MY LIVES: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

EDMUND WHITE

IN CONVERSATION WITH

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER

April 11, 2006

Celeste Bartos Forum

The New York Public Library

WWW.NYPL.ORG/LIVE

JEAN STROUSE: Welcome to the New York Public Library for what promises to be an extraordinarily interesting and undoubtedly provocative evening. I'm Jean Strouse, Director of the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, which is upstairs here on the Library's second floor. In a moment I will introduce the participants in tonight's event, which the Center is delighted to be cosponsoring with LIVE from the New York Public Library. First, I would like to tell you about a few upcoming events. Actually, even before *that,* I would like to say that if you enjoy tonight's performance—even if you don't, but you will—you should think seriously about becoming a Friend of the Library. These flyers are—as you leave, you could pick one up, and find out how to do that. It would be great. The library is not self-sustaining and we would be delighted to be your Friends.

On April 25th the Center for Scholars and Writers will present a conversation between two American historians, one of them a former Cullman Center Fellow, Eric Foner and Tom Bender—Bender was the Fellow—they will be talking about Tom Bender's new book, which he wrote here, called *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History,* and there are flyers about that outside, as well, as you leave. On May 8th, the Center and LIVE from the New York Public Library will cosponsor what should be a fantastically interesting program called "Listening In: Eavesdropping and the National Security Agency" with panelists James Risen, the *New York Times* reporter who broke the story about the NSA's warrantless eavesdropping; and a former Cullman Center [Fellow], Patrick Keefe, who was the author of *Chatter: Dispatches from the Secret World of Global Eavesdropping*; and a former director of the NSA, Admiral Bobby Ray Inman; and the whole evening will be moderated by the law professor and journalist Jeffrey Rosen, so that's May 8; and on June 22, the Center and LIVE will co-host the tenth-anniversary party of *Slate* magazine with a forum called "Online Media and the Future of Journalism," with Malcolm Gladwell, Norman Pearlstein, Arianna Huffington, Jacob Weisberg, and the founding editor of *Slate,* Michael Kinsley, as moderator. If you'd like to find out about more of any of these programs or reserve tickets, go to the library's website under LIVE and you'll be able to do that, or leave us your email address as you leave and we'll send you information and put you on our mailing lists. There are also flyers for the Tom Bender/Eric Foner event as you leave.

Now, *tonight.* Edmund White, a current Cullman Center Fellow, has published more books than some people ever read **(laughter)**—but nobody *here*—including the beautiful autobiographical novel *A Boy's Own Story*, a magnificent biography of Genet, and a delightful historical novel called *Fanny,* ostensibly the last novel written by Frances Trollope. At the Center he's working on a new historical novel about Stephen Crane. I'll sidestep here to say what an entertaining pleasure it is to have Edmund at the Center this year, although he holds us all to quite a high standard, since at least half of his witticisms are in French. **(laughter)** He's just published a new memoir called *My Lives,* which he will talk about tonight with Paul Holdengräber, who, as most of you know, is Director of Public Programs for the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library and therefore of LIVE from the NYPL. Before coming to the Library, Paul was the Founder and Director of the Institute for Art and Cultures at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and he has brought tremendous energy, imagination, and vitality—or should I say dazzle?—

to the programming here. Paul will tell you about some of the forthcoming programs from LIVE and then will interview Edmund about *My Lives*. LIVE, *Lives*—lots of life in here tonight. It's a pleasure to turn the evening over to Paul.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you so much, Jean. It's a pleasure to collaborate, cooperate, with the Cullman Center. Jean has told you some of the programs we will be doing. Indeed, I'm the director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. I often say that my goal here, my stated goal, at the Library is simply to make the lions roar. In so doing, before you leave, and probably you might even have it on your chair, you will see our upcoming announcements of the events that are happening between now and June. A few will be added. I think it's particularly appropriate that on the cover we have "Flame-able" given the nature of the event tonight. **(laughter)** I encourage you to subscribe to our email list and to become also a good Friend of the Library. I would like to talk to you of some of the events that we have coming up, many of them with PEN, the international organization of writers. There is their second Festival happening here in New York. And last year we opened, we inaugurated the Festival. This year, we're closing it, with people like Salman Rushdie and Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize of Economics, but many other events. We're doing an important evening on multiculturalism in Europe, particularly with the French riots and the Danish cartoon fiasco, I think it's particularly appropriate for the Library, which deeply believes in the freedom of speech, to be sponsoring something of that nature. If you look on, you will see that we are having an event with David Remnick; with John Updike, who will be interviewed by Jeffrey Goldberg; and other events that are not yet announced. But if you join our email list—and three hundred people do every month— I highly encourage you to do so— you will find out what these events are. You simply go to nypl.org/live.

And now it gives me really great pleasure to interview Edmund White. While we were speaking in the green room—green rooms are somehow never green—but while we were speaking in the green room, Edmund was telling me that he is going on tour with this book, and he will be interviewing *himself* on tour, so I feel particularly *dispensable* tonight. But nevertheless, I will do

my best and try to talk about this extremely interesting and terribly prurient book called *My Lives*.

(laughter/applause)

"Archly mischievous book" is what Adam Phillips calls it. Why don't we start, since you actually do like reading your own work, but you don't like reading some of the passages that are the boldest—you said you prefer writing them than reading them aloud. I will encourage you to read some of those later, and the audience can leave as they wish. **(laughter)** But before we get to those passages, which most of them seem anatomically impossible, **(laughter)** before we get to them, I would like us to begin, if you don't mind, with your mother. And if you—**(laughter)** I don't know why it seems particularly appropriate to begin with her, but let's begin with your mother. And you could read perhaps the first two paragraphs of the chapter called "My Mother."

EDMUND WHITE: Okay. The only trouble about reading just these two paragraphs is that it sounds so mean.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And it gets meaner, no?

