



# *the* PARIS REVIEW

## THE ART OF FICTION NO. 103 MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

I had an appointment with Marguerite Yourcenar on Saturday, November 14, 1987, at her hotel in Amsterdam. I was told that she had not arrived, that several people had been looking for her, including her driver, and that no one knew where she was. Further telephone calls to her home in Maine and to her publishers in Paris revealed that she had had a slight stroke and was recovering, and that there was no cause for concern. She did not recover, and died on December 18. She was eighty-four.

I had first interviewed her on April 11 in London and later sent her the typescript for corrections. It had come back with a good deal of amendment, carefully written on the text and on separate sheets of paper. I was grateful that she had taken so much trouble over it, but she was still not quite satisfied and wanted to see me again, go through it with me and make sure that everything was exactly as she intended. I was happily anticipating our meeting in Amsterdam, but it was not to be. The following introduction was written after our meeting in London. I have left it in the present tense.

Marguerite Yourcenar has the ardent imagination and clear, intense blue eyes of her Flemish ancestors. The rich, many colored

subtlety of her great novels—*Memoirs of Hadrian*, *The Abyss*, *Alexis*, *Coup de Grace*, and others—is reminiscent of their intricate tapestries, while her sublime mystical appreciation of nature and its beauty evokes the golden age of landscape painting in the low countries. For years she has been considered one of France's most distinguished and original writers; yet it was not until 1981, when she was the first woman ever to “join the Immortals” and be elected to the French Academy in the four hundred years of its existence, that she was discovered by the general public.

Marguerite Yourcenar was born in 1903 into a patrician Franco-Belgian family. (Yourcenar is an anagram of her real name *à particule*, de Crayencour.) Her mother died of puerperal fever shortly after her birth, and she was brought up by her father, a great reader and traveler, who taught her Latin and Greek and read the French classics with her. They lived in various European countries, and she learned English and Italian as well.

She published two volumes of poetry in her teens, “which are frankly *oeuvres de jeunesse* and never to be republished.” Her two novellas, *Alexis* and *Coup de Grâce*, appeared in 1929 and 1939 respectively (during which time she lived mostly in Greece) and won her critical acclaim. In 1938 she met Grace Frick in Paris, who later “admirably translated” three of her major books. When the war came in 1939 and she could not return to Greece, she was offered hospitality in the U.S. by Grace Frick, “since she had not the means of living in Paris.” To support herself, she took a teaching job at Sarah Lawrence College. She also began to write her masterpiece, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, which was published in 1954.

In 1950 Yourcenar and Frick bought a house in Mount Desert Island, off the coast of Maine, where they lived between long journeys abroad. Grace Frick died in 1979 after a long illness, but Marguerite Yourcenar still lives there, though she continues to travel extensively.

Her latest book, *Two Lives and a Dream*, was published recently in England, and she is now working on *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, completing the autobiographical triptych that began with

*Souvenirs pieux* and *Archives du nord*. She has just written a long essay on Borges—a lecture given recently at Harvard.

Marguerite Yourcenar's intellectual vigor and curiosity are still prodigious, despite age and an open-heart operation two years ago. She has just translated James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* and Yukio Mishima's *Five Modern No Plays* into French from the original English and Japanese, helped for the latter by her friend J. M. Shisagi, Mishima's executor. She was in London briefly for the publication of *Two Lives and a Dream*, and this interview took place at her hotel in Chelsea. She was elegantly dressed in black and white and spoke an exquisite French, with a markedly patrician accent, in a deep, mellifluous tone.

—*Shusha Guppy, 1988*

#### INTERVIEWER

You have just spent the day in Richmond; was it just to walk in the beautiful park there or for some other reason?

#### MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

Well, it had to do with the book I am writing at the moment, which is a book built entirely of memories, and in the present chapter I evoke the fourteen months I spent in England when I was twelve and we lived in Richmond. But where exactly I can't recall. I saw dozens of little houses in as many streets, all looking alike, with tiny gardens, but I couldn't tell which one was ours. It was during the first and second years of World War I, which, unlike the Second World War, did not drop from the sky in England—there were no bomb alerts or blitzes. I used to go for long walks in Richmond Park on fine days and to museums in London when it rained. I saw the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum and went to the Victoria and Albert frequently. I used to drop my sweet wrappings in a porcelain dragon there—I bet they're still there!

