

At the end of a distinguished career at Penn, an English professor and veteran navigator of campus rapids offers some penetrating thoughts on University life.

Lucid.

Observations

By Samuel Hughes

His eyesight may be fading, but his insight is still quite keen. His conversation is dry, pungent, and at times wickedly funny, blending a delicacy of imagery with a bracing saltiness and a penetrating irreverence for—well, almost everything, including himself. He has an “Irish ward-heeler’s” acumen for University politics (to borrow from a colleague), yet he is widely regarded as a very decent man. He is a peculiarly American man of letters, and he is a hell of a storyteller.

These traits alone would make Dr. Robert F. Lucid, now emeritus professor of English, a worthwhile subject to interview, as would the fact of his 32 years at Penn. But what sets him apart, for our purposes, is the depth and breadth of his University experience—what one colleague calls the “unique multifariousness of his career.”

His resume shows that he won both the Lindback Award and the Ira Abrams Award for distinguished teaching; that he served as graduate chairman of the English department (1974-76) and as chairman of the department (1980-85, and again in 1990). He held the reins of the Faculty Senate (1976-77); founded the Penn-in-London program; and served as associate director of the Provost’s Council on Undergraduate Education. As chairman of the PEN-at-Penn and the Steinberg Symposium programs, he was responsible for bringing visit-

ing artists and thinkers of all stripes to campus. (Some stories about those visitors appear on page 30, though, as Lucid noted, “There are a lot you can’t tell.”) He also served as chairman of the Collegiate Planning Board and sat on the Council of Undergraduate Deans and on innumerable other committees.

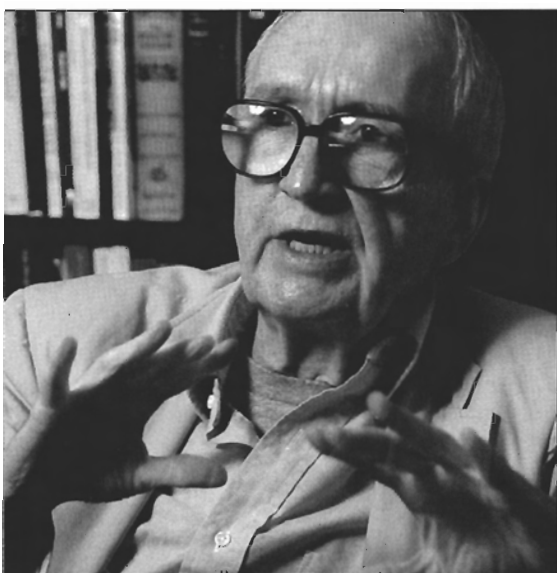
As faculty master of Hill College House for the past 17 years, he helped countless students adjust to the sometimes bewildering rigors of University life—and, more importantly, he came to have a pretty good idea what makes students tick. The notion of student community became his overriding concern over the years, and before he retired this past summer—an event hastened by the discovery that his eyes were suffering from an irreversible condition known as macular degeneration—he served as chairman of the Residential Faculty Council, which is spearheading the University’s efforts to create a residential college system.

Born in Washington state in 1930, Robert Francis Lucid was raised in a large, working-class Irish-Catholic family (“They were very devoted to service,” he says; “they despaired of me, I guess”). One brother became a Jesuit priest; another, a Communist organizer; Robert thought he would become a labor lawyer until he discovered that he didn’t much care for the law. After a two-year stint in the Air Force, he took his undergraduate degree in English at the

P H O T O G R A P H S B Y J I M G R A H A M

University of Washington, courtesy of the G.I. Bill. McCarthyism was then in full sway, and Lucid saw several tenured professors fired for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. It was, he notes, “a context to grow up in.” After earning his master’s degree and his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, he turned down a teaching job at the University of Illinois when he found that he would have to sign one of the era’s “loyalty oaths.”

In 1964, after two years’ teaching at Chicago and five years at Wesleyan University, Lucid came to Penn, where a generation of English-department professors was about to retire almost en masse. “I went to thirteen retirement parties in four years,” he recalls. “It became a social form that I mastered.” And he has been in the thick of it ever since.