EDMUND WHITE: It's very mixed, I think. "I suppose it's the nature of mothers to make their children wince. A friend of mine from Munich, with Austrian roots, groans because his mother is always trying to make him read Goethe and listen to Mozart. People complain because their mothers are too nosy, or, conversely, too cold and indifferent. Some people say their mothers cling too much and then are shocked when their mothers enter a church-run old age home and lose interest in them because they're so taken up with the intrigues and organized trips of their new community. Some children complain because their parents fight, or are divorced, without realizing the most neglected people of all are the offspring of love marriages. A husband and wife besotted with each other look at their children as annoying interlopers. **(laughter)** My mother brought me up to be more cultured than anyone had ever been in her family, and when she succeeded, I turned around and despised her for her crudeness. **(laughter)** Whereas *I'd* learned to think of conversation as an art, *she* blurted out anything that entered her head. Not

only was she impulsive, she often sounded stupid to me, self-contradictory, imprecise, or just plain *wrong*. She stuck close to the nearest cliché and smiled triumphantly whenever she could locate it. Her egotism and incessant chatter could be truly punishing." **(laughter)**

See what I mean? It sounds awfully mean. But there are nicer passages. **(laughter)** And a lot of her faults I ascribe to myself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So, a question that the recent book review brought up, which is the way in which the book is organized. I might say, the book review in Sunday's *New York Times* I find particularly interesting because it makes you want to read the book, however much it may have hurt. I think all of you should get the book at the end of this event, because it's a *fantastically* salacious book to read. I don't know if it's a book you read with one hand, **(laughter from the audience and an exclamation of protest from EW)** we might talk about that in a little bit, but before we get to that, let's quickly talk about *wh*y you organized the book in this way. Why, because I'll read—there are ten chapters—I'll read them because it's worthwhile, it's nearly operatic. My Shrinks. My Father. My Mother. My Hustlers. My Women. My Europe. My Master. My Blonds. My Genet. My Friends. And then there's Acknowledgments, nobody noticed that in the reviews. I'm wondering why you organized the book in this way, because obviously other great autobiographies have been organized—I'm thinking for instance of one that I particularly love, which is Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mots*—words—which is organized in two chapters, "Lire," "Écrire": Reading, Writing. You organized this in this particular way and I think in a way—there will be a question, I promise you—I think maybe I'm interviewing *myself* now. In a way it reminded me of the best study I think that Roland Barthes did, of Michelet, where he spoke about trying to—the organizational principle—he said to come up with "an organized web of obsessions" and in some way, *that* I think fits very nicely with what you were trying to do. So why organize it thematically, rather than chronologically, when you're talking, after all, about your life?

EDMUND WHITE: Well. I have after all, written three, maybe four, four autobiographical novels and where I had really run through a lot of the main elements of my life, so I was eager not to repeat myself. I've also written a lot of autobiographical short stories, in any event, and

there have been two biographies written about me, so I thought this is an *over-documented* life and so I was eager not to repeat everything that everybody already knew. It also seemed to me that—one of the things when I worked on the biography of Jean Genet, I was determined to write a classical biography that began with his birth and ended with his death and that . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How many pages was it?

EDMUND WHITE: Six hundred, maybe. . . . in which I never mention the word "I." I never talk about myself in it. I wanted to write a classical biography in *that* sense but one of the things I realized in working on his life was that it didn't add up. You couldn't totalize him. You couldn't find—the way so many Freudian-oriented biographies do—the one trauma of his childhood that then shaped the rest of his personality. That, in fact, there was an absolutely astonishing trajectory in his life and you'd have a hard time saying why would this boy, who was brought up as a peasant in the heart of France, born in 1910, end up a friend of the Black Panthers. I mean, that is not an obvious trajectory, and I love that about him, and I felt that, as a biographer, I had to be supple enough to respond to those incredible unpredictable elements in his life.

So I thought, well, when I write about my own life, if I sink these probes into these different areas, for one thing, I won't be indulging in narrative. I mean, although I tell a lot of anecdotes in this book, nevertheless, I start off in a kind of philosophical way. Like if I do a chapter on "My Women," I try to think about what it was that—what it is that women have *meant* to me, especially when I was younger and sort of slightly tormented by being gay, and wanting and always feeling *guilty* around women. So anyway, I tried to do . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'll stop you right there, and we will continue talking about this. Read the passage from "My Women." It's all orchestrated.

EDMUND WHITE: Not really.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It actually isn't at all. I'm trying to think "what next?" and I have a very good segue there.

EDMUND WHITE: "Unhappy women. How many of them I've known. Sniffling and drinking or with eyes big and reproachful. Silent or complaining women. Violent or depressed. A whole tribe of unhappy women has always surrounded me. I can't take it anymore. **(laughter)** Now I've turned them into a semi-humorous category; I've made them into a caricature of themselves, a category that subsumes and obliterates all the suffering individuals. But labeling them is only a recent strategy for me, a way of not rushing to comfort them. For most of my life, I've been a shoulder to cry on, and for most of my life, I've felt guilty for not easing the pain of all these women, starting with my mother. If I were straight, if I'd marry one of them, I'd know how to comfort her. I wouldn't run off with *another* woman. I wouldn't spend all of my money on drink. I wouldn't wound her by cheating on her. I'd work hard to provide her with the security and even *luxury* she required. I'd be as sensitive to her needs as a sister, and as protective as a father. I'd never have a bad mood of my own, and certainly never get angry. I'd always tell her where I was going and exactly when I'd be coming home. No wonder heterosexuality frightened me. **(laughter)** Marriage, it seemed, was designed to make at least one unhappy woman happy, though at what an awful cost to the man, to me. Maybe a straight man is first and foremost someone who can piss off a woman and laugh it off."

(laughter)

That passage, I think, is the one that got me in trouble with that woman who reviewed my book in the *Times*, because it's the very next passage that she quoted as saying she hated so much, all about how I have a cult of frivolity and I like people to be light and everything and she didn't like that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: After all, there are some great models of people who have a cult of frivolity, such as Calvino, for instance.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, at least he has an essay about lightness, and about how that's his favorite quality in writing. And I think you could say that's what we all like in Mozart, is a certain kind of airiness and buoyancy.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So, you were talking about the arc of a life.

EDMUND WHITE: Oh, yes. Well, what I wanted to say is I think that whereas a novel has the obligation first and foremost to create interest and tell a story and to have a kind of a cumulative narrative punch, that a memoir—especially this kind of, at least mine—which I call a "memoir," rather than an autobiography because I think an autobiography is something that "tells your life story," and I don't pretend to do that, I don't start at the beginning, I don't end with where I am now.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So how would you phrase it? A memoir—you tell your life story and when you punctuate it in a certain way and a memoir is—

EDMUND WHITE: A memoir is mainly about the people you've known. I mean, it's portraits of other people. It's your memories of well, it's partly, it's a much older word than autobiography. "Autobiography" is a late-eighteenth-century word. "Memoir" goes back, well, to the fourteenth century, in English. And a memoir is something that really talks about strange and unusual things that you have observed and the fascinating people you've known, so it's kind of almost "tourist on the earth" approach to writing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You say that in one passage that your good friends are people who in some way share this view of the world, "being tourists on earth."

EDMUND WHITE: Oh, yeah. Did I? I'm glad I did!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, it's a good line.

