

as bartender pours drink
Bunny named after character
child's boots
b.c. wants one proof of her
existence
- Butler in both - she brought
Cigarette
- morality - brother confided
to her in 1920. people who've had
to commend her that she's
gone, then she's safe
- they thought work at dolls
putting together a baby
in her Saturday hours
with dolls but almost been
loved to death

Notes for the composition of Dolman Hardy, 1940.



A. Chisholm

THE ART OF FICTION XXI

CONSTANCE EAKINS

The interview "took place" one morning in a midtown New York hotel. One must resort to quotation marks here because Constance Eakins—a jealous recluse despite his global popularity and larger-than-life persona—refused to allow the interviewer a glimpse of his famous countenance at any point during the meeting. Following a stipulation put forward by Eakins previous to the meeting, a busboy was summoned to the room to set up a curtain-like apparatus in the doorway between the suite's living room and its bedding quarter. (The curtain was, in fact, a tablecloth.) The interviewer sat in a chair on one side of the curtain, and spoke his questions with great volume. From the loud breathing several feet away, it could be surmised that the

world-class author was reclining in his bed. Several times the author was silent as long as thirty minutes, after which period he would explain that he had been gripped by a fit of composition too powerful to restrain. The interview was cut short by one such fit, which lasted several hours, at which point the interviewer made his exit.

Fifteen floors below the window, cars streamed through the late autumn rain on Fifth Avenue, toward the Empire States Building.

* * *

INTERVIEWER

E. M. Forster says his characters sometimes take over and dictate the course of his novels. Has this ever been a problem for you, or are you in complete command?

EAKINS

My knowledge of Mr. Forster's work is limited to one novel which I dislike. My characters are galley slaves.

INTERVIEWER

You were saying earlier that you don't like being interviewed.

EAKINS

The reason I don't like interviews is that I seem to react violently to personal questions. The category of "personal questions" encompasses all inquiries about my work. The violence with which I react can be severe, irregular, and stunning in its alacrity.

INTERVIEWER

Blaise Cendrars said that writing is a privilege compared to most work, and that writers exaggerate their suffering. What do you think?

EAKINS

I think that writing is very difficult, but no more difficult

than the skinning and surgical reconstruction of animal carcasses, in preparation for taxidermy. Take a tiger, for instance, and say that the cause of fatality was a true-struck blow to the cheek, by means of a bony, iron-hard human fist. The first thing one has to do is meticulously recreate the bone structure of the face. Otherwise, the animal's visage will never come close to reclaiming any verisimilitude to its natural condition. The eyeball, having been cast a dozen yards from the body by the force of the death-blow, must be recovered and re-inserted into the socket with great delicacy; usually a smudge of petroleum jelly will help get the job done. One must then stealthily remove delicate, superfluous bones from other parts of the beast's body, shave them into proportionally, and weave them together in a lattice-like structure to imitate the natural convexity of the cheek. The cheek-skin must then be re-sewed with a precision one might expect from a Penelope of seamstresses, but not a young writer-adventurer from St. Rose, Louisiana. And then there is the business of organ-cleaning and blood-draining, a tedious and unrewarding process. So now I pose the question back to you, interviewer: what is the feat of writing when put alongside that?

INTERVIEWER

Is your fiction at all autobiographical? Do you write about people you know specifically, do you write about yourself?

EAKINS

Sometimes. My fiction is usually autobiographical, but in a distant, unrecognizable way. Once in a while, as in the story "Sacrosanct, or Conroy Eaker Ate Lunch," I write pretty close to what happened. But I fictionalized that too—which worries me, in fact. When you get to an event that close to real life and you alter the characters in some way, you run the risk of your girlfriend, or your wife, or your friends thinking, You don't understand me. That wasn't what I was thinking. I know that's not what they were thinking, but I need searchlights on a piece, so I have to change characters, make them more appropriate to the fictional idea, the real subject, which isn't just history. Usually, though, I'm not interested in celebrating my own life. I use feelings that I have

myself—the only feelings I know, directly—and I deal them out to a group of characters and let the characters fight out the problems that I've been fighting. And when they fight, they let it all out. So the autobiographical element is more emotional than anything else.

