A Conversation About Names with Novelist Vance Bourjaily

William A. Francis

Vance Bourjaily was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 17, 1922. His father, Monte Bourjaily, a Lebanese by birth, was at the time a newspaper reporter. He also served as Commissioner of Information and Research for the City of Cleveland. Later he became the Assistant Editor-in-Chief of Scripps-Howard Newspapers (Ohio Group). He managed the United Feature Syndicate in the thirties, serving as editor and publisher for a number of distinguished journalists, including Heywood Broun, Westbrook Pegler, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Vance Bourjaily vividly remembers these celebrated journalists in an article he wrote for *Esquire*, "My Father's Life" (March 1984). Bourjaily's mother, Barbara Webb, wrote stories and popular romance novels. Bourjaily has observed that his parents contributed greatly to his love of the English language and to his choice of a writing career.

Bourjaily left Bowdoin College before completing his studies to enlist in the American Field Service (1942-1944) as a volunteer ambulance driver in Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Italy. His AFS experiences provided him with material for his first novel, *The End of My Life* (1947) and his fourth novel, *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960). He served in the U.S. Army from 1944 to 1946. In December, 1946, he married Bettina Yensen.

In the early fifties Bourjaily wrote a number of television plays that were broadcast live from New York City. He also edited *discovery* from 1951 to 1953. This was a periodical that carried fiction by a number of young writers whose reputations were to grow rapidly: Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, William Styron, and Bernard Malamud.

Bourjaily's other novels are: *The Hound of Earth* (1955), *The Violated* (1958), *The Man Who Knew Kennedy* (1967), *Brill among the Ruins* (1970; nominated for the National Book Award), *Now Playing at Canterbury* (1976), and *A Game Men Play* (1980). Two works of non-fiction reveal Bourjaily's love of the out-of-doors, hunting, and fishing: *The Unnatural Enemy* (1963) and *Country Matters: Collected Reports from the Fields and Streams of Iowa and Other Places* (1973).

In the late fifties Bourjaily became a teacher of fiction at the Writers' Workshop of the University of Iowa, where he guided many young writers along the path to successful careers. After some twenty years at Iowa City, he moved to the University of Arizona to continue his teaching career. In September, 1985, Bourjaily became the director of the M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

In forty years of writing fiction, Bourjaily has been recognized as an important voice speaking on the American scene. His novels are subtle, witty, incisive, poignant, and sometimes shocking. Critics, reviewers, and scholars have recognized his importance in the history of contemporary American fiction.

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Interviewer: In *Brill among the Ruins* you observe that life starts with playing with names.

Bourjaily: Well, that's an anthropological saw. In the primitive view of language, to name something is to own it. I think it's less applicable to proper names than to simple nouns in general. The same thing persists in an amateur of the neosciences today, which I suppose I am in a way. If you can look at a tree and say that's a black walnut, that's a red elm, that's a white oak, not a black oak, by naming it you own it. You collected it, even though you leave it in the field. That's the impulse behind rock hunting, mushroom hunting, or bird watching - all those things are involved with properly, correctly naming something. I suppose the final extension of it is to recognize something which has not previously been named. You can name it yourself. Then you're really honored, and science recognizes that often by incorporating your name in it.

Interviewer: C.S. Forester was obviously playing with names when he chose *Hornblower*, which he said was a grotesque name for a fairly grotesque character. In *The Violated*, Ernest Goswith and Eddie Bissle are grotesque characters. Do their names reflect that grotesqueness?

Bourjaily: Well, I can't, as I remember the names in *The Violated*, associate Goswith and Bissle as having been named through the same kind of process. *Bissle* was a name which I used once or twice in notes for a friend of mine, who, while he was not like Eddie Bissle, had some of the same mannerisms in terms of speech. I used to refer to this particular friend as *Bissle*, which is fairly close to his actual name. I have no idea

why I called Ernest Goswith *Ernest Goswith.* In many cases, the name simply occurs intuitively and seems appropriate and sticks. I generally have a good deal more trouble naming central characters than I do peripheral ones. Names for peripheral characters seem to come very easily. *Kress Hartle* in *Brill among the Ruins* supplied itself automatically as being an appropriate name, which suggests some sort of Middle European ethnic origin, but nothing specific. It could be a farm family name of the Middle West. I realize now that there's a senator named *Hartke,* so obviously his name was fairly close to the top of my head, but I wasn't thinking of Senator Hartke when I chose that name. In matter of fact it hadn't occurred to me until now that my character and the Indiana senator have the same name. There's a lot of unconscious plagiarism involved in naming. I remember being surprised when a friend pointed out to me that I had used his first two names - *Thomas Kendrick* - in naming the main character in *The End of My Life* Thomas Kendrick Galt. It was perfectly unconscious. One would not do it that way if one realized what one was doing.

