



(L #159)

BILL MOYERS' JOURNAL

"A Conversation with Archibald MacLeish"

Executive Producer
Editor-in-Chief

CHARLES ROSE
BILL MOYERS

This program was made possible by an underwriting grant from THE FORD FOUNDATION, the CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING and public television stations.

Transcript of "A Conversation with Archibald MacLeish"

copyright 1976, Educational Broadcasting Corporation

Executive Producer: CHARLES ROSE

Editor-in-Chief: BILL MOYERS

MacLEISH: I believe that the Republic exists; I believe with all my heart it exists. I believe it's alive, creative...doing well. But I'm afraid that unless we give more thought to it, to its possibilities, to what it gives us besides the wages we have, the satisfactions of various kinds we have, what it gives us in terms of human relationships, in terms of humanity, our basic humanity, unless we become again the essentially humane people that we were known to be to the whole world for about a hundred years, we may find ourselves with nothing but our possessions left.

MOYERS: How do you think, therefore, we should celebrate the Bicentennial?

MacLEISH: You know how John Adams wanted to celebrate it? He named all the possible means of making noise in the world. He said that what you had to do on the Fourth Day of July was to get out and parade and shoot guns and light bonfires and dance and make speeches and just a great volume of glorious noise. Well, of course, the trouble with the Bicentennial year is that we're going to have that for twelve months.

No, I think a humble sense of gratitude to whoever God is and wherever he is for the opportunity of self-government. My God, what a privilege that is, if we can exercise it.

MOYERS: This is Archibald MacLeish at 83. I'll be talking with him about his life and work, and about the American experience. I'm Bill Moyers.

MUSIC

MacLEISH: This scene here, for example. There's a wonderful web of little New England rivers. Down in this valley is the South River which goes through this town. Then, next going down in the gorge that goes that way is the Bear River which is the north end of town. Then is the Deerfield, which is a lovely river, a real river, which flows into the Connecticut. And in that far valley this side of the gray hill, is the Connecticut. Which is one of the great rivers of the world.

MOYERS: Wonderful names -- Bear, Deerfield.

MacLEISH: Oh, yes. Deerfield and the Connecticut.

MOYERS: Why do you like it so much here?

MacLEISH: Silence. Silence, which is the rarest thing in the world now... but what you can be sure of here. I work in that stone house over there through the trees...beyond the trees. And I can dig in there. I know that even if they call me from the house, I don't have to hear them. And I'm sure I'm safe from sort of events down below. Nothing ever happens. An occasional motor car will go by.

MOYERS: What was here when you came? And did you...you and Mrs. MacLeish, do what we see here?

MacLEISH: I'll have to show you a picture of what was here. This place had been bought by somebody from the South who had covered it with pillars and columns and porches. And we had to strip all that off, partly because it was rotting away and partly because it didn't belong with the house; and get it down to that beautiful square, simple, clean shape. And once that was done, we...we just lost our hearts to it. In fact it's like a person to us. We have so deep a sense that it's there and that it's aware of us, if that doesn't sound too silly. You know, it seems to respond to our being there, being around.

MOYERS: How about the garden? Did you do that?

MacLEISH: No. Well, it's Ada's. Ada's design. This was...there had been a barn on this part of it. It was covered with loose stuff, under-the-ground rocks, I mean. And all of those rocks were in dry walls. That's a dry wall; that's a dry wall there, a dry wall there. So, it makes a...this side is cemented because we have earth above it.

MOYERS: Do you like to work with your hands?

MacLEISH: I love it. It's the great...it's the great instigator of the mind because you can...you're working with your hands and you don't think you're thinking, but you are. And you surprise yourself when that happens.

MOYERS: You were old when you came here?

MacLEISH: 1927, I was...seven, plus eight...I was 34.

MOYERS: Do you remember that poem you wrote? "At 20, stooped 'round about. I thought the world a miserable place. Truth a trick; faith in doubt. Little beauty, less grace." Remember that?

MacLEISH: Yeah. And it goes on, "And now at 60 what I see, Although the world is worse by far, Stops my heart with ecstasy. God, the wonders that there are."

At 60, I thought, you know, that I had plumbed the depths of old age. I hadn't even begun to look at it.

MOYERS: You wrote that at 60.

MacLEISH: Why, I take it I did because I said, "At 60..." in the poem.