The main danger would be to believe that I have actually enacted all of the horrors depicted in my writing. Besides, even if I have, a work of fiction cannot be used in a court of law to support real-world allegations. I learned that during my trial for armed robbery in Mobile several years back, when the prosecution tried to enter into evidence my story, "There Was Only \$23.44 in the Cash Register of Duane's Liquor Store."

INTERVIEWER

I want to discuss your childhood, about which you have been very private in the past. Was it when you ran away from home that you began to feel that you were going to be a writer?

EAKINS

No, I always wanted to be a writer, even before I was born. My first story was what I like to call an image-story. When I hadn't yet learned how to speak, my dear mother would give me a parcel of rusty nails, which I used to draw abstract shapes on the walls of our home.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know that these were stories? I mean, doesn't every child make drawings if given some sort of writing implement?

EAKINS

They were image-stories and if you went to look at them now they would make you weep from the beauty of their narrative swoop.

INTERVIEWER

You said you knew you would be a writer before you were born. How is that possible?

EAKINS

I remember vividly what it was like before I was born. There was tremendous pressure all around and I was swimming in a fluid with

the consistency of fruit preserves. I've written about this at length elsewhere. Next question.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe in a community of writers? Is that of any interest to you?

EAKINS

No. I've never seen one in any case...and I don't think any writer ever has.

INTERVIEWER

But surely there were writers important to you growing up, writers who inspired you, either through their work or their company.

EAKINS

From the ages of five to fifteen I read every work by every writer of note who has ever lived. I devoured them like a hungry beast and then I laughed.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you laugh?

EAKINS

Because I knew that my creations would dwarf them all. I am thinking of Gulliver arriving at the Court of the Lilliput.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep a notebook?

EAKINS

No, but I do keep a brainbook—a mental catalogue of every thought I have that may one day be useful for a story or poem or essay. As I write I mentally page through the reams of my brainbook, looking for ideas and correspondences.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you work?

EAKINS

I have an office like any other honest man, if that's what you mean. But I do not confine my working hours to it. Life is like a chain of molecules. There are nodules of activity, but between the atoms and the electrons there are enormous gaps in which we waste away our existence. I use those gaps to do my work. So I write in the elevator, in the bathtub, waiting for an elevator, tying my shoes, eating a plum. I am writing right now.

INTERVIEWER

When do you begin writing each day? As soon as you wake up?

EAKINS

Yes, when I wake up in the morning I always have the desire to sit down to write. The first thing I do is write down my dreams, then I get to my fiction, poetry, theater, film scripts, monographs, critical essays, and journalism—in that order. But then I constantly am receiving telephone calls, gawking fans come up to my house, friends try to visit, and I am all the time interrupted. Somehow I manage to keep on writing. I sometimes think I will only be able to achieve a perfect state should I go away to a far island. I would go to the moon not to be disturbed. I have never yet written in peace, but I keep going nonetheless.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever listen to music as you work?

EAKINS

No, but I do hear a sound in my head during the art of composition. It is like the sound of every orchestra in the world tuning their instruments at the same time, like every wave crashing in every sea, like the shrieks of every motherless child, deprived of their love, begging for buttermilk. It is an awful, world-rending sound, but it is my lot. It is far preferable to the screaming muteness of the great abyss that awaits us all.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write this morning?

EAKINS

I did. I wrote twenty-three pages. That's what it's come to. I used to write ten thousand words a day and sometimes even more, in my golden years. But now it's just a paltry seven thousand or so. Things move so slowly sometimes I feel that I am living in reverse. This is the trouble with being in one's thirties, and past one's prime.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write by longhand?

