

# *the* PARIS REVIEW



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# Ryszard Kapuściński

## *Problem, No Problem*



*"Africa Mode" dressmaker's shop, place and date unknown. Photograph by Ryszard Kapuściński.*

WHEN I WENT to work at the Polish Press Agency in 1958, the world presented itself to me as something impossible even to begin to comprehend, let alone master. And all the more so because, given my work, I had so little time to devote to it. All day long, dispatches arrived in my office from various countries, which I had to read, translate, condense, edit, and send on to newspapers and radio stations. There is turmoil in Africa: tempests and revolts, coups and riots. And because only a single body of water, the Mediterranean Sea, separates Africa from Europe, one hears the rumblings of this continent as though they were coming from just next door. For centuries people have been attracted by a certain aura of mystery surrounding this continent—and many had the ambition to test their mettle there, to discover and uncover its bewildering, confounding core.

I first see the Nile in 1960. My initial glimpse is in the evening, as my airplane approaches Cairo. From up high, the river at this time of day resembles a black, glistening trunk, forking and branching, surrounded by garlands

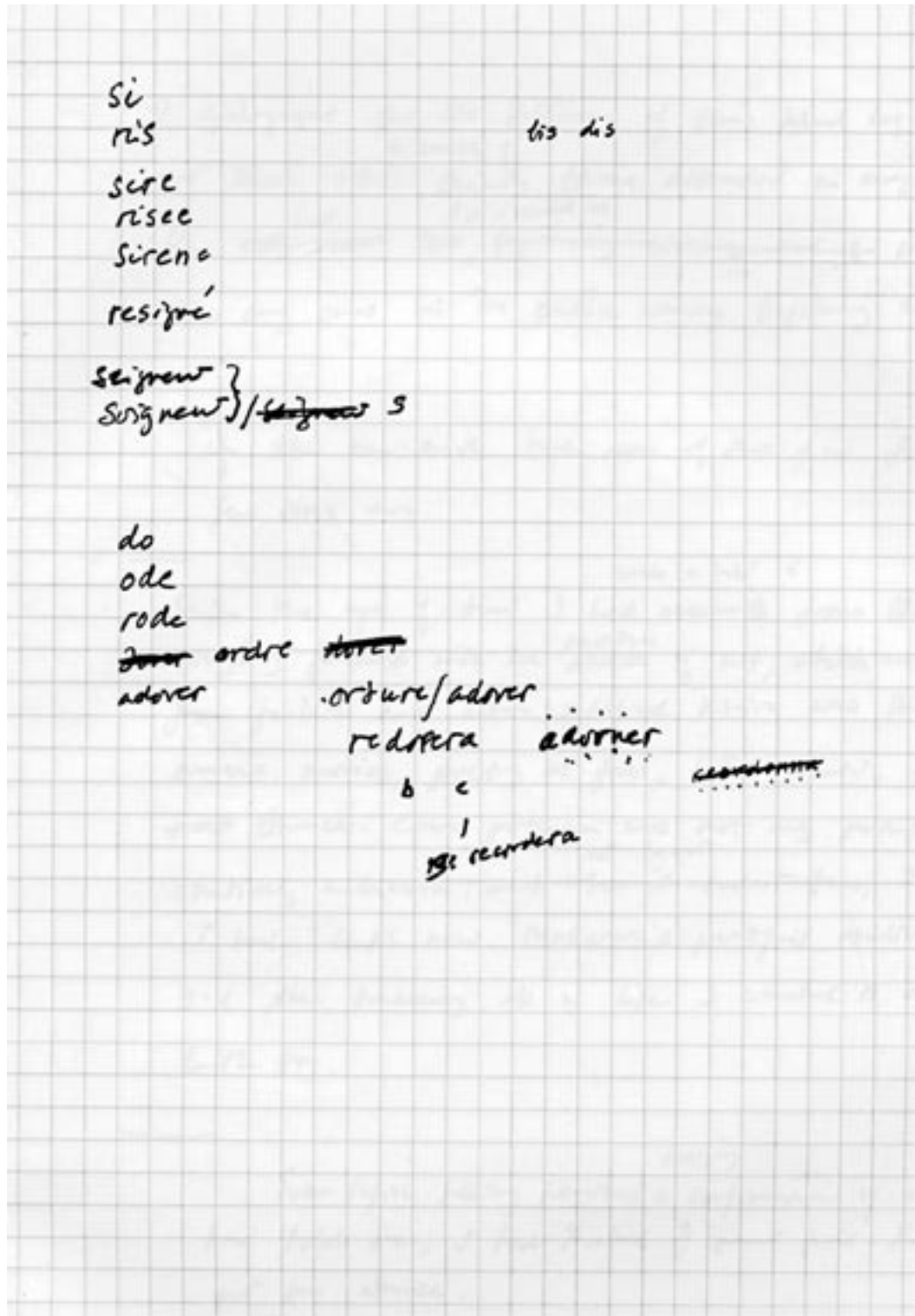


# Harry Mathews

## *The Art of Fiction No. 191*

IN 1962 RANDOM HOUSE published a first novel by a thirty-two-year-old American living in Paris named Harry Mathews. *The Conversions* is an adventure story about a man trying to decipher the meaning of carvings on an ancient weapon, and it unfolds in a succession of bizarre anecdotes and obscure quotations, with an appendix in German. One particularly trying passage is written in a language once popular with schoolchildren that involves adding *arag* before most vowels. *Furthermore* is faragurtharaggermaragore and *indulgences* is araggindaragulgearaggencearaggis.

The book was considered groundbreaking by a certain literary set. Terry Southern called it a “startling piece of work,” and George Plimpton published a seventy-page excerpt in *The Paris Review*. Mathews’s agent Maxine Groffsky, then in her first job after college in the editorial department at Random House, says that reading *The Conversions* was like “seeing Merce Cunningham for the first time.” But it baffled most of the reading public, including the poor *Time* critic who complained that the symbolism “spreads through the novel like crab grass.”



Detail of a Harry Mathews notebook page showing a sketch for a sestina with end words that expand one letter in each stanza.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing?