Interviewer: Have you ever consulted lists of names to find the right name for a character?

Bourjaily: They generally come almost automatically. Perhaps they should be given more thought than I give them. I don't think of that as one of the big problems in writing. Naming of characters seems to me a relatively minor example of something that has to happen all along when one is writing. The right line of dialogue, the right outcome of a scene, a new direction in the story, all of these things, when you're working well, seem to come out of your fingers rather than out of your head. And if that isn't happening, the book isn't happening. There will be certain names which were given arbitrarily rather than intuitively. I think one tries to avoid the arbitrary and stick with the intuitive as often as one can, and when the intuition isn't coming up with the right name, then you may do things like looking at the phone books. As far as the central characters' names are concerned, the problem is to find a name which has the right sort of resonance for the character, and in most cases to make it a name of no particular ethnic significance. In *Now Playing at Canterbury, Billy Hoffman,* for example, could as easily be a Jewish name or a German name or an Appalachian name - there are a lot of people named *Hoffman* in Appalachia. So it's ethnically non-committal, and I suppose it is the ideal sort of name for a central character, unless you are going to do something with his ethnic entity.

Interviewer: Opera buffs would probably be reminded of *The Tales of Hoffmann.*

Bourjaily: Well, after I'd named Billy that I thought about *The Tales of Hoffmann,* and then I made a reference to that in the book.

Interviewer: In *The Hound of Earth,* is Dolly Klamath's name a reference to the Klamath Indians?

Bourjaily: I think it came into my mind because there's a town called Klamath Falls in Oregon. Particularly, the unpleasant and upsetting people in books shouldn't be given names - if you can avoid it - which are going to be the names of actual people. I don't write really villainous people very often, I don't think, but it just seems a matter of one's courtesy not to upset people because their names are attached to somebody unpleasant in the book.

Interviewer: You have only one title with a character's name in it - *Brill among the Ruins.*

Bourjaily: That came about as perhaps the one time I ever yielded to a publisher and editor on an important point, and I regret it as a matter of fact. My title for *Brill among the Ruins* was "Tell Rain Goodbye," which I still prefer. It is a line from the book. The editor and publisher of Dial Press were delighted with the book, but they didn't think that the title worked, and they urged me to give them a title in which the character was named. Their contention was that since the book had a very strong character in it, it would be more appropriate to give it a title which included the name, and their suggestions were things like "The World of Robert Brill." Eventually, I did yield the point and gave them *Brill among the Ruins* for a title. I've never been quite comfortable with it. That's a case in which I think I might have named the character something else had I intended to use his name in the title, because I've frequently had people say "tell me the name of one of your books," and I say "*Brill among the Ruins,*" and they say "*what* among the ruins?" It doesn't work.

Interviewer: At the time you were writing "Expedition," the working title for *Brill among the Ruins,* a character named *Barney James* was working in archaeological ruins in Mexico. When President Kennedy was assassinated, you were asked to contribute to a collection of stories to commemorate him. You used *Barney James* in your short story because he was in your mind as an active character. The short story later became a novel, *The Man Who Knew Kennedy.* You then changed the name

Barney James in "Expedition" to *Robert Brill.* How did you decide upon that name?

Bourjaily: It really was the surname *Brill* rather than the *Robert* which determined it, and I liked it because it sounded tough to me. It's a strong monosyllable which seemed appropriate to a guy who doesn't "let kiddies climb on him," as he remarks to Gabby at one point. To my mind it has a kind of harshness to it, and it is possibly associated with Brillo.

Interviewer: A number of the characters in *Brill among the Ruins* have names which seem to be puns on *stone*: Stoner, Stein, Pederson.

Bourjaily: I hadn't thought about it, but it seems to be in there. Brill, on the other hand, in British dialect, is a fish.

Interviewer: Well, Bob Brill does metamorphose into a coelacanth, a primitive fish, in the second half of the book! There is also a cluster of names suggesting vegetation, growth, and life. For example, Hartke's first name is *Kress*, and someone is playfully called "Colonel Mustard." These names are ironic in view of the fact that so much is being done in America as well as in Viet Nam to destroy vegetation. Poisonous chemicals are spilled by corn fields. Farm land is misused. And the availability of tractors is limited because weapons have priority.

Bourjaily: Again, it may well be in there, but it's not in there consciously. I've never really thought what the things may be that influence the choices of names in the subconscious. A curious point.