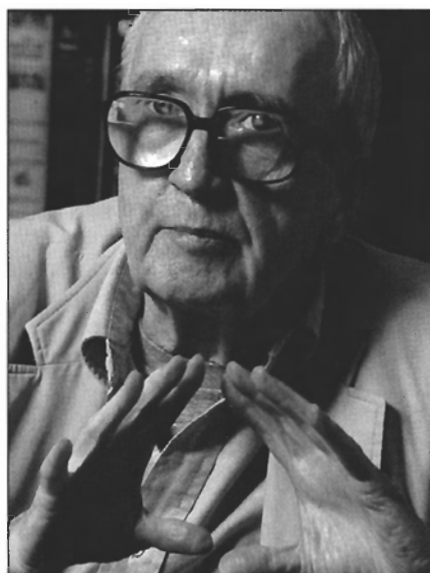


It was in Chicago, during a stint as head of a visiting-writers program, that he met a young writer named Norman Mailer. Their friendship has lasted almost 40 years now, as has the literary association—Lucid, author of *Norman Mailer, the Man and his Work* (Little, Brown), and editor of *The Long Patrol: Twenty-Five Years of Writing from the Work of Norman Mailer* (World Publishing), is now working on Mailer’s authorized biography, which is expected to run to three volumes. After retiring in June, Lucid and his wife, Joanne, moved to the Wilkes Barre, Pa., area, where the Mailer archives are located. At the end of last month, Mailer and another friend, poet Richard Wilbur, spoke at a colloquium on campus—“American Writers in Paris Following World War II”—that was held in honor of Lucid’s retirement.

Back in August, we spoke with Lucid for several hours on a wide range of University-related subjects. The interview began in his old office in Bennett Hall, now occupied by Dr. Al Filreis, professor of English; continued later that afternoon in the guest room at Hill House; and concluded the following morning in the *Gazette* offices. What follows is an edited version of that conversation.

S.H.: Talk a little about the changes in students since you’ve been here. Has the pendulum been swinging, or has it been a relatively linear sort of evolution?

R.L.: Well, I think the students themselves are really quite consistently the same, all the way through, because they’re the same age, and their primary concerns by far are interpersonal concerns—the dynamics of inter-



personal relationships. They’re kind enough to include the academic experience to a significant degree, but they don’t overemphasize it necessarily, and that’s pretty constant.

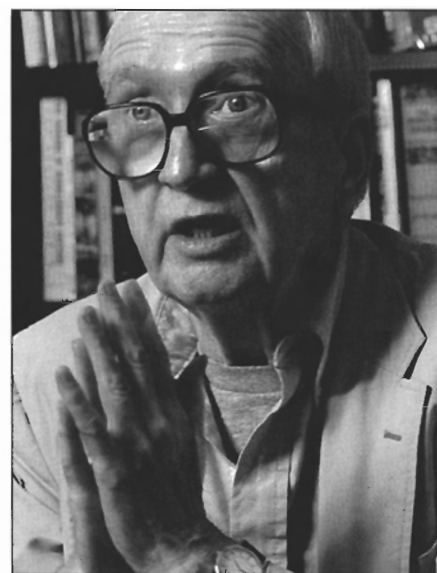
S.H.: Is this anything peculiar to Penn?

R.L.: Oh, no, just because people are—they’re fairly well educated; they’re 18, 19 years old and so forth; they’re away from home for the most part; and they’re in a city. If you were a playwright, that would give you an awful lot right there.

When people come to a university, they’re interested in it almost exclusively for certain utilitarian reasons—they’re looking for a job or whatever it is—but they’re also interested in it as a theater, in which they’re going to act out a certain part. They’ve been thinking about it for quite a while, and they’re ready to act it out now if *only* the other actors are there. And it’s that almost

desperate search for the other players—they’ve got the script pretty clear in mind; it’s just that they want to be sure that they’re in the right place. You know, “Can I have the play here? Or am I in the wrong place?”

It is true, though, that things like politics—the sense of what’s going on in the world is quite different now from what it used to be. Indeed, there are quite different things going on in the world. But certainly the political orientation of students in the Sixties and Seventies was very much to the Left. And that’s changed, of course. There’s much more of a conservative presence in the politics of students now. But I don’t actually see very much difference, honestly, between what they want from the University—and what they want from the other people who are at the University—than has ever been the case.