INTERVIEWER

What is your new book to be called?

YOURCENAR

The French title is *Quoi? L'Eternité*, which is from a poem of Rimbaud's—"Quoi? L'Eternité, elle est retrouvée." The book is the third volume of my memoirs. The other two are being translated into English at the moment. There are certain words one can't translate literally, and one has to change them. For example the first volume is called *Souvenirs pieux* in French, and I have translated it as *Dear Departed*, which conveys the same nuance of irony. The second volume is called *Archives du nord*, but "the north" in another language evokes a different image—in England "the north" refers to Manchester, or even Scotland; in Holland it is the Fresian Isles, which has nothing to do with the north of France. So I have changed it completely, and taken the first line of a Bob Dylan song—"Blowin' in the Wind." I quote the song inside as an epigraph, "How many roads must a man walk down / Before you can call him a man?" It is very beautiful, don't you think? At least it defines well my father's life, and many lives. But to come to the present volume, I don't think "Quoi? L'Eternité" would work in English, and we will have to find another title. Among the Elizabethan poets there must be quantities of quotations about eternity, so I think I might find something there.

INTERVIEWER

Let's go back to the beginning. You were very close to your father. He encouraged you to write and he published your first poems. It was a limited edition, and I believe is now unobtainable. What do you think of them in retrospect?

YOURCENAR

My father had them published at his own expense—a sort of compliment from him. He shouldn't have done it—they were not much good. I was only sixteen. I liked writing, but I had no liter-

ary ambitions. I had all these characters and stories in me, but I had hardly any knowledge of history and none of life to do anything with them. I could say that all my books were conceived by the time I was twenty, although they were not to be written for another thirty or forty years. But perhaps this is true of most writers—the emotional storage is done very early on.

INTERVIEWER

This relates to what you once said, that “books are not life, only its ashes.” Do you still believe that?

YOURCENAR

Yes, but books are also a way of learning to feel more acutely. Writing is a way of going to the depth of Being.

INTERVIEWER

From your father’s death, in 1929, to 1939 you only published two novellas, *Alexis* and *Coup de Grâce*, which you said were based on people you knew. Who were they?

YOURCENAR

My father loved an extraordinary woman, exceedingly free in her private life, yet of an almost heroic morality. She chose to remain with her husband though her real attraction was for a man who was *Alexis*. As for *Coup de Grâce*, I can now tell you that Sophie is very close to me at twenty, and Eric, the young man ardently attached to her own brother whom she falls in love with, was someone I knew, but political problems separated us. Of course one never knows how close fictional characters are to real people. At the beginning of my memoirs I say, “L’être que j’appelle moi”—the person I call myself—which means that I don’t know who I am. Does one ever?

INTERVIEWER

Next came *Memoirs of Hadrian*, which was immediately

hailed as a masterpiece and became a best-seller all over the world. Why did you choose the historical novel as a genre?

YOURCENAR

I have never written a historical novel in my life. I dislike most historical novels. I wrote a monologue about Hadrian's life, as it could have been seen by himself. I can point out that this *treatise-monologue* was a common literary genre of the period and that others besides Hadrian had done it. Hadrian is a very intelligent man, enriched by all the traditions of his time, while Zenon, the protagonist of *The Abyss* [*L'Oeuvre au noir*] is also very intelligent and in advance of his time—indeed of all other epochs too—and is defeated at the end. Nathanaël, the hero of the third panel, *Two Lives and a Dream*, is by contrast a simple, nearly uneducated man who dies at twenty-eight of tuberculosis. He is a sailor at first who becomes shipwrecked off the coast of Maine in America, marries a girl who dies of TB, travels back to England and Holland, marries a second time a woman who turns out to be a thief and a prostitute, and is finally taken up by a wealthy Dutch family. For the first time he comes into contact with culture—listens to music, looks at paintings, lives in luxury. But he keeps a clear head and sharp eyes, because he knows that while he is listening to music in the hospital, opposite his house, men and women are suffering and dying of disease. Eventually he is sent away to an island in the north and dies in peace, surrounded by wild animals and nature. The question is how far can one go without accepting any culture. The answer is, for Nathanaël, very far, through lucidity of mind and humility of heart.

INTERVIEWER

You met Grace Frick, who later translated *Hadrian*, in 1938. Did you move to the States straight away?