EDMUND WHITE: Oh, thanks. Isn't there a Pablo Neruda book with a title like that? *A Tourist on Earth* or something? Anyway, so I guess I feel like each of these chapters is a kind of meditation on a separate thing. I try to make things add up in a way that you don't really *have* to in a novel. I think in a novel, your first obligation is to *involve* the reader, to tell a story, and to maybe be entertaining. Whereas here, if there is entertainment, it's of a different sort—more of an epigrammatic sort—and the real obligation, at least for me, or at least the real project, was to try to dig in deep about various things that have haunted me throughout my life—including sex.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Certainly not *excluding* sex.

EDMUND WHITE: No. We live in such a strangely pleasure-phobic country, I think, sometimes, that I mean—I must say, in dear England, which we think of as being so puritanical—this book came out last September there, and almost nobody even mentioned the sexual thing, but whereas here that seems to be the only thing—including you—talked about.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I mean, including me. I learned so much. **(laughter)**
My vocabulary and, you know, the different kinds of activities that go on that your book describes are new to me, and so I want to publicly thank you for helping me. **(laughter)**
It was very educational. But let's take you at face value and figure out whether what you're saying is actually true, that you're writing a memoir rather than autobiography, because to some extent I think at least part of the way I read your memoir was as an autobiography, in the sense of *auto-bio-graph-ie*, and in some way the self was coming to life through the act of writing and you remember the last line of your memoir/autobiography, do you, shall we look at it together? **(laughter)** Do you want to read it?

EDMUND WHITE: "Being predictable is the one unforgivable sin in a friend."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I wonder if that's true or not true but regardless of that, of whether that is a correct belief, I'm just wondering if in the very sheer act of writing this book, a certain

number of unpredictable or very surprising parts of your life came to life to *you* that *you* didn't expect to see.

EDMUND WHITE: Oh, definitely. I mean, I feel like I was kind of conducting an auto-psychoanalysis in a way. So, for instance, I have a chapter on "My Blonds," and I try to think, "Well, why do I like the color blond, what does that mean?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why do you?

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I think my sister and father were both blond, my mother and I were both dark, which isn't even *true,* but it's what the family **(laughter)** . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We should really *trust* you in this memoir!

EDMUND WHITE: But the family *myth* was that. My mother always used to say— families have these myths about children—"Your sister and your father are real bluebloods, whereas you and I, Eddie, are peasants. They're *blond.*" Well, they weren't, even. My father was graying by the time I knew him and my sister was a platinum blonde, but, anyway, the thing is that I think that these things take on this kind of strange totemic weight within families, and there's a kind of family mythology that the family itself creates, and all these roles are assigned to different people. So like my mother decided I was "Irish" because her father was of Irish extraction and so that meant being a dreamer and impractical, which was very good if you wanted to be an artist, which I did, but very bad if you wanted to drive a car, or get a job, or support yourself, or ever leave *her,* you know. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which you managed, which you managed, eventually. A quick question. In the wake of *A Million Little Pieces,* I'm wondering if your book here—if everything in this book is true, and, more importantly, if you would feel the need in the second edition to modify certain elements.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I've gotten a few letters from people, especially in France, who've objected to—they've said, "That was 1981, not 1982." So those things I have changed.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Between the English and the American editions or . . . ?

EDMUND WHITE: Well, actually, it's the French version I'm really worrying about!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why is that? The French have such an extraordinary tradition of being bad editors, **(laughter)** not particularly reviewing their books carefully, so why are you afraid of your French reading public?

EDMUND WHITE: Well, it's actual people there who know many of the people I write about, like Foucault and so on, and so I just want to get everything absolutely right. And so as far as the James Frey test, I feel that in the case of *his* book, that was a book about recovery that became a bible for many people who were in recovery, and I think they were terribly wounded and disappointed when they discovered that there were a lot of deliberate lies in it. My book is not addressed to that kind of very vulnerable public and it's also not—if there are little mistakes in it, they're the ones I made by accident. But what I think was strange about myself, is that I always said, "If I ever write a real autobiography, I'm going to research it in just the way I did my Genet biography." But in fact I didn't. I didn't research it *at all*. I didn't ask anybody any questions.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why not?

EDMUND WHITE: I don't know, I guess it was just easier somehow **(laughter)** to just write it out of my own experience.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Did you try, at any point, or did you get bored immediately researching your own life?

EDMUND WHITE: Immediately bored. Immediately bored.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I know you've had that problem for a while. You wrote to me that you were trying to write "pure" autobiography.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, in what sense did I mean, I wonder?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I don't know. You tell me.

EDMUND WHITE: I wanted to write something that wasn't fiction. Let me give you an example, instead of talking so abstractly. In *A Boy's Own Story,* I write about my own childhood but it isn't—in many ways it's like my childhood, the boy goes through some of the same stages. But on the other hand, I was very conscious when that book came out, in 1982, that I was writing really what was like the first novel about a gay guy coming out, that I knew of, at least, and so it was very important to me that it be representative, that it not be *too* strange, and so I made the boy a lot *shyer* than I am in real life and a lot less precocious, because I was sort of a smart kid, so that he's not—he's rather average, intellectually, and very shy, which I thought was closer probably to what most readers would be able to identify with. But in an autobiography, in a memoir, if you will, you feel free to be as eccentric as you really are, to portray yourself, because you're not trying to create a kind of identification.

Obviously, fiction always has to depend upon very specific, vivid, particular details, but, nevertheless, I think there's a kind of almost basic drive in fiction toward the typical. If you take a book that seems as eccentric and intricate and full of very precise details as James Joyce's *Ulysses,* nevertheless, the fact that Dedalus is a young intellectual, and Bloom is highly intelligent but not an intellectual who's a small-time businessman fascinated with how the world works, and Molly Bloom is a sensualist and an artist. It's like he took three very representative types of the Dublin of that period, and they're well-distributed across a kind of—you see what I mean? Whereas in a memoir, if you're writing about your mother and your father, even if they overlapped a lot in their character types you wouldn't mind, because that's not your duty, is to represent humanity in general, but to show yourself in particular, and the people you've known.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This way of organizing the book in, as I said, in a kind of organized web of obsessions gave you greater freedom.

EDMUND WHITE: Yes. I kept playing—throughout the writing of the book, I kept thinking, will I write a chapter called "My AIDS" because I've been positive since 1985 and I've never actually had any symptoms or ever had to take medicine until last summer, so that puts me in a very strange category. But I came out in 1985 as somebody who was HIV-positive, and that was very unusual. I mean, it turns out that almost nobody does that. And it is a sort of curse because then all your sex partners, all they have to do is Google you and say "Uhp!" You know, it's sort of a problem.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Google is.