MATHEWS

My first serious work was a poem I wrote at the age of eleven. I went to a boys' school in New York called St. Bernard's. I had a wonderful English teacher who created a special class in Latin and in English poetry for me and a few other pupils. One day in class I wrote my first poem. He read it and gazed out of the window with an expression that, to me, said, What have I done? WASP private schools weren't meant to produce poets, but doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and so forth. He could clearly see that I was hooked.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember the poem?

MATHEWS

"It was a sad autumnal morn, / The earth was but a mass of clay; / Of foliage the trees were shorn, / Leaving their branches dull and gray."

When I got to boarding school, I was addicted to poetry. I remember one week I wrote something like eight poems in eight different styles imitating Wordsworth, Swinburne, and Tennyson, among others. I incurred the total disapproval of my teachers and classmates. I was roundly condemned.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

MATHEWS

Because of the idiotic thing that aspiring young writers are usually told: write about yourself. Don't imitate literary models. Of course, imitating literary models is the best thing one can do. Like painters—they make copies of classical masterpieces. I was cowed, so I wrote a couple of poems about my own experiences, which were close to doggerel. Then I started sneaking back toward more literary, more derivative work. There was a generous, brilliant man who taught at Groton named John Pick, and we became friends. He had written one of the first books on Gerard Manley Hopkins. I went to his study one evening, and he read me "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and my life was never the same after that. There was no attempt to make a visible,

logical sequence in the poem. By the time I was thirteen, I knew the work of Stravinsky and Bartók. They too had abandoned what passed for logic in music, which was harmonic organization of the work. It had never occurred to me that that could happen in writing.

Actually my first great aesthetic excitement came from classical music, starting with Wagner. I suppose Wagner is an artist as unlike me as you could imagine. And nevertheless, the obsessive romantic passion that those operas inspired in me is something that is behind all my writing, even though it's totally suppressed and censored. Can I tell you a joke? What is the question to which the answer is 9 W?