MOYERS: Well, what's changed between 60 and 83?

MacLEISH: Oh, your...your whole feeling about yourself. The things that you've gotten past and have regretted as you got past them, but have now learned to get along without. The things that drop out of your life. And the extraordinary sense of freedom. And in my case freedom, plus wonderful and complete companionship, which is necessary to that sense of isolation and freedom, because otherwise, it would be isolation and loneliness. All that happens.

I found the decade of the 70's really wonderful country. You're going to like it, Bill, when you get there.

MOYERS: The 70's?

MacLEISH: The 70's.

MOYERS: I hope I travel it.

MacLEISH: I'll report to you on the 80's later on.

MOYERS: All right. I'll come back 10 years from now.

MacLEISH: Come back 10 years from now. I'll let you know.

MOYERS: Although he graduated from Harvard Law School at the head of his class, Archibald MacLeish gave up the practice of law half a century ago because he felt compelled to write poetry. Soon he was one of America's most distinguished artists of language. His honors are too lengthy to list, but they include three Pulitzer Prizes, including one for his verse play, J.B., based on the Old Testament story of Job.

Under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, he has held several Government posts -- Librarian of Congress, a Director of the Office of War Information, Assistant Secretary of State, and a founder of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

He has lectured and taught around the world. But he belongs here, he says, on his farm in Western Massachusetts, where he does most of his writing.

Poet, playwright, teacher and public official. His has been a long and successful career. But his enduring passions have been for Ada, his wife, poetry and the American Republic.

Do you know why you became a poet?

MacLEISH: No. If I knew the answer to that question, I'd be infinitely wiser than I am. I was perfectly happy practicing law. I mean, law...the practice of law is the greatest indoor game in the world. It's like pocket billiards. And it's great fun; and if you're good at it, and I was fairly good at it, it's very rewarding. Also, it makes a lot of money. But there was this other thing I had to do, and why, Bill, I couldn't tell you if you twisted my arm.

MOYERS: Well, but without twisting your arm, was there a moment when you realized...without understanding why...when you realized that you had to do it?

MacLEISH: Yes, yes, yes. Well, there was a moment when I realized that I had to leave the law. This was...this is as clear in my mind...how long ago is it now? Sixty years. It's as clear in my mind as though it happened last night. The office that I was in, if you know Boston, was on State Street back of the old State House. And I used to walk over the Park Street and Hunter and take the subway back out to Cambridge, and walk out home. And I started on a late winter night--very clear night, very cold--with a moon in the West which I can see now. This nagging thing was in the back of my mind. By the time I got to Park Street and Hunter, I went right by the subway entrance and walked the length of Commonwealth to Massachusetts Avenue, and the length of Massachusetts Avenue to Harvard Square, and on another mile home. I don't know how long that walk is, but it took me quite a while. And I simply pounded it out with myself and came to the conclusion that if...IF I was ever going to do the thing that I felt in my heart I had to do, I would have to make the decision then, that night--that very night.

I got home, found Ada worried to death and mad. And we sat up all night and talked about it and we decided we'd do it.

MOYERS: And you went to Paris.

MacLEISH: We went to Paris about four or five months afterwards, and stayed

there for about six years. Not for the reasons which sometimes seem relevant; that is, to be part of a group of ex-patriot Americans. This is the biggest piece of nonsense ever perpetrated. We went to Paris, one, my wife is a singer... was...she was a...had spent a good deal of time working in Paris. She knew the city; I knew it. We both wanted to live there. And there was a marvelous inflation going on in Paris which made it a very much cheaper place to live than Boston. So we were able to live there. That's why we went.

And then later on, we had the enormous dividend of being part of that extraordinary gathering of the young from all over the world who crowded into Paris in the decade of the '20's...because Picasso was there, because Stravinsky was there, because Les Six were writing, because Masson had started, because... you know, just endless riches.

MOYERS: The Americans, Hemingway...Fitzgerald.

MacLEISH: And Hemingway and Scott and Dos and many another.

MOYERS: Do you remember those days clearly now?

MacLEISH: The Paris days I couldn't possibly forget. They are...that city, as itself, enters your memory and sits there and you can't get away from it. The smell of the carpeting, I think it was sort of cocoa matting that was used in inexpensive apartments, I can smell that. We lived in so many of them. I can smell that in my sleep and awake.