YOURCENAR

At first only for a few months. I was living in Greece then, in

Athens. I came to Paris for a visit and the war broke out. I could not go back to Greece and had no money to live in Paris. Grace, with infinite kindness, asked me to come to America for a while. I thought it would be for six months, but there I still am!

INTERVIEWER

What made you choose Mount Desert Island?

YOURCENAR

We had a friend who was a professor of theology at Yale. In 1940 he took a house in Maine while he was on sabbatical, and asked his friends to come and stay. Grace and I went to visit him, and thought that it would be nice to have a house in this still, then, peaceful island. Grace went all over the villages on horseback and became known as “the lady who is looking for a house”! There were luxury houses, sort of chalets for millionnaires, or village houses with no facilities, and nothing in between. We finally bought a simple house and modernized it, putting in central heating and a few other amenities. Did you know that Mount Desert was discovered by the French sailor and explorer Champlain? His ship developed some trouble and he had to stay there for a while to have it repaired. He named it Mount Desert, but alas it is now anything but deserted, and in summer boatloads of tourists pour in from everywhere.

INTERVIEWER

One striking aspect of your work is that nearly all your protagonists have been male homosexuals—Alexis, Eric, Hadrian, Zenon, Mishima. Why is it that you have never created a woman who would be an example of female sexual deviance?

YOURCENAR

I do not like the word *homosexual*, which I think is dangerous—for it enhances prejudice—and absurd. Say “gay” if you must. Anyway, homosexuality, as you call it, is not the same phe-

nomenon in a man as in a woman. Love for women in a woman is different from love for men in a man. I know a number of “gay” men, but relatively few openly “gay” women. But let us go back to a passage in *Hadrian* where he says that a man who *thinks*, who is engaged upon a philosophical problem or devising a theorem, is neither a man nor a woman, nor even human. He is something else. It is very rare that one could say that about a woman. It does happen, but very seldom; for example, the woman whom my father loved was very sensuous and also, in terms of her times, an “intellectual,” but the greatest element of her life was love, especially love for her husband. Even without reaching the high level of someone like Hadrian, one is in the same mental space, and it is unimportant whether one is a man or a woman. Can I say also that love between women interests me less, because I have never met with a great example of it.

#### INTERVIEWER

But there are writers, like Gertrude Stein and Colette, who have tried to illuminate female homosexuality.

#### YOURCENAR

I do not happen to like Colette and Gertrude Stein. The latter is completely foreign to me; Colette, in matters of eroticism, often falls to the level of a Parisian concierge. You look for an example of a woman who is in love with another woman, but *how* is she in love? Is it an ardent passion of a few months? Or a bond of friendship over a long period? Or something in between? When you are in love you're in love—the sex of the beloved does not matter very much. What matters is the feelings, emotions, relationships between people.

#### INTERVIEWER

Nonetheless, having portrayed Hadrian so eloquently, could you have done something similar on, say, Sappho? And you have been very discreet about your own life—with Grace Frick for example.

au moment où Dida reculait, le jalonne du café barrant  
le jali dormant sur le corridor. Sous sa coiffure  
bien lissée, elle était tout jâlée.

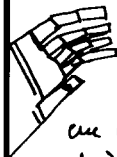
— Vous savez qui, Dida ? Soixia le jalonne  
du café qui Quelle soue, ~~qu'elle~~ t'arrête, Dida !  
Vous savez qui. On a tué, une lèsi ? Pour ce la  
A la suite... Je vous le dis comme un client au l'a  
del... et puant un peu une client reculé  
deux l'odeur, et y av ont assez temps  
et que la rue au del repue m au ce tout es  
ments

Au moment où Dida reculait, le jalonne  
du café fermait le jali dans le corridor. Sous sa  
Coiffure bien lissée, elle était tout jâlée :

— Quelles un lèsi Dida ? Vous savez qui ?  
On a tué une lèsi à la suite. — Un client au l'a del...