EAKINS

Yes, but I often go back to typewriter when my arm can't keep up with the jet engine that is my image-narrative-thought-machine.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by "image-narrative-thought-machine"?

EAKINS

Brain.

INTERVIEWER

Do you rewrite constantly? How important is the editorial process to you?

EAKINS

There is not a single utterance I have made that requires the interference of an editor or any other deviant body. I have not rewritten a single page in my life and if you modify in print any word I have said during this conversation I will react with a stern and unyielding display of force that will make you wish you were a hole in the ground. A swampy hole in which not even a wounded sparrow would crawl to die. A hole like that I would make of you, and you would laugh with pleasure and thank me kindly for it instead I do my worse.

INTERVIEWER

I don't follow your use of the word "instead" in that last line.

EAKINS

I warned you once already.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do when you finish a first draft?

EAKINS

I send it to the press.

INTERVIEWER

You mean, you send it right away to your editor?

EAKINS

No, I mean the printing press. Editor? I don't have editors! My publisher is always in a great rush to put the newest book on the shelves so they ask me to send it straight to my man the printing press. He is a good man who does good work, so I have nothing to say against him. You can ask me all day about revision and about editors and all day I will reject that frivolous line of talk.

INTERVIEWER

How do you name your characters?

EAKINS

How does a mother name her sweet child?

INTERVIEWER

Are you asking me? Well, I don't know. I guess it depends on who the mother is. Sometimes a baby will be named after a relative—

EAKINS

A mother names her sweet child after the vision that gleams in her deepest heart. A song that has yet to be sung. A cry that clings still to the throat. A caterpillar. When that doesn't work I leaf through the phone book.

INTERVIEWER

I see certain characters forming a pattern in your work. Miss Eckhart in *The Slayed* is an individualist and outside and similar in

that respect to Kefkir of "Kefkir The Blind," and Johnson Else of *Days and Nights*.

EAKINS

In looking back I can see the pattern. It's funny—when I'm writing, I never see a repeat I make in large or small degree. I learn about it later. In New Orleans they were recently doing a play of Dolman Hardy. The new novel was so fresh in mind, whereas I hadn't thought of Dolman Hardy for years. But when I sat in at rehearsals, I kept seeing bits and pieces come up that I thought I had invented for *The Next World*, there they were in another version in Dolman Hardy. So I thought, It's sort of dismaying, but there it is. Your mind works that way. Yet they occur to me as new every time. Of course, I'm confident that if the two characters were ever to meet, they wouldn't recognize each other.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask you about *Sacrament*, one of your greatest successes, and a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize. One of the most startling things about the book is that it's not lachrymose. In fact, given the tragic nature of the material, it's rather dry-eyed. And yet, as I read it, I kept thinking, Doesn't the knowledge of this experience, what you witnessed, what described—albeit in fictional form—in this book, set you apart in some unbridgeable way from the world that you've since come to inhabit?

EAKINS

It does. Certainly I have felt, ever since the war ended, ever since I could stop pretending to be someone I wasn't—that in spite of all my efforts to be normal, to be like everyone else (these efforts, I should add, stopped some time ago), I remained irremediably different. I have always been aware of an uncomfortable distance separating me from other people. Perhaps also a distance separating the real me from the other visible me that you, for instance, are talking to right now (but not, in fact, actually seeing, due to the curtain-cloth). I have worried that this distance manifests itself as a lack of

spontaneity, a tendency to be aloof and stand aside. Sometimes, half in jest, I call it being a zombie. I am speaking now of what I call my personal life, and my emotional life. Oddly, I have somehow, despite this, managed to be in love with very many women in very intimate and heart-rending ways. So this is something I call a paradox.

INTERVIEWER

Your relationships with women have been the source of great speculation, both in the tabloid magazines as well as in the literary columns. Can you talk about them further?

EAKINS

It is true that I cannot.