And the beauty of the city, the loveliness, that gray, pearl light that Paris has. The water carts early in the morning. And the possibility of work. The whole city was working. They left you alone. You were part of the flow of it.

MOYERS: Someone told me that the fall of France in 1940 had shaken you profoundly. Is that true?

MacLEISH: It was a crushing blow. I saw it as the fall of Paris. And it seemed to me that Paris had become in the six or seven years that we were there... I mean, it became during that period...not only the center of the creative and artistic life of the world, but a sort of representation of it. Wherever you went, there were indications of it. There were things going on. There was a sort of new beginning of the spirit of man and it was expressing itself in the arts. And the occupation of Paris seemed to me to be...particularly by the people who did occupy it and for the purpose for which they occupied it...seemed to me to be an unbearable indecency.

MOYERS: The 20th Century has been filled with unbearable indecencies. And most people aren't poets and cannot see the loveliness beyond the horror. And I often wonder whether poetry isn't a way out for the poet that somehow justifies...not, it doesn't justify, but it somehow makes tolerable the unbearable indecencies that ordinary people are left to deal with.

MacLEISH: Bill, I would take that and set it in quotation marks if you would change one word. Not a way out, but a way in. Poetry is a means of knowing. It's a means of knowing the kind of thing that can only be known emotionally. That can't be analyzed, taken apart, spelled out, put back together again. Poetry takes the apple whole, eats the whole apple. It doesn't chew it up and then digest it. It is capable of that kind of truth, of perception. And it is capable of perceiving the tragedy of life, as Shakespeare, I must say, demonstrated and many before him...is capable of seeing the tragedy of life as nothing else can see it. The great reaches of the Bible which penetrate the tragedy of life are largely, like Job, poems...like the Book of Job. It is a means of knowing. And

its great triumph is that when it succeeds, which it does much less often than it thinks or anybody else thinks; but when it succeeds, it makes the unbearable bearable because one can see what it is at last. One feels it. Wordsworth said, "Truth carried alive into the heart by passion." That's what poetry was to Wordsworth. "Truth carried alive into the heart by passion." Well, the truth of tragedy also carried alive into the heart by passion, that also becomes comprehensible.

MOYERS: Would that be the answer to your own question? The one you raised in a poem you dedicated to Wallace Stevens when you asked, "Why be poet now? When the meanings do not mean. Why be poet?"

MacLEISH: Exactly, Bill, I'm glad you read that; I'm glad you said that. That's true. That's it.

MOYERS: What is there so for the...why should those of us who are not poets read poetry?

MacLEISH: People read poetry I think for the same reason really that poetry is written, but in reverse. You write a poem, in my experience...I couldn't expect to have any agreement about this...but you write a poem, in my experience, because as a sculptor gets hold of a piece of marble which he can see has got a girl in it somewhere. If he can get that out, she's going to get that kneeling girl. You run into a piece of experience which you know contains something that is going to be a poem. You don't know why exactly, but you begin to get a feeling of it. And the work of writing which is very rarely that surge of inspiration which is supposed to take place, but which is usually very long, and very laborious, and extremely painful, is the work of trying to find the poem within the experience.

Now I think the reader comes at the same thing in reverse. What he's faced with is the poem. It's the combination of sounds, rhythms, images; it's a whole, it's almost an object. What did it come out of and what does it really contain? And this experience can be...whereas the creation of the thing may have been laborious and painful, this other experience, though it also can be laborious and painful, is enormously rewarding if he just happens to have to do with a great poem.

Take the...take that wonderful...I think it's the oldest recorded...it's the oldest poem to which we have recorded music in English. It's in the Bodleian, the manuscript of it. "Oh Western Wind, when whilst thou blow that the small rain down can rain? Christ, that my love were in my arms and I in my bed again." This is very simple, very clear, little scene. Some very simple observations about weather. But it's also a great deal more than that. It almost...almost...for the reader who is sensitive enough, catches a bit of the experience of love. It's in there; it's in there. And it's always in there for me. I'd say it always moves me when I come back to that.

MOYERS: That's one of the reasons that your poetry has always rung with such affirmation. Somebody even said you still look on the world with ecstasy. And I remember one of the characters in J.B., the child, Jolly Adams.

MacLEISH: Yes.