EDMUND WHITE: Googling. But nevertheless, so you're sort of forced to be honest and straightforward and all those bad things but the thing is that . . . I lost my train of thought.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It happens in the best of families. Tell me this. Do you consider that this book, and other books you've written, but more specifically, this book, is pornographic? Just having re-read Susan Sontag's quite enlightened essay, "The Pornographic Imagination," I was wondering if you do. I mentioned, to get quick laughs at the beginning, that this may or may not be a book one reads with one hand, so I'm just wondering . . .

EDMUND WHITE: I haven't read her essay in years, but . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You referred me to it the other day.

EDMUND WHITE: . . . but it was very formative to me, and I think she makes a very interesting distinction in there that *real* pornography has to be very formulaic in its language. It can't be too original. You can't indulge in longwinded or complicated or artistic descriptions of

this and that. It has to follow a very definite rhythm, because it's a sexual aid. And so that's pornography. But I think what I do is something very unusual that almost nobody does, which is to write realistically about sex, which is oftentimes comical, because comedy is when the spirit outstrips the body, when what you want to do you can't always do. I think it was Bergson who thought of that as one of the definitions of humor, the young lovers want to rush out into the night but they get stuck in the revolving door. It's when the material world resists the spirit. Well, what better example than sex? **(laughter)** And I think that *that's* the way I like to write about it. I like to write about the phenomenology of sex, of what actually goes through your head when you're *doing* it, and I think very few people write about that. Because I never try to make it enticing or exciting or certainly not to follow those rhythms of an actual sexual act.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Might you, might I encourage you to find a passage where you could show us the phenomenology of . . . what was your term? I've forgotten it.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, we didn't plan this!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, but take your time.

EDMUND WHITE: (uneasy chuckle) "Physically,"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You wrote it. Do you want me to read it?

(laughter)

EDMUND WHITE: No, no, that's all right. "My years of living in France had turned me into a realist about myself. The French are very realistic. Fame might be the best aphrodisiac, but I wasn't famous *enough* to excite anyone except the rare individual. When I was younger and less celebrated, I had had more success. Youth boosts the appeal of even quite mediocre fame. In any event, it's women who are more susceptible to the lure of power and money. Men like youth and beauty. Straight men might envy or compete with male success, but gay men seek out trophy boys. Not unattractive, if well-known, older men. Perhaps a young gay man might convince

himself I was appealing if he knew he could end up as Mrs. Edmund White, but only one person can fill that post at a time and for the last decade I've lived in marital harmony with my lover." Anyway, that's not a very hot passage, but the funny thing is, I was saying to Paul that I love writing about sex, but I can't bear to talk about it in public. I turn bright red. So there you are. It's a contradiction.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It is. Well you know, maybe I can . . . **(laughter)** There's this passage that I quite like. Maybe you can elaborate a little bit on it. You say on page 228—for those of you getting the book, start on page 228—"I was always grateful. Gratitude is my main erotic emotion, one that does well with abjection. I can imagine some of my friends reading this and muttering 'TMI, too much information.'" I'll stop there. Say a little bit about that, if you would.

EDMUND WHITE: I guess this chapter, which has been rather controversial, called "My Master," was something that I sort of dared myself to write. My agent here in America and my editor at first thought I shouldn't publish it, because they thought it was too much information, and sometimes I wish I hadn't published it, but on the other hand, one thing I kept remembering that one time I had given, I had done a tour in English but throughout Germany and I read in all these different bookshops, in English, and in Munich there was this teenager who sat in the front row with this bright-red angry face, and he just hated me, and at the end of the whole thing he exploded and he said, "Well, you know, you write about all these things that happened to you *years* ago with this kind of awful smugness and complacency. Why don't you write angst literature, why don't you write about what you're suffering now?" So I thought, that's quite a good point, you know. So in this case at least, in this chapter, it was a very painful love affair that I'd had only two and a half years ago and that completely tore me apart, I cried every day for three months on the train, told all my students about it at Princeton, everybody thought I was stark raving mad.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My alma mater. I didn't know you back then.

EDMUND WHITE: Everybody thought I was just totally mad, and I *was* sort of crazy, and then I did all the things you're supposed to do—I took Paxil and I went to a shrink, and then I went to Italy for . . . **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is that the three-step program?

(laughter)

EDMUND WHITE: Anyway, I thought it was still very recent. In fact, I even took notes during it, because twice before in my life I had had these *terrible* love affairs and I had forgotten them, because you do forget painful things, so this time, I thought, "I'm going to take notes," that's the writer in you I guess, so I did take them, and so it's all there.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I was just about to ask you why you don't keep a journal. Obviously, for this particular experience, you did.

EDMUND WHITE: I mean, I'm too lazy to keep one, and in another way I have a kind of superstition, which probably just serves my laziness, which is that I feel like one of the most useful things for a writer is actually forgetting, not remembering. The truth is we're so overwhelmed with information, and if you were to put—if you really kept a journal and you felt obliged to put in all those details about everything that ever happened to you, you would drown the reader. Whereas if you only have what Ezra Pound called "the bright particulars," these few, as I get older, fewer and fewer, things that you actually . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But still bright.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, I hope. That you recall, and then those you can kind of serve up with as much skill as you have as a writer. It's sort of a natural-selection process for memory. There are just a few beautiful phases, wonderful events, glorious strains of music, that *last* in all this chaos of one's forgetting and my first book was called *Forgetting Elena,* and Richard Howard

wrote a wonderful blurb on the back of it in which he said people have over-praised the faculty of remembering but actually *forgetting* is the great compositional principle of art.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's interesting. Two things come to mind. One is Beckett's great book on Proust, where he says, I'm not sure it's the exact quotation, I'm probably forgetting it a little bit, he says, "Proust had a bad memory," which, of course, given this book, is quite a statement to make. And the other one is a book that I thought of when I was reading your memoir-slash-autobiography, which is one of my very favorite nineteenth-century autobiographies, *La vie de Henry Brulard*, the Life of Henry Brulard, which is Stendhal or Henri Beyle's great autobiography, where he talks about the art, L'art de l'oubli memoire and he talks about, in many passages he talks about the art of forgetting. One passage in particular that comes to my mind, and I'm sorry if I speak for a short minute here. He's just seen Cimarosa's *Matrimonio segreto*, since you were talking about music and opera, and someone comes up to him and says, asks him to comment on it, and he writes in his memoir that that night or shortly thereafter. J'eus l'enfance de parler de mon bonheur. "I was infantile enough to speak about my happiness and somehow writing it down destroyed that memory."

EDMUND WHITE: Well, you know, just to trade passages . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's do that. Let's do that.