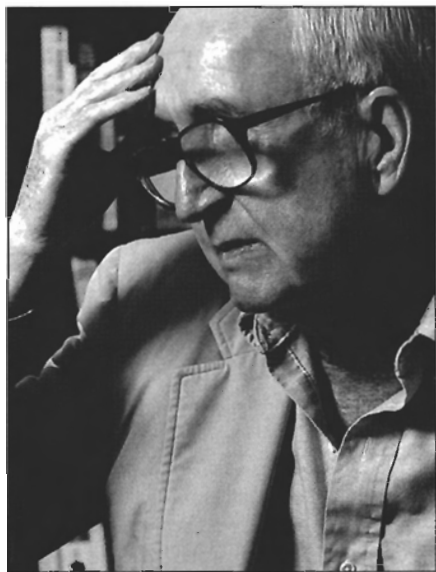


S.H.: You once suggested that Penn doesn’t really feel like an Ivy League school; I think you used the word *muscular* to describe it.

R.L.: I don’t remember saying that, but I don’t think of Penn as being in the same kind of institutional category that Harvard and Yale and Princeton are in at all. The community it represents is much more heterogeneous, I would say, than those schools, both on the managerial level, and the decanal level, and the faculty level, and certainly on the student level. There is a kind of laissez-faire character to the main currents of experience at a place like Penn—that may have been what I meant by *muscular*. And there is certainly much more of a willingness of the institution to reinvent itself. The Penn that came out of the Second World War really started reinventing itself at an incredible rate.

S.H.: What pitfalls or needs do you see ahead for Penn?

R.L.: In my view, what Penn needs to do is to bring the undergraduate experience together for the people who come here. There are 10,000 undergraduates in this place, give or take a few hundred. They turn 'em loose in a place like this—the four undergraduate schools don't give them *shit* outside of the curriculum. I mean, it is an education, but what about their lives? And what about some kind of community? There's the Greek system—which is, I think, admirably trying to get things in a different and more intelligent light—but the idea of the University moving toward the creation of communities that undergraduates can live in, survive in, even mature in—they have to form the communities themselves, of course; you can't impose things on these people, but in not



the economics department—was that no undergraduate credit earned at any other economics department anywhere counted toward an undergraduate degree at Penn. The London School of Economics; forget about it. M.I.T.; no dice. So there was a kind of parochialism. And in the early Seventies, the Office of International Programs was developed as an outreach entity, which of course shepherded students coming *in* from international communities, and we began to ratchet up our recruiting to bring in students internationally—and also to create a series of programs in which Penn students could go out and experience life in other cultures. To make a long story short, there were three things going on: There was a kind of international outreach starting to go on; there was a kind of consolidation of undergraduate educational resources going

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imposing things you can provide guidelines, resources, and you can have a plan. In my view, that's the great priority, to provide for the 10,000 undergraduates, to actually create a structure of community affiliation for those people. It's certainly what I worked on all those years with great optimism. And it may actually be achieving real priority among a very broad combination of Penn people now.

S.H.: You've said that Penn has “at last learned to draw upon the international experience as a way of giving students cultural models of an exciting and sophisticating sort, and that may mark a great turning point in Penn student life.” Could you elaborate on that a little?

R.L.: Well, at one time, the Office of International Programs didn't exist at all. And a very common rule—for example, in

on; and there was the beginnings of this community stuff going on—the College Houses and so forth. It was a 1970s' phenomenon. They developed, for a long time, quite independently.

I had a little to do with each of the three things in one way or another. In the late Seventies, I took an English-department summer course abroad, as the teacher, to London. And I enjoyed it so much—I'd never been abroad, you know; I was a complete West Coast parochial person—that it was almost the end of me. When I became chairman of the English department, the first thing I did was to set up a junior year abroad for English majors. And we send 20, 30, 40 kids a year to London for the year—or a semester. It's so different when they come back—they have a real sense of humor! You know, they've been around a little bit. It's really quite wonderful.