INTERVIEWER

In addition to writing stories and novels, you spent many years of your life in journalism. You still work as a journalist for numerous publications, including *The Herald Tribune*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Forward*.

EAKINS

Yes. I am a journalist. Every week I write two or three journalistic articles. But I don't limit my definition of journalism to reporting on facts, or commenting on the political situation. I can write pieces about whether life makes sense or not, or that you shouldn't commit suicide, or a treatise onimps or devils being in everything. So if I am a journalist, I am not exactly the same kind of journalist who works for, let's say, *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, though I do write for them as well on occasion.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think working as a journalist is a good background for somebody who wants to write novels and stories?

EAKINS

I think that any information a human being gets, especially a writer, is good for him. I don't think that being a journalist can do any damage to a writer. The only thing that can do damage is doing

interviews. They suck the blood out of you. Each question is a mosquito.

INTERVIEWER

American poets often answer questions about how it feels to be a poet in our time. Do questions like this interest you?

EAKINS

No.

INTERVIEWER

Do questions about the social utility of poetry interest you?

EAKINS

No. I agree with Auden that "poetry makes nothing happen." Nothing else needs to be said about it.

INTERVIEWER

When you write, do you read your poems out loud?

EAKINS

I recite them very loudly to myself while standing up in my room. If I hear that something is wrong with the rhythm of the poem, then I destroy it and begin a new one.

INTERVIEWER

How does the writing of a play differ from the writing of poems?

EAKINS

They take quite different approaches. There is all the difference in the world between writing a play for an audience and writing a poem, in which you're writing primarily for yourself—although obviously you wouldn't be satisfied if the poem didn't mean something to other people afterward. With a poem you can say, I got my feeling into words for myself. I now have the equivalent in words for that much of what I have felt. Also in a poem you're writing for your own voice, which is very important. You're thinking in terms of your own voice, whereas in a play from the beginning you have

of your own voice, whereas in a play from the beginning you have to realize that you're preparing something that is going into the hands of other people, unknown at the time you're writing it. Of course all my work will go into the hands of other people, sooner than later, but the rate varies when you move from poetry to theater—or to film for that matter.

INTERVIEWER

And what about film? It's been said that you have earned a prodigious amount of money in Hollywood but you are never credited on any films. Why is that?

EAKINS

It is true I have made a solid buck in the film trade. Yet there is a certain immutable fact about screenwriting—it is impossible to do it with interference. Every word is picked over by a dozen levels of clerks, bureaucrats, and executives. By the time the process is finished what is there bears only slight resemblance to my original creation. I could not in any good conscious allow the name of Constance Eakins to be associated with a product so heavily diluted of my spirit, so I refuse credit. It is true that payment is a service I accept.

INTERVIEWER

Did the fatwa shake your confidence as a writer?

EAKINS

Not at all. I took a very deep breath, and then I rededicated myself to the art. It is true that, for a number of years, I did suffer worldwide vilification and my life being threatened. This is why I went into hiding.

INTERVIEWER

Weren't you in hiding long before the fatwa?

EAKINS

Yes, of course. I was always hiding. But I had another reason for it then. My critics, at least, gave me more of a break as a result. I knew my work did not appeal to the likes of radical mullahs, but nobody could have foreseen this result. It had never happened

before. It never would have occurred to me. And you know, I found out some time later that there had been an unauthorized translation into Farsi of my previous novel, *The Turnipseed and the Anger*, done by the Persians, who had then given it a major prize as the best translated novel that year. This meant that when *The Darkness and the Dead* was published, even Iranian book-sellers thought that I was probably acceptable, because the mullahs had given my previous book a stamp of approval. So it surprised people in Iran as much as elsewhere. But why shouldn't literature provoke? It always has. I might add, why shouldn't one's lifestyle choices provoke? The way I live is part of my art.

INTERVIEWER

Does that include your criminal activities?

EAKINS

Of course. If my life is criminal, my literature is homicidal. I mean that exactly as you think I do.