INTERVIEWER

I give up.

MATHEWS

Mr. Wagner, do you write your name with a V?

INTERVIEWER

What did you like to read as a child?

MATHEWS

At first I was read to. My grandfather had taught Greek and Latin at Columbia, and he read to me from a book that had abbreviated versions of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*—plus a lot of classic fairy tales, which, as you know, are extremely disturbing. Then I began reading on my own. I read mostly Westerns. My parents approved of that, because at least they were books. But when I got into comic books, they disapproved. I would read them by flashlight under the covers. No one realized in those days that 1930s Action Comics and DC Comics, Superman and Batman, would become legendary in American culture. They taught me a great deal about narrative—lots of invention and no pretense of realism.

INTERVIEWER

You were an only child?

MATHEWS

Yes. My mother despised children, except for me, to whom she was



# Karl Taro Greenfeld

## *Silver*

**W**E WERE BLOATED. Here in Hong Kong we had nine floors full of staff. I had been sent from New York to run two of these floors, our regional marketing and sales departments. We had seventy employees in Hong Kong, and dozens more spread through the region. We were like a big, slow-moving housefly that had lived past the summer; we were too heavy to stay aloft for long, and as soon as we landed, swat, we'd be dead.

But how long would it take? The conglomerate had hundreds of divisions, thousands of projects, tens of thousands of employees. It could take them years to figure out why we were even out here, in this remote outpost. Back in New York they were busy digesting a massive merger, what the press had called a “transformative transaction” that would, within just a few months, become known as the worst corporate marriage in history. In Hong Kong you could see the fat, the extraneous employees and duplicated departments: five payroll divisions, six HRs, and a dozen IT help desks. And in this distant tail of the lumbering beast, far from the nerve centers, we had kept on hiring

long after the string of good quarters had ended. The orders to freeze hadn't made it down the chains of command, so plans conceived during the boom were still in effect: new marketing teams; sales offices in Seoul, Bangalore, and KL; a VP in Japan. We filled every position.

I had the best job of all—the expat boss sent from overseas, generously accommodated with a housing allowance, club memberships, a Teutonic sedan, and a cost-of-living stipend. I was thirty-two, unmarried, and I suddenly found myself living a life of affluence. I had enough money to walk into any of the fancy boutiques in Pacific Place and choose whichever suit or pair of shoes I desired. If I'd had more time, I would have taken up an expensive hobby like sailing or collecting modern Chinese art but instead—at first—I was too busy hiring.

Our local staff greeted me warily. I've noticed that the first impression I give is often of arrogance or disdain, when actually I am diffident. This misperception has served me well in the corporate environment. It worked in New York when I joined the company straight out of business school. I completed my tasks proficiently, managed a few insignificant projects, and was lumped in with a group of colleagues who were given credit for a successful, albeit minor, acquisition. I caught the eye of our leader, the man who would later orchestrate the disastrous merger, and rumors spread that I enjoyed a close friendship with him. Those rumors were unfounded, but their existence was enough to ensure that I was handled with great delicacy by my management team.

So it was a surprise and relief for my immediate superiors in New York when I took the position in Hong Kong. It was not seen as a wise move. Those who wanted to get ahead would stay in New York, as close to our Sixth Avenue headquarters as possible. Once you left, my colleagues worried, you couldn't control what people were saying about you.

They were right, but I didn't care. I had gone through college and my twenties without making many friends. I didn't know that by the time you hit thirty you had all the friends you were going to get. I'd miscalculated. I thought maybe in Hong Kong I could catch up.

I left a girlfriend behind in New York. Courtney was a blond with short hair and a pleasing gap in her lower front teeth that you saw when she smiled. She was pretty and smart, from a good family with property in Connecticut and Cape Cod. She coproduced television commercials with a partner, a slightly older gay man. When I told her I had accepted a job in Hong Kong, she was