I also more or less accidentally became the faculty master at Hill. And just about that time, the V.P.U.L. [vice provost for University life] had persuaded me to head up a council of faculty masters they had at all the other houses. So we put together a council and we began to plan for—embryonically—the idea of communities for everybody, to see if we couldn't create a situation that would give everybody the opportunity to have some place of their own at Penn.

I don't know exactly when the three things began to occur to me as having something to do with each other.

S.H.: Are you concerned about a decline in reading—how it affects English departments, literature, and society in general?

R.L.: Well, my perception hasn't led me to that concern. That is, we've got so many English majors over in the English department that the numbers—I keep checking them because I don't think they can be right. It really is amazing. Furthermore, Filreis is the genius locus behind the Writers House. If I never did one other good thing at Penn, getting Filreis to take the head of that Writers House thing was the rightest thing that I ever did, because he took a kind of interesting idea and just went to the moon with it. He put together a group of English majors that they call the Undergraduate Advisory Board, and what Al's trying to do is to get undergraduate input into this question of the places where literature is in the University community as a whole. And I think that in doing this, we're taking the same approach that we're taking in Writers House—we're operating on the assumption that literature and reading is by no means the domain of a bunch of English majors. It constitutes part of the lifeblood of a community like Penn.

You know, I suppose there's always a kind of concern about the preservation of reading, particularly with all this stuff now going on—the technology business and the Web and all of that. But I honestly don't feel that, at least in the large undergraduate community that Penn presents, it has revealed itself as an issue. Penn has always had its very full share of Philistine illiterate embarrassments, you know. But I haven't seen any signs at all—at Hill, for example, there's a Dead Poets Society, and literary magazines behind every potted palm, and drama clubs and this and that. I must say that students don't read what I read, and I'm always amazed at what they regard as compelling and gripping literature. But that's different.

S.H.: You've been pretty involved in the Penn Reading Project for freshmen. Are you pleased with the way it's worked out?

R.L.: Well, I think it's worked OK, but I think that it's just on the verge of a next big surge that I'd really like to see. See, the trouble with the damn thing now is that you get a text, and let's say the text works well. Everybody agrees that *Arcadia* worked very well, and we got a good year out of it, thanks to Mr. Steinberg [Saul Steinberg, '59 W, the charter trustee whose Steinberg Symposium program brought *Arcadia* author Tom Stoppard to Penn for three days in February]. But I think that the real, obvious trouble with it is just that it's a superficial injection into the mix.

There's another, better way, I think, to do it now, and we're just now coming to it. It was actually Steinberg's suggestion. He nominated a text, *The Wealth of Nations*. We all said, "It's a great text"—I mean, there are, like, 25 texts like that in modern Western thought—but we didn't choose it. The idea of the freshmen reading project now is, we pick the thing in, like, May; they read it between May and September; and they have to have it read. You can't give somebody *The Wealth of Nations*, for Christ's sake, in May, and expect them to come in and have it read, you know. So we

didn't do it; we picked the Hemingway book [*A Moveable Feast*].

S.H.: *The Wealth of Nations* is the one that talks about the "invisible hand of the marketplace," right?

R.L.: Absolutely. Adam Smith. It's just wonderful. I mean, you could use *Das Kapital*; you could use Darwin's *Origin of Species*. There are certain books that turn out to be sort of pivotal. But suppose you began to use those texts. The first thing you'd have to say is, "Well, of course you don't have to have it all read and mastered by September." If the undergraduate deans were to decide that Class A should take *The Wealth of Nations*, let's say, or *Origin of Species*, then this class would use that book, and have reference to that book for four years, no matter what school they were in. And they would be known as the Darwin Class, or whatever it was. And there would be programming done, and courses given, so that at the end of the four years, you would emerge with your class—by then you'd probably have read the goddamn thing, and you'd have been exposed to it in half a dozen different ways; you might actually, as an educated person, be a slightly different person—and even a slightly different class—than you would otherwise be. And I got the impres-

sion that that was what was ultimately implied by Steinberg's nomination.

It seems to me that that's one of those things which is just on the verge at Penn of coming into its own from an educational point of view, that I feel certain will work.

S.H.: Could you talk a little about your involvement with the various Distinguished Visitors programs?