MOYERS: She's told to look away from Job with all his sores for fear that the ugliness will stay with her, that she'll remember the agony. And she says, "All the sores I seen I remember." Do you remember the afflictions of this 83 year life that's been lived through war and disease and plagues and corruption?

MacLEISH: One can't forget them and they are continuous and they search you out if you try to forget them. But I suppose the real question is not whether

they are present in your mind, but whether with them present in your mind are the things that don't counter-balance them because they are in a different sort of balance altogether...but give even them meaning. The quality of life to which one can really apply the word humanity, the humanity of so many lives that one sees lived around one which in a sense put the miseries and the sorrows in their place because these people one sees and one admires have, of course...all have their own sufferings and their own sorrows. The delight of life is so much greater than the sorrow of it because the sorrow does eventually become part of the delight. It's a deep enrichment.

I suppose this really means that I've been extraordinarily fortunate in my life. I have the kind of marriage that...about which you can't say anything. It's just a wonderful marriage. It's existed for about 60 years. It'll go on as long as we're around...as long as there is us to be married. And perhaps even after that.

MOYERS: What are the thoughts of a man who's lived 83 years about his life and times? Thoughts he hasn't expressed before.

MacLEISH: Well, at 83 your views of...not of your life and time, but of yourself in your life and time, which is really the turning point...begin to change quite a lot. You become remarkably less afraid of death, if you ever were. I've been much afraid of death. I have no hankering for dying; that's something I'd like to get by easily if possible. The Irish talk about a happy death. If there's an Irishman around who'd like to tell me how to do that, I'd be pleased. But I'd never been much afraid of death, but now I have a very easy feeling about it indeed. My only feeling about death now is not...if possible, to arrange it so that I won't cause pain to somebody I care a great, great deal about.

I have a poem about that, incidentally, that tries to get at it.

MOYERS: A recent poem...a recent poem?

MacLEISH: Huh? Yes, a poem...I've just finished a group of about 30 poems, most of which...two-thirds of which at least, haven't been published. I'm going to bring them out next year.

MOYERS: Autobiographical?

MacLEISH: They are...they are quite so, I think. Actually, some of them are poems that have been batting around in notebooks for a while and that I finally came to grips with this summer. I've had a very good summer of writing, very good...good productive summer, as they say. And some of them are...just appeared out of nowhere this summer. And so they cover a certain period of time.

The one I was talking about, that is, the one I said I was...I had written a poem on the theme you had mentioned is this one. It's called "The Old Gray Couple". There are two. There's...the old gray couple are placed in the scene and then they have a conversation.

And "The Old Gray Couple" goes this way:

They have only to look at each other to laugh,
No one knows why, not even they.
Something back in the lives they lived
They both remember, but no words can say.

They go off at an evening's end to talk, but they don't.
Or to sleep, but they lie awake.
Hardly a word, just a touch, just near.
Just listening, but not to hear.

Everything they know, they know together.
Everything, that is, but one.
Their lives they learn like secrets from each other.
Death, they think of in the nights alone.

MacLEISH: And then, they get talking. And this is the way that dialogue goes:

She Love, says the poet, has no reasons.
He Not even after 50 years?
She Particularly after 50 years.
He What was it then that lured us, that still teases?

She You used to say my plaited hair.
He And then you'd laugh because it wasn't plaited.
She And now it can't be. Just the old gray couple.
Love has no reasons, so you made one up to laugh at.

He No, to prove the adage true,
Love has no reasons, but old lovers do.
She And they can't tell.
He I can, and so can you.

Fifty years ago, we drew each other,
Magnetized needle toward the longing North.
It was your naked presence that so moved me.
It was your absolute presence that was love.

She And now?
He Years older I begin to see absence, not presence.
What the world would be without your footstep in the world.
The garden empty of the radiance where you are.

She And that's old lovers reasoning?
They see their love because they know now what its loss would be
Because, like Cleopatra in the play,
They know there's nothing left once love's away.

Nothing remarkable beneath the visiting moon.
Theirs is the late, last wisdom of the afternoon.
They know that love, like light,
Grows dearer toward the dark.

Well, this is called "Family Group". I think it completely explains itself. I had a younger brother, remarkably beautiful young man, who left Yale in the... when the war broke out in 1917. He was in the Class of '18. And joined a small group of people who were learning to fly planes for naval aviation. This was the beginning of naval aviation. We had no naval aviation. And he went to the front and he was on the front flying for something like very close to two years which is about 20 times longer than most people lasted in those days. He was shot down on the 14th of October, before the Armistice. And his body was not found until the middle of the next winter because he fell in flooded country.