EDMUND WHITE: Nabokov has a very interesting thing in *Speak, Memory*. He starts to write the only chapter in the book that he originally wrote in French, and it's about his Mademoiselle, his governess when he was a boy, and he says, "You know, she was the most wonderful person in my life, and I oftentimes return in my thoughts to thinking about her, and I know if I write about her I'll never think about her again." And that's, of course, the *horrible* thing about writing, and I've had boyfriends who say to me, "Why don't you ever write about me?" And I say, "That'll be the kiss-off." **(laughter)** I mean, you only write about things that are *over*. Like my current boyfriend, who's back there somewhere, I've spared him in *this* book entirely. People have commented on the fact that here Mr. White has lived with this person for eleven years and he barely mentions him. And some people who *hate* the book say "the long-suffering Michael

Carroll, who's had to listen to all this terrible writing and observed all these ghastly affairs" and so on. But I don't really talk about him, and I don't talk too much about the people really current in my life.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This leads me to ask you if there are models, or were models, for writing . . .

EDMUND WHITE: You started off talking about Sartre's *The Words,* and that was a very important book to me, and I don't know how many of you have read that, but one of the things I found most shocking about it is how *harsh* he is about himself. He sees himself as a ghastly little actor who—and also as somebody who exemplifies the tensions in his family, between the Catholic and the Protestant side, the Swiss and the French, and so on. He was the nephew of Albert Schweitzer, I believe. He basically talks about what bad faith he acted under, and how dishonest he was as a child, and how he was endlessly pleasing his parents and grandparents by being this little comedian and I thought, "This is astonishing." Because almost all memoirs or autobiographies that you read are self-justifying. People are always trying to say how they came to be so marvelous, and how they suffered as a child or how—especially in America, there's this whole tradition of complaining about child abuse. You were an abused child and so now you're sort of a scarred but heroic grownup. I don't know. I don't think we're all that good. I don't think we're always victims and oftentimes we victimize others. And so I try to be—that was an inspiration, the level of honesty in that book, I thought, was extraordinary.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Who else? Or who do you write against?

EDMUND WHITE: One thing, it's a way of exaggerating, I guess, if you're a writer, to talk only about other writers. Because the truth is we use everybody we know as people who are either potential allies or enemies or baffles or, you know. So, in my case, I oftentimes think about the heterosexual male writer who I feel is so imprisoned by his role that he has an awfully hard time being supple in talking about his *real* experience. It seems to me that—I've talked to straight men friends of mine who say, "Gee, I really envy you, but I couldn't really talk about all that kind of stuff even if I'd lived through it, because my wife wouldn't like it, and then my

children. . .” So I feel that one of the things that’s great about being gay is that you’re so totally free. No-one’s going to . . . well, I suppose you could lose your job, but I have a tenured position. **(laughter)** Somebody was interviewing Joyce Carol Oates, my colleague, and said, “This book’s awfully racy. Is Mr. White going to be fired, or what are you going to do at Princeton?” And Joyce said, “We’re going to put him in stocks and . . .” **(laughter)** Anyway, she was very good. I don’t know. I do feel like that I wanted to sort of show, I mean, what’s that old line from a song, “Freedom means having nothing left to lose,” and I feel like, in a way, a gay man doesn’t have a lot of pretenses about being a certain kind of macho ideal. He’s not all armored. I feel like there’s something sort of prehistoric about heterosexual men and that . . . **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Say more, say more.

EDMUND WHITE: I feel there’s this sort of armored, awkward, *rigid* aspect to straight men that gay men don’t have to labor under all those problems, and it makes us a lot freer as writers.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You give us a lot to aspire to. True. You were claiming that you were a little bit worried about the book in France and getting the facts right and getting Foucault right. Foucault you knew a little bit. We knew him at exactly the same time as it turns out. I knew him in the late seventies, early eighties, when I was in France and . . .

EDMUND WHITE: Right. Well, I was the director of the New York Institute for the Humanities, which is at NYU, and he was a frequent guest, and he did many seminars there. He was working on *The History of Sexuality,* and he was getting close to the end of it, and many of the ideas we heard elaborated in his seminars were things that have never appeared—yet, at least—in print in the fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality,* and one of my jobs as the executive director of the thing was to take him out. And I was terribly shy about it, because I didn’t know his work that well then. Since then, I’ve read a lot of it, but I can’t claim to be an expert. Anyway, I took him out and I said to him, “How did you get to be so smart?” That was my opening line at dinner. **(laughter)** And he said, “Well I wasn’t actually always so smart. I was a terrible hyperactive child who did very badly in school and my father was a provincial doctor and was very upset by my bad performance in school. But then I fell in love with this boy

who was even dumber than I was, a worse student, and I thought I could ingratiate myself to him by doing (this was at boarding school) his homework for him." So he said, "I started really studying in earnest, but it was all motivated by this *love* for this totally indifferent boy. Years later, when I was forty-five, it was the big rentree where everybody's on the train going back to Paris in September, and I'm standing next to a classmate of mine and I haven't seen any of them in thirty-five years. And we're standing there together because it's so crowded, and I'm asking him about all the various classmates, but I can't bring myself to mention this boy's name because I'm afraid if I do I'll blush. So finally I do, and he says, 'Oh, *that* old pederast?' and I said, 'What do you mean?' and he said, 'Oh, we all had him, didn't you?'" **(laughter)** Which I thought was a very good anecdote for the world's most famous philosopher. We became great friends. That is, I shouldn't say "great friends" because I only knew him toward the end of his life and he died in 1984, but in this book I tried to clarify a few things.

You know, one of the things that people like to say, there was a very nasty biography by an American of Foucault that said that he had known that he had AIDS and he had deliberately gone around infecting his partners, and so on. I always thought that was such rubbish, because anybody who knows anything about gay life, and him, knew that he was a masochist, and bottoms don't give AIDS to tops. I mean, anyway. I won't go into that. It's too complicated. It has to do with the transmission of semen and everything. But anyway, so there was no way *that* was going to happen, and then the second thing was that he himself didn't know he had AIDS. He didn't know it until January before he died. He died in May and he knew only in January, and I was with him through that whole period. So the thing was to build this huge case that he was this kind of satanic self-indulgent sensualist, whereas he was anything but. He was almost saintly, as *you* know, in his interest in other people and his kindness. . . . **(a few missing words at tape change)** He could be crazy if he thought that people were opposed to him in any way, but friends, he was adorable with.

It's interesting because he liked big, sadistic, older men in sex, but in life, in his friendships, he liked beautiful ephebes of the sort that Plato would have liked, and he'd surround himself with all these ringletted hyacinthine boys who were all intellectuals, too. **(laughter)** So it was a strange sort of world. The very last party he ever gave was for William Burroughs, of all people.