R.L.: The general principle is that a community like Penn has to define itself, among other things, by the caliber and breadth of the major imaginations it brings in and pays some respect to—and also allows people to see them and hear them and so forth. And I felt that I had made a contribution to the University because I had helped make a case that our score in that respect was pretty good. Many of the same people come to these things, you know; it's really interesting—they use it as part of their education. But it's an earnest of the cultured character of the University community that it would turn in the direction of these people, and then turn out for them when they're here. That's what no two or three people would show you. You'd have to see that it was an almost never-ending stream of people coming through all the time—but that it wouldn't have amounted to anything if peo-

Bob Lucid On Some Distinguished Visitors To Penn

On Yevgeny Yevtushenko:

It turns out he's bringing his wife, two kids, and a nanny. And one of the deals was that we were going to go first class. So I pick up the phone, and I call the dean, and I said, "First class for two kids, a wife, a nanny, and Yevtushenko—that's gonna alter the budget." We had a budget, but the idea was that it was not an extravagant budget. You could do this for much less than you could do it if you brought the person in from New York. Saul [Steinberg, '59 W, the charter trustee who funded the program] was trying to make a point about the literary world in the United States, and I didn't want to, as it were, miss the point. So I called Saul. And he thought about it. And he said, "We can fly 'em all business class."

So I communicate this to Yevtushenko: "Business class." "No problem," he says, and hangs up the phone. And I'm waiting to see what happens. And he comes over first class, with champagne and everything—you know, from Moscow to New

York, first class all the way. And I said, "I thought you were coming business class?"

He says, "The rest of them went tourist—came out to exactly the same thing!" So he sends his wife, his kids, and the nanny sort of in the baggage compartment of the plane, and he sits up front—Ohhh, God! I thought to myself, "Well, yeah, didn't hurt our budget at all. I understand the finances."

On Stephen Sondheim:

When Sondheim was here, he stayed at the Beverly Sills Suite in Van Pelt House. We called it that because when Beverly Sills was here, she stayed at Van Pelt, but we didn't have a decent guest suite, so we got the money out of somebody, and we redid it, and we christened it the Beverly Sills Suite. So Sondheim stayed there. And he was great—he's very hospitable, a very nice guy. He says, "I don't give speeches; I can't give a speech." So I said, "You don't have to give a speech; we'll take care of that." And we put him up on the stage

in the Harrison Auditorium of the University Museum, and it was completely packed. And some of the people it was packed with were ladies in hats—that is, from New Jersey and so forth. And they all had the programs from Sondheim musicals that they'd seen in various theaters someplace. And these are very grim ladies, you know; this was a celebrity situation, as far as they were concerned. It was like a sale in a department store or something—they were down front, you know, and they'd got down there with all of these things. And Sondheim, we had him up on the stage between two interlocutors. We had [Dr.] Cary Mazer on the one hand from drama, and we had a guy from the music department who knew a lot about Sondheim's music. But neither of those guys ever got a word in edgewise. They asked Sondheim a couple of questions, and then he spoke uninterruptedly for an hour and 45 minutes. But it wasn't a speech—it was a conversation as far as he

ple didn't come out for them. And these presences can kind of cross the more sober and not necessarily obviously cultural business of the University.

When Nadine Gordimer was here, through no coordination, the trustees were meeting on campus. And the issue on campus at the time that was hassling the trustees was the divestment issue in South Africa. I was doing all the publicity for the Gordimer thing, and whoever was in charge of the agenda for the trustees said, "Do you think that Gordimer might be interested in talking to the trustees about the divestment issue?" So I talked to her, and she said, "I'd love to get the opportunity to talk to university trustees. Now, these are the people who actually do the investing, as I understand it." And I said, "Oh yes, and they are not students of the subject—they're actually players."

So she talks to these guys for 20 minutes or so, and it was terrific, because she was very passionate. Her argument was: Disinvest—that this will have an effect that you wouldn't believe, that the actual goal here is trying to persuade people who are trying to make up their minds about things in government, De Klerk and these people. She didn't harangue them or anything like that; she had talked to a lot of people about this—it was a subject she really had mas-

tered. And then there was a question-and-answer thing that went on for a long, long time, and people got up and gave the contrary view, and they knew what they were talking about—it was a very spirited and very interesting business.