And this is a poem called "Family Group" and it's imagined as a photograph, two photographs.

That's my younger brother with his Navy wings.
He's 22 or would be but for six months
Flying Camels at the front.

I am beside him in my brand new Sam Brown belt.
The town behind us ought to be Limoge.
That's where we met by accident that April.
Someone's lengthened shadow, the photographer's,
Falls across our feet.

This other's afterward, after the Armistice,
I mean, the winter floods, the months without a word.
That shattered barnyard is in Belgium somewhere.
The faceless figure on its back,
The helmet buckled wears what looks like Navy wings.
A lengthened shadow falls across the muck about its feet.
I'm back in Cambridge with clean clothes,
A comfortable bed, my wife, my son.

MOYERS: Well, what can one say?

MacLEISH: I don't know. The curious quality of a poem is that it can be far more naked than prose. And if you can tell me why, I'll bless you. I don't know why. You can be, in fact, we're besieged these days with a literature that is, as they say, explicit, extremely explicit. Nakedness, deprived even of its nakedness. But somehow there's nothing embarrassing about it. And yet, a poem without being explicit at all can be much more naked, and there isn't anything to say about things like that. There they are; they either are or they aren't.

MOYERS: What's been the agony of Archibald MacLeish behind the poetry?

MacLEISH: Well, I tried...I tried a few minutes ago to talk about the specific events, the sorrows -- the death of a son, the death of a brother, the miseries of the First World War. All these things which eventually become part of a pattern, part of a fabric; and therefore, a part of life, and therefore, acceptable. I think the real...well, agony is not...the wrong word for it.

The real motivating agony with me, if I can talk about a motivating agony, has been the long struggle with the art. When Frost was 80, we gave a dinner for him down here in Amherst; and he was asked to read a few poems, which he did. I was running the dinner so I suggested to him that maybe he'd like to say a word about his poems as separate from himself.

And he said, well, he'd do that. And what he said was that he had always hoped to write a few poems which would be hard to get rid of. And that's really it.

And the motivating agony in my life has been the constant defeat. I suppose it's the defeat that any artist feels. I don't suppose any artist in any art is ever sure that he has really perpetrated a work of art, and maybe a fake. This doubt, I think, afflicts me more than most. But the real suffering has been in the work itself. And also, of course, occasionally real rewards.

MOYERS: I may be about to enter a field where the lame shouldn't tread, but I want to ask you about what to me seems to be a persistent inquiry on your part. Beginning in 1925 with that bedeviling work called, "No, By Daddy"...

MacLEISH: You have read that?

MOYERS: ...right on through J.B., the great, modern profile of Job. In both of them there is this search for some understanding of our relationship to God. There is this unsatisfied desire to know what has happened between us and God. This, what you call...this vast silence overhead...you've been seeming to reach for, build ladders toward. And I wonder if after fifty years of writing the poetry, from that first beginning of "The Odyssey" 'til now, do you know any more about the answer?

MacLEISH: No, I think that what I think I know is that the answer is closer to us than it is to the stars, that the Creator of all that out there is not a... is not a visible, a manageable entity for us. I don't mean that it's all too mysterious. I mean that it is really too large. I have a young...very brilliant young physicist friend, who tells me that most physicists...I have his word for it...I don't know anything about this...that most physicists would agree that the direction of evolution in the Universe as a whole is constantly towards symmetry. And he has reasons for this, mathematical reasons, which he explains to me which I don't understand at all. But it's an idea that fascinates me. But it's also an admirable idea, the movement of the Universe is towards symmetry and means that there is a purpose which involves at least one thing which human beings can understand, which is beauty...symmetry and beauty having much to do with each other.

But there is nothing in the idea of symmetry to which one would turn with a broken heart. You don't weep on the bosom of symmetry. The real vocabulary, it seems to me in which one can catch the nature of the...I was going to say the thing above us...it's the...that's such a totally wrong word. I'm not sure at all that it's a person. The spirit, the entity, that has to do with our lives and the meaning of our lives that perhaps knows the meaning of our lives, is very much closer to ourselves and that the channel through which...the medium through which it's closer to us is the medium of love. So that I find my way to the teachings of Jesus Christ that way and to me the fundamental truth of Jesus is that he does move love into the center of the human experience. And to say that love is the answer to the mystery of the Universe is a little bit more childish than I want to be on a program with you. And yet, there is something there. There is something there.