Interviewer: I'd like to turn away from the naming of characters to the naming of places in *Brill among the Ruins*, which is set in Rosetta, Illinois. Rosetta is in Alexandria County, near a town named *Memphis.* There are other Nile Delta placenames. You said that you wrote to the mayor of Rosetta, Mississippi, and inquired about the naming of the town, but you got no response. Then you wrote to the mayor of Rosetta, Arkansas, and you received an anonymous reply in which it was said that the town was named for the postmistress, Rosetta Allen. You decided, then, that since there were no Rosettas left in the United States you were free to invent one yourself. Why did you make the parallels between the Egyptian Delta and the Little Egypt area of Illinois? And why did you incorporate your letter to the two Rosetta mayors, and the unsigned response, into the opening pages of *Brill among the Ruins*?

Bourjaily: Well, I suppose first of all to open a book which is going to deal extensively with archaeology with some archaeological reference. Another reason has to do with the problems involved in beginning novels. It's difficult these days to open a novel by describing the place where it's

going to occur, although obviously Victorian novels frequently did open that way. It has to do with how patient readers are. They're not very patient with things like that any longer. If it's important to you to begin your novel with a description of place - as it was to me in this particular novel, because Bob Brill is so rooted in that town - then in order to make it interesting you probably set aside the traditional techniques of fiction and become an essayist, and you do the same sorts of things that you would do in trying to make an essay interesting: You write a short essay about the place, and make it as interesting as possible. And so there's a good deal of playfulness, obviously, in that. There's also that great stroke of luck of having gotten the actual letter from the correspondent in Arkansas.

Interviewer: You make frequent references to American Indian place-names in your books, names which have been corrupted by settlers who anglicized them because they were difficult to pronounce.

Bourjaily: I'm not one of those who are specifically politicized on behalf of the Indian, though I find that now that there is an American Indian movement I have a great deal of sympathy for it. I'm not a romantic about Indians. I don't recall that James Fenimore Cooper was one of my favorite authors as a boy.

Interviewer: Please comment on the names you used in *Now Playing at Canterbury.*

Bourjaily: Naming really was an interesting problem in this book because there are so many people in it. *Dick Auerbach* and *Cindy Benesch* (Sidney Bennett's original name) both have Iowa resonance - German and Bohemian. *Benesch* is very close to some common Bohemian farm names around here, and I wanted them to have Iowa farm names. Henry Fennellon gave me a lot of trouble. I wanted him to be a kind of big solid Ronald Coleman-like figure. I don't remember where I finally got *Fennellon,* but it's probably an English name derived from the Scandinavian, like *Van Allen.* Debbie Dieter Haas - I just was taken by the German two-word names. Maury Jackstone's name was changed a number of times. Because Maury's the kind of magical character, I wanted him to have a name that suggested a magician's property. A jackstone is a curious thing that you play jacks with. Lekberg - I think I was thinking about the midwestern-Scandinavian farm tradition. John Ten Mason - I was fascinated that Dutch names often had *Ten* as a middle name, and yet in Johnny's case I thought probably he somehow just didn't come by it honestly. In one version - I don't know whether it's still

in the book or not - John claimed to have been named in an orphanage. Sato Murasaki - that's a naked acknowledgement to Lady Murasaki, the author of *Tale of Genji*, which has a good deal to do with the peculiar form that Sato's story takes in the book. It enabled me to name his mother *Lady Murasaki* in the course of his story. *Beth Paulus* - it just sounded sexy to me. David and Susan Riding - I wanted them to have a pretty name. *Riding* has always seemed like a pretty word. There's a poet named Laura Riding, and I'm sure that suggested it, too. Marcel St. Edouard - he needed to come from Louisiana, and I wanted him to have one of those Creole-parishioner's names. Mike and Mona Shapen - they're Jewish characters. I didn't want them to have a heavily Hebraic name, but *Shapen* is pretty close to being an ethnic name. I think I was just playing around at that point with the way in which Short both did and did not represent me in the novel since he's the librettist and I'm obviously the librettist, too. He got named when I wrote the story, "Fitzgerald Attends My Fitzgerald Seminar," and it's a story in which I am concerned among other things with deprecating my own performance as a teacher, and so I took a physical characteristic of my own, which is shortness. It's part of poking fun at myself, calling him Professor Short. Maggi Taro, Mrs. Short, again has a kind of magic name. She, like Maury, is a magic character. There's the reference to the tarot deck. There was a red herring line that my editor finally persuaded me to take out of the book - I think he was quite right - in which it was pointed out that the natives of Polynesian islands eat a lot of poi, and poi is made from taro root. But this is all having fun, putting things in the book that are not going to be caught by the reader - you don't mean them to be caught. They're some of the many subtextual things you do in writing to keep yourself interested. Hughmore Skeats IV - an absolute false feel. *Hughmore Skeats* is a name which appears in the cathedral of Canterbury. I think he was one of the choirmasters in the history of Canterbury theater. I got the name off a bronze tablet at the cathedral when I visited England in 1972. Imagine him, a raucous Australian, a descendant of some pious English churchman.

