to die in, is the war from which Maupassant describes an episode in his marvelous short story “*Boul de Suif*,” published in 1880, about a group of French people trying to get past a German checkpoint in 1869 or 1870. Maupassant’s mentor was Gustav Flaubert, and every time Maupassant showed Flaubert a story he had written, Flaubert told him, “No, don’t publish that, you’re not ready.” On Flaubert’s death bed, it is said, Maupassant showed him that story, “*Boul de Suif*,” and Flaubert told him this was good enough, that he should publish it. It is a wonderful story, perhaps the best Maupassant ever wrote, though I have not read them all. I often wonder if Fred Volk ever read it.

So, in answer to your question, I ask myself another question. What is my national identity? Is it American, is it Alsatian, is it German, is it French, is it Irish, is it Danish, is it Yankee, is it Queens’ kid, is it Roman Catholic, or RC apostate? All of these identities have affected my writing and my personal identity. There are also the identities you admire and can’t have, and somehow that’s a part of you, too. In the Army, I lived for the first time close to black people and became aware of a humor and style that I could not possess. At City College of New York, I got close to Jewish friends and admired how sensuous and direct and crafty and mischievous they were. Why couldn’t I be that way? I remember a Jewish woman I met in Helsinki. I told her I was a Jew. She lifted the sunglasses I was wearing and peered into my baby blues. “You are *not* a Jew,” she pronounced. How could she tell?! I wanted to be a Jew with her. I’m from New York. I could be a Jew!

**MT:** Are there certain trends that you see in American literature that make it unique? Are there trends in literature internationally that you are aware of?

**TEK:** There was a time I followed literary trends, as best I could, with great interest and felt an intense wish to be able to identify them, to feel myself adept at understanding which trends were underway at present, which trends we had just left behind, which



trends we were on our way into.

There were the late nineteenth century realists and the novels of manners and acculturation. Then came the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century modernists. Then there was Joyce, a classification unto himself. And then all those good writers like Hemingway, who, we thought, was a super realist, and satirists like Sinclair Lewis, and wonderful guys like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, and Sherwood Anderson, who, alas, choked to death on a toothpick. I'm leaving so many people out. I didn't even mention the fabulous Hawthorne and Melville, the gloriously purple Poe. Dostoevski in Russia and Kierkegaard in Denmark and Goethe in Germany and later Verlaine and his wonder boy Rimbaud in France and the great Rilke of Austria, who was Rodin's secretary. And I almost forgot terrific guys like John Cheever, John Updike... This is all such a terrible, glossing generalization, and simplification—I didn't even mention the Bible, Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare! Flash way forward and along came the down-and-dirty beats, who called the asshole holy holy holy, etc. And suddenly a great wave of innovators swept across us; they wrote about writing itself, metafiction and self-reflexive fiction and fabulation and irrealism and what Jerome Klinkowitz referred to as "voodoo" (referring scornfully to the notion that characters in fiction are real people). Then came the inevitable backlash with writers who, as Raymond Carver put it, "wrote about the real things that really matter to real people." These were supposed to be the so-called "Dirty Realists." As far as I know, they got that name from Bill Buford when he did two issues of *Granta* titled "Dirty Realism" and then "More Dirt." He was so good at labels. His *Granta* issue on the Germans he called "Krauts." But of course there were others who had earlier coined the phrase "Trashcan Realism" and still others, in the 1980s, who were talking about "K-mart Realism," where you name all of the products that you can buy in the K-mart, I guess, in the interests of verisimilitude, in order to prove that you know the trailer park milieu you are writing about. Oh, and I completely forgot the new journalists: Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe et al.—although I suppose it could be argued that Meyer Levin got there just before Capote with his docu-novel about the famous Leopold-Loeb murder from the 1920s in his book, *Compulsion*. It seemed that was the time that everything had to be "new"—I guess the New Criticism started that off. Then we had the New Fiction, the New Journalism. This was useful to some people, helped them think, because when something was "new" it signalled that what had come before was "old" and therefore no longer worthy of our esteem. The trouble is that then the word "new" got old. You couldn't quite call something "the new newism" or the "old newism," so someone latched onto the idea of "post." Then we had "post-modernism." But the trouble with that is it got people terrified to use the word "modern" anymore because what was "modern" was, by definition, now "old" and past. Then someone manufactured the label "post-colonialism," which was a *good* idea. And into the arena of culture rode the multiculturalists, which was also good. And I have completely forgotten the feminists. I am profoundly grateful to the feminists for forcing our culture to recognize and admit that women are just as strong and good at writing and everything else that can be done as men, better even, and thank goddess for that. I am so happy to have been freed of my Received Opinion as a child that women and dark people were inferior to men and pink people. Well I used to try to keep abreast of all these terms—it was particularly useful if you were asked to write a book review. Then you had all this terminology to sling about.

I guess I am trying to say that although I am certain it is of great worth to classify all these different trends and put them into textbooks that people can buy and study, and set writers into groupings so that when someone says, “Keats,” you can say, “Right, Romantic,” and you don’t hardly even have to bother to read him. What is most important to me about literature is not trends or critical schools or whatever, but rather books, stories, poems, essays. I love to read books, all different kinds of books from all different times and periods, and when I am really bitten by a particular book, I sometimes even like to read books about that book and about that author and interviews and essays. I am in awe of someone who can put it all into order—someone like Harold Bloom, who can read *every single* word of Shakespeare and make a great fat book discussing, analyzing and categorizing it all. And it is a very good book, indeed, which I refer to frequently for pleasure and enlightenment. Mr Bloom even once kindly chose an essay of mine on Sherwood Anderson and included it in a book he put together about Anderson. He was so gracious as to give me a copy of the book, too, but he had cut something out of the essay, without asking me (though I would be hesitant to tell Mr Bloom I didn’t want him to do something). He had cut out the part I thought most interesting—where I had caught another famous critic in a misunderstanding of one of Anderson’s most sophisticated stories.

I guess Mr. Bloom saw no reason to expose that misunderstanding. Not that I’m so great—I misunderstand things all the time. But perhaps you see what I am trying to say: Although I’ve written a few books of literary criticism, I am not really a very good literary critic. I’m not good at classifying and comparing. I’m better (I think, I hope, I trust, I pray) at creating.