MOYERS: Suffer the little children.

MacLEISH: Yeah, back to the...

MOYERS: This piercing of the inner reality within the experience in a very personal way. Does it have any relationship to the larger world, to the political world?

MacLEISH: You know perfectly well what my answer to that is. I...I've never really been able to understand the mentality which assumes that...or as poetry works as an instrument of knowledge, an instrument of apprehension. In the world of the sexual emotions, for example. It won't work in the world...the political world, the world, the historical world. That's something else and poetry should keep out of it and the practitioner of poetry should keep out of it. Well, to say this in a time like ours which is essentially political is in effect to say that poetry is sort of a marginal activity, a private activity, which one should reserve for the secrets of one's own life or the private moments that can't otherwise be discussed. And this is just pure nonsense. And the reason I say that is because there's demonstrable proof at the very highest level that it's nonsense. The greatest poet since Keats, I think without any question, is William Butler Yeats. Yeats, down to his fifties...I think early fifties... was an Irish Bard, writing charming, bardic and largely Gaelic poems and Gaelic themes. I don't mean that he wrote them in the Gaelic, but he wrote them in English, of course.

But in the early 50's...at the period when we're moving in, toward 1916... this was about 1914...1916 was just ahead...he began to write, as one of his contemporaries in Ireland said...he began to use the English language as though it meant business. And he began to use it about what was happening in Ireland. And he wrote poems in that first book of his...the book at that time called Responsibilities like "...Romantic Ireland's dead and gone. It's with O'Leary in the grave." That's pretty political and it gets more political as you go on with

it. And then he gets in eventually to the Second Coming, which is perhaps the most penetrating statement made by anyone in any form in the last 40 years about the time we're in. Yeats became a great poet when he began to treat with all experience, his experience with the world, his political experience, the agony of Ireland, as well as the agony of Willie Yeats. And it's just nonsense to try to... I mean, it reduces poetry to a child's game. If you put a knife through that and say, ah well, that's for other people, that's for journalists. Journalists are out there. We're in here with our hearts our bleeding hearts, and we're going to talk about our bleeding hearts. Well, nonsense.

MOYERS: So much of your poetry is consistent with what you've just said as emphasizing the primacy of the individual in our society. And I wonder there hasn't been a diminution of the individual as a consequence of these forces which the Founders of the Republic couldn't foresee.

MacLEISH: Well, isn't collective action, the action by a society, exactly what the people who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the solid citizens who signed it, at the risk of their necks, were thinking about. I agree that there's much more...we use the word society and we use the word social in a rather different sense. But certainly what the Founding Fathers meant by the Republic, what they meant by the people, was the body of the people, the dominant opinion in the country. And the individual, while he was the end and aim of government... it was his freedom that the state existed for...nevertheless, to bring about these things had to work with others.

MOYERS: I want to probe a little bit more the sense of confidence you feel in the Republic. What worries you right now about the Republic? What are our dangers?

MacLEISH: It would take some such form as this. The common ground, the common explanation, has to do with a lack of concern for the common good, which means really a lack of the sense of the common good, a lack of the sense of a community. The thing that differentiates us from the animals is that we are aware of ourselves, and being aware of ourselves, we're aware of each other. And being aware of each other, we're capable of love for each other, we're capable of strong feeling about each other -- like and dislike. But we're above all, we're capable of imagining a community in the sense in which Jefferson imagined a community.

And what seems to me to be increasingly lacking, disappearing, fading away, is this commitment to the common life, this sense of being a man and not an individual engaged in aggrandizing his fortunes, or not an individual engaged in fighting off his enemies or not an individual who hopes to achieve more power than he now has. The sense of a community, the sense really of the Republic.

MOYERS: But you do still believe, apparently, that even in a conglomerate age, an age of towering and massive institutions and an age of technology, the single individual is the essence of what Jefferson meant by this Revolution.