Interviewer: How did you choose the names of cities in *The Hound of Earth*: Tell City, Coeur d'Alene, Pass Christian, Valdosta, Talladega, Chagrin Falls, Massillon, Las Animas, and Hoquiam, to name a few?

Bourjaily: I got fascinated looking through an atlas one day and falling in love with names like Pass Christian and Coeur d'Alene.

Interviewer: Had you visited all of those cities?

Bourjaily: No, I've been through a number of them since. I have actually been in Pass Christian. They were just American placenames that sounded pretty to me. I needed to give Al some way of organizing his travels, and so I thought, well, with his rather whimsical mind what Al did was to look in an atlas or a collection of road maps, or something like that, and pick a number of places purely for their names and move among them.

Interviewer: The F.B.I. never detected that pattern.

Bourjaily: Mr. Usez might have after awhile. The F.B.I. itself did not.

Interviewer: The name *Quincy* in *Confessions of a Spent Youth* seems almost thrust upon you.

Bourjaily: Actually, the origin of almost any one of my novels was a story, except for *Brill*, and the story expanded into a book, and the origin of *Confessions* was a piece I decided to write for the first issue of *discovery*, because it didn't have any non-fiction. Jack Aldridge and I wondered how to balance the table of contents. We wanted mostly fiction and some poetry, but we wanted a couple of pieces of non-fiction. We just couldn't find them. We finally did get one from Herb Gold: "inflation-on-the-erie." And I said let me write one about marijuana. This is the first time I can remember consciously comparing life to literature, because marijuana is really quite different in my experience from the narcotic agent's view of it as something really violent and dangerous, and at the same time quite different from the current sort of romanticization of it as marvelous turn-on. I just told what it was for me. Since I was the co-editor of this first issue of *discovery*, I decided not to use my own name, and I also thought it was part of the joke of writing about the supposedly terribly forbidden thing to purport that it had to be done pseudonymously in the contributor's notes. In that first issue of *discovery* it says "U.S.D. Quincy is of course a pseudonym." So *U.S.D. Quincy* of course is inevitable because you're imitating DeQuincey's title, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater.*

Interviewer: In an essay in Thomas McCormack's *Afterwards: Novelists on Their Novels*, you said that "Quince" makes a half-rhyme for Vance, so there is an autobiographical connection. Quince's first name is *Ulysses*, and he is on a quest, a journey of self-discovery.

Bourjaily: Yes, you see, it also suggests U.S. Grant, which I think was more in my mind than anything else. *Ulysses S.* is a very square American appellation.

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Interviewer: In *Confessions of a Spent Youth*, there is a Victorian house named "Moonstone," and its owners are named *Collins*. Quince also meets the Browning sisters. Were these conscious allusions?

Bourjaily: No, I think it's just the clutter in my particular head. If my head were cluttered otherwise, I'd probably name things otherwise. The house actually referred to was called "Moonstone," on the St. Johns River in Florida. And it probably was mental laziness on my part that made me call the people *Collins*. I forget what their name was. Their house was actually called "Moonstone," though. No, wait. The house that we lived in was called "Moonstone," and their house was called something else. The two houses were side by side.

Interviewer: And then there's the title that reminds one of Sinclair Lewis's *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*.

Bourjaily: Of course *The Man Who Knew Kennedy* is openly derived from Lewis's book, which is referred to at the beginning.

Interviewer: And one of the characters is named *Doremus*.

Bourjaily: I'd forgotten that. Doremus is the newspaper editor in *It Can't Happen Here*. That's unconscious plagiarism - it's not intentional.

Interviewer: And yet the name *Doremus* does seem to link *The Man Who Knew Kennedy* with Lewis.

Bourjaily: It probably does, and who knows? When one is engaged in writing a novel these things which come up and seem right may come up and seem right because there is a link between what Sinclair Lewis is trying to do and what I'm trying to do in a somewhat different way. In *The Man Who Knew Kennedy* I was trying to observe a certain very nice decent kind of American businessman whom I had come to know and value. Perhaps this link supplied the name *Doremus* without my realizing why.

Interviewer: Mr. Bourjaily, thank you for your candid observations about the giving of names to people and places in your novels.

Bourjaily: You are most welcome.

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