And Foucault spoke very good English, but the more stoned that Burroughs got, the less comprehensible he got, so I had to translate from Burroughs's English into Foucault's English, it was a very strange intermediary role. Foucault was dying, and he staggered around with all these dishes because he loved to serve everybody, but when you went to his house for a dinner you only ate meat and dessert and no vegetables. Why? Because he got everything from a caterer downstairs and they didn't have vegetables, and it was too far to go to the vegetable market so you never had them. That's the kind of thing I know about Foucault. I don't know the great things, but I know the little things.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You also mentioned that he didn't particularly like to talk about philosophy outside of the classroom. I remember that.

EDMUND WHITE: I mean, one of the first times I had him to dinner was in Paris and I had Susan, I thought Susan Sontag, and Foucault, but he hated it because he didn't want to talk about ideas. He liked to talk about ideas with his students in seminars, but otherwise he liked to have these beautiful platonic boys sort of floating around.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Speaking of Foucault, of course, brings us back to Paris, and I'm wondering why such a long period of your life—sixteen full years—is virtually absent from *My Lives.* There are passages, but not many, and certainly not sixteen years' worth of passages.

EDMUND WHITE: Well, that's true. I could write another book just like this if anybody ever wanted to read it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: *My Paris.*

EDMUND WHITE: Well, or at least, another whole. . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you've written about Paris.

EDMUND WHITE: I've written books about Paris, and I've written novels about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So . . .

EDMUND WHITE: So in this, again I guess I didn't want to be representative. What I wanted to do was to touch on nerves within myself and maybe within the reader. As I say, the whole time I was writing this book, I kept thinking, "Will I write a chapter on my lovers?" and in fact there are none, there's nothing like that. Or my sister? My sister turns out to be one of the most interesting people in my life, and I *adore* her, but there's nothing really about her in there. My sister went through a very painful coming-out, I mean, after being married and having three children and being the wife of a high-school principal, she then went through a terrible coming-out, a period of alcoholism, tried to kill herself, mental hospitals. Her son was hospitalized too. I got him out, brought him to New York, raised him. And then she finally straightened herself out. I sent her back to graduate school. She became a psychotherapist, of course. **(laughter)** And, anyway, now she runs an adoption agency, and she's adopted eight black babies. Most of whom had HIV when they were born, and two of whom still have it but the rest have thrown it off.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Had you thought of including her in the book?

EDMUND WHITE: Well, no. I thought of it, and I would, and it would make such an interesting story. And she's such a wonderful person and I love her so much. But I don't know. It's like another . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Did she look for herself in this story?

EDMUND WHITE: No, she didn't. And I was terrified to give her the book, because I thought, "She'll hate these portraits of our parents." And she said to me, "Oh boy, you let *them* off lightly." **(laughter)** I said, "Really?" and she said, "Don't you remember that time our mother tried to drive us off a cliff . . ."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You see, if you had kept notes. . .

EDMUND WHITE: Yeah, right, very good.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's open it up in a minute or two. Let's just play this game, since there are many fans here of yours, but not every single fan in this audience will have the pleasure of seeing you on tour. You told me you're going on tour with this book, which is something that writers do now. Actually, I'd like to do a whole event about the tour, I think it's quite interesting and maybe something to do next year. So you're going to interview yourself. And you're doing this very soon, so maybe just for a little while you could just do that, for a little while. Ask yourself a question.

EDMUND WHITE: And you're going to go away?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I'm just going to be here. I'll be nearby. If you need me, call.

EDMUND WHITE: Oh dear. Well, let me think.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ask yourself a good question.

EDMUND WHITE: Well actually, I wrote them all out. That's typical of me. I'd rather read something than chat. One of the things I am writing out in this thing is, you write in "My Blonds" about the great love of your life, Jim Ruddy, and yet the portrait in your memoirs is rather dull compared to the one you've written previously in your novels. Why is that?

I thought, that's precisely why I didn't cover a lot of these same things that I covered in my novels, is because once you write about them, they lose their immediacy. It's like beach glass that you've taken home from the beach; it's just not as shiny or beautiful. And something about. . . . You cannot really deal with the same material more than once or twice. I do with the parents, because I had sort of lied in my novels about my father, for instance. Like, I realized that in the first chapter of *Boy's Own Story*, I really get my father well. I capture the way he really was, sort of *lugubrious* and *lonely* and *very* boring, the most boring man who ever lived, whereas but then I sort of. . . . Fantasy enters at a certain point later in the novel and he's sort of upgraded and

becomes more clever and more urbane and more beautifully dressed and it's sort of like when you're writing, you can't stand too much reality, especially if it's about your own family, and you tend to idealize it and make it better than it really was. Whereas now, at all this great distance, long after his death and my mother's death, and having written about him several times, I felt like I could *finally* get to the truth about him and look at it in this unblinking, unvarnished way, and so that was the reason why I returned to that subject, because I'd never really gotten him right before.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, I think you did answer the question. I did this once in Los Angeles. I had Richard Rodriguez interview himself. His alter-ego, or as we used to joke, his altered-ego. We had a couch and a chair, and he went from one to the other.

EDMUND WHITE: That's good. He might have rehearsed a bit, though.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you know Pierre Mac Orlan once said that improvisation is something you prepare, of course. Let's end more or less here, by invoking where you are *now,* namely at the New York Public Library, and perhaps since people are always interested in what's next. I mean after this book, what's next? And I know that you are nearly finished with what's next and are already talking about what's after that, you told me. So what are you doing here in this library upstairs?

EDMUND WHITE: This thing I've been doing, which Jean Strouse directs and which is such a wonderful program. I applied for—you have to apply for it—and you have to show that you would be using one of the special collections here in the Library. In my case, for years I've wanted to write something about Stephen Crane, the *thoroughly heterosexual* author of *The Red Badge of Courage*. But there was a very strange moment in his life. I read this anecdote once and it always stuck in my mind, which is that after he wrote *Maggie, Girl of the Streets,* which was his book about a female prostitute, he started to write a book about a male prostitute. That is, he ran into a boy on the street who he thought was a beggar and then he realized that he was painted with mascara. And Crane felt really physically ill. After all, he'd been raised as the son of a Methodist minister and a temperance worker in New Jersey and he'd only been in New York a

very short time and he really didn't know that homosexuals even existed, much less boy prostitutes. He became fascinated with this boy, because he loved lowlife. And he loved prostitutes. His wife was a prostitute. She ran a house of prostitution in Jacksonville, Florida, called Hotel de Dream, which is the title of my book, *Hotel de Dream*.