INTERVIEWER

You once quoted Coleridge's saying that all men are either Platonists or Aristotelians. Which are you?

EAKINS

I'm both.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't that contradict Coleridge's statement?

EAKINS

Yes. He was wrong about that and much else. He had a peculiar theory of the digestive system that has been disproved by numerous scientific interrogations staged in recent years. I think he also had a series of odd hypotheses about the transubstantiation of matter in outer space that are clearly preposterous—and was considered as such in his own time. But he did have an original mind, didn't he? He was also said to be an excellent father and an accomplished horse-breeder, two traits I respect highly.

INTERVIEWER

You've traveled extensively, so much so that you are considered a world-class explorer. *National Geographic* has awarded you special medal of special distinction. Do you spend so much of your life traveling because you were looking for a perfect place?

EAKINS

No, I don't think so. I really haven't traveled that much yet. I do want to spend more time in the Upper Amazon. You start from Peru and go down. I loved the trip down the Nile, and of course the one to the Galapagos Islands a few years ago. Zimbabwe in '46, that was a dream from which I'd like never to awake. Same for the Himalayas that year, and Siam, and don't let me forget St. Petersburg, lest I forget one of the best weekends of my life. I'd like very much to go back to Italy again because I haven't seen nearly enough of it. Sicily is a dream. Venice is wonderful. Florence is rather strenuous, I think. I was last there in '49 with several women friends. We rented a car did northern Italy for five or six weeks. We did an extra month in Rome. I must go back. There are so many things I haven't seen yet. I am of the opinion that even in the world's most heavily-traveled places it is still possible to find, tucked away here and there, vestigial outposts of the natural kingdom. That is always what I am seeking in all my travels.

INTERVIEWER

Is emotional stability necessary to write well? You once wrote that you could only write well when you were in love. Could you expound on that a bit more?

EAKINS

What a hell of a question. But full marks for trying. What do you take yourself for, a poet-philosopher? If it is all the same to you I would rather not expound on that. I will say this: there has never been a time in my life when I have not been in love. My definition of love, however, may be different from yours. Treating a syphilitic whore to an exceedingly expensive meal at the Plaza Hotel, and shouting at the other diners to shut up, so that they can better hear her pathetic tales of heart-misery and soul-rot: this is love. Murdering a wild, man-hungry beast under the sweltering heat of the Kalahari, with nothing but one's own fists and hearty, sun-battered legs: this is

love. Swimming a fifty-mile stretch of the Mississippi River, against the current, on the dare of a deranged wino, encountered on the streets of New Orleans: this is the loveliest love of them all.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder how schizophrenia has influenced your imagination.

EAKINS

I wonder that too. I am not sure. I really wonder that sometimes.

INTERVIEWER

Why do writers have such a hard time writing about sex?

EAKINS

Because they haven't had much of it. They say you ought to write from experience. That is why I have such massive amounts of sex in my novels.

INTERVIEWER

If a writer explores violence at length in his work, is there a sense in which he inevitably celebrates it?

EAKINS

I would call it a coming to terms. There is a catharsis. We live in a time of ongoing war and the threat of violence is very close to all of us. It's not an exotic thing. You have to be pretty lucky to get through a day without witnessing it—at least I do. Writing about violence is, for me, a way of dealing with the violence in myself. I think it can do that for the reader as well. Violence is a preoccupation of mine. It occurs in my books perhaps disproportionately. But it's been my fortune to see rather a lot of it and to have to think about it. I try to curb my fears in what I write. There's a sense in which I use my characters as scapegoats to pay my dues for me, to ward with their flesh danger away from mine. You know, when some drama intrudes on your life your first impulse is to recount it—to turn disaster into anecdote or art. I deal with much that's negative and gruesome, but I don't write to dispirit people. I write to give them courage, to make them confront things as they are in a more courageous way. A more Eakins-like way.