S.H.: You became friends with Mailer in Chicago, right?

R.L.: Yeah. I was in Chicago, and he was a visiting writer. He was there for several days, and I was 28, 27, and he was therefore, 34, 33, and I was the host figure. I was asked to look after him and so forth. And we became friends in that process. We drank quite a bit together during the time, is what it amounted to. And I took him to the bars that I went to, and we did an interview with him which was later published and so forth. Then we just stayed in touch, and then *Advertisements for Myself* came out the next year, and I found that to be a very interesting and important book, and I wrote him a letter about it. And then I moved to Wesleyan from Chicago, so I was in the East, and we began to become friends in that way. I would do some writing about stuff that he was doing, but mostly we were social friends over the years. He was a very social person in those days.

It was really very late in our friendship

when he asked me if I would take on his biographical responsibilities. I had run his archive for years, put it together. And he was aware of the fact that I knew quite a bit of this stuff, and other biographers were asking him if they could have access to it and if they could do it, and he didn't want to do that, but didn't know what to do. So he asked me if I would take it on.

When this thing went wrong with my eyes, and I asked these ophthalmologists what the prognosis was—I can't read out of this eye, so the question is, "How long am I going to be able to read out of the other?" I went to several ophthalmologists, and I told them about the stuff I was doing at Penn, and I said, "I really want to finish up this stuff at Penn, but then I want to do the other thing, too, and I want you to really give me your best call on this." They said: "Drop the Penn stuff. Other people can do it. Go do the book right away."

So the first thing I did was pick up the phone and call Norman. I said, "I have some choices I want to make, so I wanted to touch base with you." And he said, "Well, if you want to retire and work on this book, I not only think it would be OK—I would take it as a great honor."

So that did it. I went in and filed for retirement that day.

was concerned. Then he took questions from the audience, and it was really a great scene.

But he had said to me, "You've got to get me out of here at the end of this thing somehow; is there a way we can bail out of this place when it's over?"—'cause he *knew*. He'd done this. And I wasn't sensitive to the bent that his audience had. So I said, "OK, I'll get you out." I said to Mazer and this other guy, "You've got to run interference to get him out of here." And they both faded; they apparently didn't pay any attention. So I was up there with him, and I saw what he meant: These women came up on the stage, and it was terrifying. They were bearing down on him, and he turned around and *ran* like a deer, and I was running—"Come on! Come on!" he said—and I was supposed to have a car out there, and there was no car, and we didn't even break stride; we ran all the way from the museum—he says "You go first," because he

didn't know where we were going. And I ran just full-tilt all the way up Spruce Street to Van Pelt—and that's way the hell up at 40th—so we run full-pedal from 32nd to 40th street like a couple of guys who'd just knocked over a gas station! And he was very serious about it. He says, "Weren't they awful? Have you ever seen anything like this? Once they tore all my clothes!" I was simply thunderstruck. So he says, "This is it, all right—we're home. I recognize it now. OK, thanks, I'll see you now," and he went on in. I didn't know Sondheim at all, either before or since.

On Arthur Miller:

Arthur Miller was here for a Dean's Forum—he was the first person brought to the Dean's Forum when [Dr. Joel] Conarroe was dean. Conarroe asked me to take care of it for the day. So I took him to lunch at the Palladium with some students, you know, playwrights or whatever they were, and then he was free for a

while. So we went over to my apartment and sat around and talked for a little while. He was clearly very tired, so I said, "I tell you what—why don't you lie down and take a nap here. I've got to go work. You take a nap; I'll come back and get you at 4. That's when this thing begins, and you'll be going hammer and tongs from 4 until 9. It's 2, so you'll get a two-hour nap," and I took off. So he went and lay down and went to sleep, I guess. So my wife—she's a high-school teacher, and normally doesn't come home until about 4, because of the nature of her work and so forth. But whatever it was, she came in at about 3 o'clock, and assumed that the house was empty—I'm never there at that time. This is in Hill House, you know. And she comes in, and here's this guy sleeping in the bed. And she goes, "Ahhhhemmmmm," and he wakes up, and she says: "Haven't I seen you someplace before?"

"God, I hope so," he says. "I'm Arthur Miller, and this is perfectly OK."