He wrote forty pages of this book about this boy, and Hamlin Garland, the hairy-chested Wisconsin author, author of *Boy Life on the Plains* **(laughter)**—I like "Boy Life," it's sort of like some sort of insect life or something. *Boy Life on the Plains*. He read these forty pages and he said, "These are the best you've ever done, and if you don't tear them up you won't have a career. You must destroy this book." This was the year of the Oscar Wilde trial, 1895, so he did tear them up, very reluctantly, and he never really liked Hamlin Garland after that. It was like he knew that he was destroying the next important step in his career, and yet he recognized that he had to destroy them. So nothing of them exists and only this anecdote exists in the journals of two different writers. I decided it would be interesting to take—Crane died when he was twenty-eight years old, of tuberculosis. He died in Germany, at a clinic. But he had been spending the last year and a half of his life in Sussex, in the south of England, where his neighbors were Henry James—he saw a lot of Henry James and Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells, and he was really part of a very interesting, intense literary moment there. Anyway, I'm imagining that on his deathbed he begins to dictate this book again to his wife. We know that he was dictating *something* because she talks about it in letters. Probably it wasn't *this* book, but anyway I'm imagining that he's recreating this book, so I have to recreate it, which is the most ridiculous and arrogant thing that you can possibly do, is to try and recreate the book of a great master like him, but in any event, why not? **(laughter)** So my book sort of alternates between scenes from *his* life and his dealings with his wife. They were very close, and it's a lot of fun for me to imagine this marvelous heterosexual affair while, at the same time, he, a heterosexual man, is trying to imagine the life of a gay prostitute. It's very postmodern, I guess, but, in any event, I'm enjoying it and I'm very grateful to the Library and to the Cullman Center for having made all this possible. Because you get a wonderful little cubicle.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What do you do there? People don't know. It's upstairs.

EDMUND WHITE: You get a cubicle. It's upstairs. You can go to any librarian you want to and say, "How much would a sculptor have gotten for a —a mediocre sculptor—have gotten for a statue in 1891?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And they all know.

EDMUND WHITE: They don't know that instantly, but they can find it for you. They get you *The Stonecutter's Journal* from 1901 or something, and there are prices. And it's just terrific.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We have it here, *The Stonecutter's Journal?*

EDMUND WHITE: You have to send to another place but it comes eventually. But there are seven million books here, and it's a marvelous resource, and when you write a historical novel, if you're really interested in history, as I am, and in accuracy, as I am, you have to—every time you write a line, you have to say, I wonder if that could possibly—"He has to get up to 34th Street from—but what would he have taken?" And it turns out there's a trolley, but if it's 1891 it was horse-drawn and if it was 1892, it was a cable-car. You know, so you have to know exactly which year, and what all that stuff. . . . well, *you* all know that by heart.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For most people, that shift between '91 and '92 is quite dramatic.

EDMUND WHITE: New York, it turns out to be such a fascinating place, where half of the people who lived in Manhattan were living in tenements, eight or ten people to a room, one dollar a month for a room, whereas the other half were middle class and upper class, and they lived in great mansions lining Fifth Avenue and in beautiful one-family houses off of the Avenue on either side. And here cheek-to-jowl was this fiercely underprivileged and violent group of poor people, and, especially after the crisis of 1893, which was one of the worst financial crises that America ever went through, there was *tremendous* unemployment and it was quite violent. And then at the same time you have all these Vanderbilts and Astors and everybody with these huge mansions up and down the length of Fifth Avenue, all of which are gone now except for, like, the Frick Museum, but there are very few of them left but they used to all be these huge

neoclassical mansions. Anyway, that picture of a really extreme New York of class conflict fascinates me. And I've enjoyed recreating all that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That book is nearly over, you told me, so you already know what's next.

EDMUND WHITE: Then I want to do a nonfiction book about New York in the 1970s and especially about high culture in New York in the 1970s. I mean, there's been a lot recently about the downtown scene, you know, the Ramones, but I don't want to write about that, I want to write about Jasper Johns and Balanchine and Richard Howard and John Ashbery and Susan Sontag, and of course a lot of them were gay but almost none of them was out, *then*, at least, and it was a very—it was one of the great moments in American culture. It was one of the last moments when people—I remember Brad Gooch—who was around then, although he looks like he is twenty years old—he said to me that he had this lover, Howard Brookner, who was a filmmaker, and he wanted to introduce him to all of us in the Seventies but he didn't dare admit that he was *merely* a filmmaker. Because we were poets and writers, you know, and we would disapprove of this person who was a filmmaker, although he'd already made movies with Madonna and everything. But no, not in New York, not then, I mean *now* we're all whores, we love that, you know. But there was a—still at that time, still a kind of high culture that's entirely vanished, but I want to recapture that moment.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This has been a good moment for me, and before I end it, I think that you would be willing to take some questions.

EDMUND WHITE: Oh, absolutely.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: From my experience doing this for the last decade I've noticed that questions can be asked in more or less fifty-five seconds, so ask questions, rather than make statements, if you could—don't imitate me, in other words. It's been a great pleasure, thank you very much.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We have mics so that we can record for posterity, right in the middle there, just one second if you could wait so that everybody can actually hear what you have to say.

Q: I haven't read the book yet, but I would like to know. You haven't talked about the fact that the first chapter, I understand, is "My Shrink," so it comes before "My Father" and "My Mother." Actually, is Chapter Two "My Father," and then "My Mother," is that it…

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's "My Shrinks."

EDMUND WHITE: And then "My Father," and then "My Mother."

Q: My question is just about that.

EDMUND WHITE: I'm so happy to see so many French friends of mine here tonight. It's such a thrill and especially *you* but the—I thought it would interesting to write about—since it's a book that's very analytical and in which I try to get to the bottom of things, since I spent twenty-five years on the couch, more or less, I thought it was really a formative experience for me, one that I have deep resentments about and some pleasant feelings about, and if you'll permit me, just at the very end of that chapter, I write this passage about what I think it all means:

"When I reflect on my life, which has been touched by psychotherapy in every decade, I realize that during my youth, Freudianism was my main form of intellectuality, a severe, engrossing discipline too devoid of comfort to serve as a substitute for religion. Freudianism developed in me an interest in the individual and his or her sexual development and a strong sense that the progression from one stage to another could go in only one direction in someone 'healthy.' The residue of this indoctrination was a narrow, normative view of humanity, but when I came to reject Freudianism in my late twenties and early thirties, I replaced it with its opposite—an interest in groups, rather than individuals, a morality that was situationist, rather than absolute,

and a rejection of every urge to totalize, if that means to submit experience to one master theory. Psychoanalysis did leave me with a few beliefs, including the conviction that everyone is worthy of years and years of intense scrutiny, not a bad credo for a novelist. *That's* it. As a writer, I was always competing with Freudianism, and it was no accident that I revered Proust, the supreme psychologist in fiction, someone who was in no way influenced by Freud. I remember that Nabokov or one of his characters argues somewhere that Freud thought we admire a woman's hair because we desire her body, whereas the truth is we want to sleep with her because we're so awestruck by her beautiful hair. A novelist can work with Nabokov's insight, because it respects the details, the sensuous surface of experience, but not with Freud's theory, which is arid and reductive. I sought out therapy because I was in such terrible pain, driven by desires I wanted to eradicate because I felt they were infantile, grotesque, damaging, and isolating. I was never cured, but society changed and redefined homosexuality as an orientation that was acceptable, or nearly so."