Pour sûr  
— En effet, ce n'est pas de temps pour la soixia

regard Dida qui sait bien que, les gens qui aiment,  
ils vont juché pour que l'après du temps si c'est fait.  
du chuffé



Mais je vous dis  
qu'on a tué une lèsi  
qui traîne à son exécution  
Le client a vu la fille  
dans la vitre de la voiture, eucus un jè, elle  
ceplait le nez — Et une femme encore... Et  
elle s'est débattue, il paraît, elle s'occasionait, et  
a fallu pour qu'on en finisse. Oh, elle est morte,  
ben sûr ; il paraît qu'on a vu des sang sur le plan.  
là-bas, jès

## YOURCENAR

We must set Sappho aside, since we know next to nothing about her. As for my own life—there are times when one must reveal certain things, because otherwise things could not be said with verisimilitude. For example, as I said, Sophie’s story in *Coup de Grâce* is based on a true incident. But I was always, as they say, “more intellectually oriented” than Sophie. And I was not raped by a Lithuanian sergeant, nor lodged in a ruined castle! As for my relationship with Grace Frick, I met her when we were both women of a certain age, and it went through different stages; first passionate friendship, then the usual story of two people living and traveling together for the sake of convenience and because they have common literary interests. During the last ten years of her life she was very ill. For the last eight years she couldn’t travel and that’s why I stayed in Maine during those winters. I tried to help her till the end, but she was no longer the center of my existence, and perhaps had never been. The same is true reciprocally, of course. But what is love? This species of ardor, of warmth, that propels one inexorably toward another being? Why give so much importance to the genitourinary system of people? It does not define a whole being, and it is not even erotically true. What matters, as I said, concerns emotions, relationships. But *whom* you fall in love with depends largely on chance.

## INTERVIEWER

Do you think the emphasis on the physical, sexual aspect of love is due partly to psychoanalysis? Perhaps this is what Anna Akhmatova meant when she said “Freud ruined literature.”

## YOURCENAR

Freud turns sexuality into a sort of metaphor, and a metaphor not quite worked out. It seems that he was a great innovator, being the first to speak of sexuality with frankness. But that does not make his theories acceptable. But he did not ruin literature—it was not in his power to do so, since literature is a very great thing. And

then no one thinks of Freud in terms of his time and circumstances. He came from a poor, orthodox Jewish family, living in a little provincial town. Naturally, as a young professor, he was struck by examples of pleasure in Vienna. As a result he saw the world from this double perspective.

INTERVIEWER

It is not so much his pioneering work as a doctor one questions now, but his philosophic-psychological extrapolations.

YOURCENAR

Quite so. He makes a number of extravagant extrapolations, starting from very limited, restricted, and small premises. Hence its attraction for the modern world. But he was the first man to speak about sexuality with sincerity and frankness, when it was still taboo. So everyone was fascinated. But we can now say to him: Thank you for your pioneering effort, but to us it is not a new venture, nor a total discovery. As a great psychologist I prefer Jung. He was sometimes strange, but there was genius in his madness. He was more a poet and had a larger perception of human nature. In his memoirs [*Memories, Dreams and Reflections*] you are often confronted with the mystery of life itself. For example, his mother hatred, so strong that a table breaks itself in two when they are together! A stunning parapsychological episode or a beautiful symbol?

INTERVIEWER

Is it because beyond a certain level the male-female dichotomy is irrelevant to you that you have not been interested in feminism? What has been your relationship to the feminist movement of the last few decades?

YOURCENAR

It does not interest me. I have a horror of such movements, because I think that an intelligent woman is worth an intelligent

man—if you can find any—and that a stupid woman is every bit as boring as her male counterpart. Human wickedness is almost equally distributed between the two sexes.

#### INTERVIEWER

Is that why you did not wish to be published by Virago Press in England?

#### YOURCENAR

I did not want to be published by them—what a *name!*—because they publish *only* women. It reminds one of ladies' compartments in nineteenth-century trains, or of a ghetto, or simply of those basements of restaurants where one is confronted by a door marked Women and another marked Men. But of course there are social differences, and geographical ones. The Muslim woman is somewhat more restricted. But even there, I have just spent the winter in Morocco, and when I saw women walking arm in arm, going to the *hammam* [public baths]—a place which is not at all like the Turkish baths one imagines through Ingres's pictures, and where any minute one risks one's neck, so slippery it is—well, those women often seem happier than their Parisian or New Yorker sisters. They get a lot out of their friendships. There was a Moghul princess called Jahanara, the daughter of Sultan Jahan, an admirable poet. I have found too little information concerning her, but she was initiated to Sufism by her brother, the admirable Prince Dara, assassinated in his thirties by his brother, the fanatic Aurangzarb. So you see even Muslim women could achieve eminence despite their circumstances, if they had it in them.