MacLEISH: I do indeed, Bill. I don't really see how the existence of the conglomerate age, the age of conglomerates, the age of vast, international cartels, the age of fewer and fewer corporations controlling more and more of industry, the age of big labor...I don't see how all that can have any effect but to dramatize the eternal opposition between one man and the material forces against which he has to struggle. The importance of a government, a kind of government... well, let's say, a government dedicated to human freedom. One of the dominant feelings in our time is frequently said to be and undoubtedly is, the feeling that the human individual is powerless against the organizations of political and economic power. There's very little he can do about it. And that is, I suppose,

true. But the same forces that create that kind of situation very shortly creates situations in which the enormous importance of the freedom of the individual becomes clearer and clearer. There are more and more people suffering from the demands and the exigencies of an economic system made up of huge, giant elements. And their...I mean, George III, as an enemy, is a piker compared with the things that we're up against.

MOYERS: Well, that's at the heart of the frustration it seems to me. How does the individual, impinged upon by forces he cannot even define, acted upon by circumstances not of his making, done to by people he will never meet...how does he react? What does he do except wear his numbness?

MacLEISH: I think he reacts precisely by becoming, not one consumer or one tinsmith or one poet or one whatever...he reacts by becoming a part of a people which is aware of itself as a people. A people which is aware of itself as a people is not going to be put upon by enemies no matter how huge, how vast they may be.

It has very recently, as I think recent events demonstrated, has very recently been the case that a sense of the people as a people once recreated, as it was recreated unintentionally by Mr. Nixon's public relations people, is... will create a power against which conspiracies can't stand.

MOYERS: Is this what you have occasionally called, "the American theme", "the American proposition"? Is that what you mean by it?

MacLEISH: The American...what I mean by "the American proposition" is the proposition that comes out. In that great letter that Jefferson wrote to the people of the City of Washington a few weeks before he died, in the summer of 1826, the American proposition Jefferson was talking to...writing to the people of Washington. They'd asked him to come to their celebration of the 50th Anniversary--instead of which he and John Adams were going to die together on that day. He was writing them to say that he couldn't come, but that he wanted to write them about what he thought the Declaration was. And what comes out of it is the statement which, I think, is what I mean by the American proposition...that the right of self-government that is the probability, the likelihood, more than possibility...perhaps not probability, but the likelihood that a people can govern themselves is what the American proposition is. We decided to trust ourselves to govern ourselves. Nobody'd done it before. It certainly never happened in Athens for all the use of the word democracy or republic.

Let me read this letter of Jefferson's. Can I do that?

MOYERS: Yes, he wrote it in when? 1826?

MacLEISH: He wrote it in 1826.

MOYERS: Fifty years after the revolution and the Declaration.

MacLEISH: And it's really a wonderful document. He begins by referring to the fact that they've been kind enough to ask him to come and there's nothing he'd rather do than meet with those worthies who joined him in Philadelphia, but that unfortunately, he's ill and there are some things that you can't be master of your own soul about. And this is one of them.

And then he says that he...well, I think I better begin right there.

"I should indeed with peculiar delight have met and exchanged there congratulations personally with the small band, the remnant of that host of worthies who joined with us on that day in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country--between submission and the sword--and to enjoy with them the consola-

tory fact that our fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made."

And then he says this: "May it..." ...that is, that choice, the Declaration... "May it be to the world what I believe it will be...to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all...the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition that persuaded them to bind themselves and to assume the blessings and security of self-government."

MOYERS: If you could ask back to discuss these subjects with one member of the founding era, who would be your guest?

MacLEISH: Well, I'd be afraid to take on Tom Jefferson. I think John Adams probably, with whom I would disagree about many things but about as fascinating and lovable a man as ever lived; nevertheless, cantankerous though he was. Have you read that correspondence between Adams and Jefferson?

MOYERS: Yes, I was provoked to read it, paradoxically, by your latest radio play, The Great American...

MacLEISH: The Great American Fourth of July Parade.

MOYERS: And I went back in my library...

MacLEISH: This is fascinating, my golly...

MOYERS: What impresses you about it?

MacLEISH: What impresses me about it is the human warmth of John Adams. John Adams wins my heart. He's...where I disagree with him I understand entirely why he takes the attitude he does.

Jefferson, with all his intellectual and moral greatness, a little too high and a little too remote. It's hard to get closely in touch with him except at moments when, as in the letter to the citizens of Washington, you feel his weaknesses -- illness, approaching death and so forth. Then suddenly he comes down to my dimensions so I can get hold of him.