Q: I'm intrigued by the anecdote about Howard Brookner and I'm just wondering—there was another kind of high culture of filmmaking in the Seventies—that was New York underground film, shepherded by people like Jonas Mekas and there were many gay figures from the Sixties and Seventies, like Jack Smith and Harry Smith and Warhol, obviously, and Gregory Markopoulos, and I'm wondering what connection you may have had to any of those—to that scene at all, you know, which had connections to Ashbery and people like that.

EDMUND WHITE: I myself knew Warhol and ran around with that crowd a little bit. When I think about my life, I always realize, I never did anything *too much*. I mean, I'd go to Fire Island but then stop. I'd go to discos and then forget about it. I mean I never actually built up any habits, I guess, except bad ones, and so even there, I can't say I was a great intimate of Warhol or knew those people, but you're quite right, and that is something that I want to talk about in this book. There was this underground scene, and we would all run in the Sixties and Seventies to see these preposterous films by Warhol, which we revered. We were capable of watching twelve hours of *Sleep*. We just thought all that was just great. There was another thing that characterizes that period, which is, again, gone out of the world, was a belief that serious art was always avant-garde and avant-garde art was always difficult. Now, we believe that if art doesn't please us

instantly, that there's something wrong with it, whereas in my generation we grew up with the idea that beauty is difficult.

Q: You were saying that you want to write a book about the importance of high culture in the Seventies and you were saying that there was a particularly strong gay presence in sort of high culture in the Seventies. Does that mean—are you—what are your thoughts on the state of contemporary gay culture? Are you dissatisfied? Or how do you think it's changed in *that* respect? In the importance of culture to homosexuals in America now?

EDMUND WHITE: I think that gays in my generation felt that they had to be cultured, that that was their entrance ticket to gay life. You had to have an opinion about Maria Callas and you had to know how to make a good quiche. **(laughter)** You had to—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Callas, quiche.

EDMUND WHITE: Callas, quiche…But the thing was that I think now that's not necessary, to be gay, but gay lives have become very pluralistic. There are still a lot of culture queens, but not that many. There are a lot of people who are hipsters in the East Village and who are, "I live in Chelsea, as you can tell." **(laughter)** So I don't know. It seems to me that—where we worship body culture—but there are all different kinds of gays now, there's not the same unified scene, and I think among younger gays that it isn't necessarily something that would be very high on their list of defining themselves, even. You can actually know—I know an awful lot of young people because I teach. You can know somebody for six months before it comes out that he is gay or not. It isn't part of his self-declaration.

And in my generation it was so *hard* to be gay that you would devote your entire twenties to trying to deal with your own head. You'd never get very far in your career because you were too busy being gay. I mean, it isn't just having fun, it was also suffering and dealing with it and going to shrinks, trying to be straight, because after all gay liberation didn't come along until 1969, when I was already twenty-nine years old. So I'd already spent years and years on the couch trying to go straight. Well, so, anyway, I think that things have changed a lot, but that

there are many gay people who are very cultured and one thing I just want to mention is I'm writing a piece now for the last page of the *New York Times Book Review* about how many important and good and *totally* neglected young gay writers there are. One of the things I'm saying is that Rodin said in 1900 that "America has just lived through a great Renaissance and no American knows it," and he was thinking of all the great painters that had been produced, whether it was Eakins or Mary Cassatt or Whistler or Sargent, and *he* knew about them but he knew that no Americans did, and that Americans still revered France in this way and they didn't recognize they had so many great people of their own.

In the same way I feel like there was a moment when there was gay literature in the late Seventies and the early Eighties and then that fad didn't really pay off, it didn't work out. I think they thought it was going to be like African American writing, which did pay off, because African Americans may be black, but they're still straight, and so their lives are similar to the lives of their white readers and their black readers but the thing is that gay people are from the moon, and our experience is so strange and so hard to relate to, that it was very hard to—and there are only 3 percent of the American people who are gay, although you wouldn't know it from *this* crowd, **(laughter)** but it's a very small group, and so it was very hard to build a big public for gay reading, so most publishers won't touch it now, and it's really gone out of fashion. And yet, there are all these astonishing young writers. I mean just one great novel after another, or collection of stories, is coming out and I'm going to write about five or six of them in this little article.

Q: Earlier you mentioned that you were thinking about writing a chapter called "My AIDS" and I was just wondering if you'd just talk a little bit about why you decided against writing that chapter.

EDMUND WHITE: It probably wasn't even a *decision* why I didn't write about it. It was probably something that I kept thinking I would maybe—You play with these different elements, and then at a certain moment, you realize, "Oh, I don't know, do I really want to . . . ?" and how could I pull that off and how could I make that interesting? I mean, I—one of the things that the *New York Times* accused me of was trying to be too amusing all the time and that kept me

superficial, and so maybe that's true, but it would have made me embark on a sort of dark and sort of medical chapter that didn't feel that it would work with the tone of the rest of the book. I preferred to have it as a kind of element that I *do* mention throughout the book, but as a kind of background, which is where it actually—it's the place that it actually occupies in my life.

I mean, I found out I was positive in '85. I sort of pulled the covers over my head for a year and did absolutely nothing. Most people it galvanizes, and they start working, but I just became depressed and said forget it, and then slowly I crept out, and then I realized that I wasn't getting sicker, and I wasn't going to die right away, so then I embarked on this insane Genet project, which took *seven* years, which is like the last thing you'd even imagine that somebody who was terminal was going to be doing. And then there were all these programs where I was on television, where I was being interviewed as this *dying author,* **(laughter)** and I'm still here, so, you know! There were three of those programs. In fact, Peter Jennings did one and . . . **(laughter)** And there was this thing in England called *Face to Face,* where they just have the camera right on your face the whole time for an hour and it was black and white, and this guy, who was the head of the Covent Garden, was interviewing me about "How does it feel to be dying?" and everything, and I still thought I *was,* so, you know, I would answer those questions seriously and everything, but then here I am, so . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Indeed, here you are. Thank you very much.

(applause)