MOYERS: I just want to ask you to read to me...read to us...these two pages from...three pages, let's say, from The Great American Fourth of July Parade, which is your latest play about the Fourth of July in celebrating the Bicentennial. Would you just read me these pages?

MacLEISH: I would with great, great pleasure.

Adams says:

There must be marching on the Fourth of July.
There must be ceremony, pomp, parades, sports, games,
Shows, Guns, bonfires and illuminations.
Men must remember this day who they are
Or what they are will leave them.
Pride and purpose must go marching on this day.

Well, there's been a Fourth of July celebration and the master of the celebration is trying to get people to fall in in a parade and they won't do it. So you hear the bullhorn voice saying:

Fall in, fall in.

And Adams says:
Tell them, Mr. Jefferson.

And Jefferson says:
They would not listen to me if I did.

Adams says:
The whole great world has listened to you,
Mr. Jefferson.

Jefferson says:
Long ago. Who listens to a dead man?

Adams:
The living when his words still live.
You were remembered, Mr. Jefferson.

Jefferson:
Remembered, but not believed.

Adams:
Contemptuous voices jeering in the dark
Declare the journey of mankind is ended.
The truth, they say, is out now.
We're naked apes, disgusting animals,
Ignoble creatures,
But when they say this, they remember you.
And some few others on the road beside
Who put their trust where you did, in humanity,
They ask each other how those victories were won
That now without a gunshot are surrendered.
And they think of you.

Jefferson:
They should be thinking not of me or you or any of us.
They should be thinking how their country came to be,
What pulled it out of nothing in a wilderness,
The word that called it.

Adams:
The great act of independence.

Jefferson:
Revolution, Mr. Adams.
We in our time called it revolution.
Now they've forgotten what the revolution was.

Adams:
Our separation from the British crown.

Jefferson:
Much more than that.
Much more than that.
Read the word again, Sir.
Read the causes which impelled that separation.
We spell them out for all the world to see.
They were the causes of all men, mankind.

Adams:

Those were the reasons afterward,
Not the causes.

Jefferson:

Reasons that live afterwards become the causes.
Do not deny your triumph, Mr. Adams.
I see you standing in the stifling room
Speaking separation from the British crown
In words that rang the revolution of humanity.
We struck the bell, Sir, it was we.
Laboring through the summer for a common ground.
Capable of our Republic who first struck it.
Started the metal singing, felled the kings
Like crows across the continent of Europe.

Adams:

And filled their thrones with what?
Gray, faceless despots worse than any king.

Jefferson:

Because we had abandoned our great bell
Left it to other minded men
To ring for other purposes -- their own.
You and I first quarrelled on that question.

Adams:

First and last.

Jefferson:

No. At the last I wrote a letter
Not to you, but to the citizens of Washington.
Telling them what our Declaration was
What I believed it was.
You never read it,
You and I were gone when it saw print.
Shall I tell them what that letter said,
You and your midnight marchers,
If they'll listen?

Adams:

We had no choice but listen, any of us,
Letters or violins, if Thomas Jefferson
Starts the music, all men listen.

And then it goes on with the letter that he wrote to the citizens of Washington.

MOYERS: If you could look those men in the eye, how do you think they might respond if you ask them: How fares this experiment?

MacLEISH: I think John Adams, with his sense of...down-to-earth sense of reality, power, would think we were a pretty shoddy lot, and that some of our recent behavior had been pretty contemptible, but I think he would be very much impressed by the fact that the United States is an extremely powerful country and a very rich country. He'd be troubled by what troubles you and me.

Jefferson, I wonder. Jefferson was so fundamentally wise about human nature

that he might see the tragic events of the last ten years or more as incidents on the way. He might take great satisfaction in the increasing civilization of our public life, our concern for the civil rights of others, our attempt to help the civil rights of others. But I'm afraid that he'd be pretty sad at heart when he thought about the words of the Preamble to his Constitution.

But who am I to speak for Thomas Jefferson.

MOYERS: From his home in Conway, Massachusetts, this has been a conversation with Archibald MacLeish.

I'm Bill Moyers.

* * *

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

COPYRIGHT (c) 1976 BY EDUCATIONAL BROADCASTING CORPORATION.

THIS TRANSCRIPT MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED IN WHOLE OR IN PART
BY MIMEOGRAPH OR ANY OTHER MEANS, WITHOUT PERMISSION.