#### INTERVIEWER

Because Sufism liberates them from the rigid confines of orthodox Islam. There is another Sufi poetess, Rabe'a. She wrote most of her surviving poems with her blood when they opened her veins in a warm bath until she bled to death. At least that's the story. It

was a common punishment for heretics then, and Sufis were, on and off, considered heretical.

YOURCENAR

Jahanara was not murdered, but the Sufi master who had initiated her and her brother Dara was finally put to death.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to your work, your book *Fires* is a series of monologues written from the point of view of women . . .

YOURCENAR

The impersonal narrator, who writes the small linking sentences, is also evidently a woman, but her reflections on love are genderless. There are three monologues that concern men—Achilles, Petroclus, and Phedros—and with them we are in the world of *Alexis*. On the other hand Phedre, Antigone, Clytemnestra, Sappho, Lena, are women, ranging from supreme greatness, Antigone, to vulgarity, Clytemnestra.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned once that what you wished to do through your work was to revive *le sense du sacré*. It is a common complaint that today we have lost the sense of the sacred—even those who have greatly contributed to this state of affairs complain about it! Will you expand on it a bit more, in relation to your work?

YOURCENAR

The sacred is the very essence of life. To be aware of the sacred even as I am holding this glass is therefore essential. I mean this glass has a form, which is very beautiful, and which evokes the great mystery of void and plenitude that has haunted the Chinese for centuries. Inside, the glass can serve as a receptacle, for ambrosia or poison. What matters to the Taoists is the void. And glass was invented by someone we don't know. As I say in *The*

*Abyss*, when Zenon is lying down in his monk's cell, "the dead are far away and we can't reach them, nor even the living." Who made this table? If we tried to find out how every object around us came into being we would spend our lives doing it. Everything is too far away in the past, or mysteriously too close.

#### INTERVIEWER

To what do you attribute this loss of the sacred? Is it due, as some maintain, to the development of capitalism and its corollary, consumerism?

#### YOURCENAR

Certainly consumerism has a lot to answer for. One lives in a commercialized society against which one *must* struggle. But it is not easy. As soon as one is dealing with the media one becomes their victim. But have we really lost the sense of the sacred? I wonder! Because unfortunately in the past the sacred was intricately mixed with superstition, and people came to consider superstitious even that which was not. For example, peasants believed that it was better to sow the grain at full moon. But they were quite right; that is the moment when the sap rises, drawn by gravitation. What is frightening is the loss of the sacred in human, particularly sexual, relationships, because then no true union is possible.

#### INTERVIEWER

Perhaps this feeling for the sacred is the reason why you are particularly interested in ecology and conservation?

#### YOURCENAR

It is most important. The Dutch have kindly elected me to their academy, the Erasmus Institute for the Arts and Letters. Unlike its French counterpart it includes a substantial prize, half of which one has to donate to a charity. I gave mine to the World Wildlife Organization. They protested at first, saying that the institute was for the promotion of the arts and letters, not lions and

birds! But I said that I would have to refuse the prize unless I could make my gift, and they accepted. How sincere are the Green and Ecology parties, and how much of it is political posturing, I simply do not know. But something has to be done before it is too late. It is almost too late already, with the acid rain destroying Europe's forests and the defoliation of the tropical forests in South America.

#### INTERVIEWER

Talking about the academy, you were the first woman in four hundred years to be elected to the French academy. How did it happen? I ask this because traditionally one must make an application and go canvassing with other members. One reads heart-wrenching letters from past candidates, notably Baudelaire, begging the members to vote for them.

#### YOURCENAR

Poor Baudelaire! He had greatly suffered from the condemnation of some of his poems, *Les Fleurs du mal*, and membership in the academy for him could have been revenge. In my case Jean d'Ormesson wrote asking me if I would object to being nominated, without any visit or other effort on my part. I said no, finding it discourteous to refuse. I was wrong. There are a few serious and interesting academicians; there are also, and always have been, more mediocre choices. Furthermore, the academy, like the *Figaro*, where most academicians do write, represents now a more or less strongly rightist group. I am myself neither rightist nor leftist. I did refuse to wear the academy's uniform—my long black velvet skirt and cape were designed by St. Laurent. And of course I refused the customary gift of the sword. But I received a Hadrian coin from voluntary contributors.

#### INTERVIEWER

Since your election to the academy you have become much better known to the general public and lionized by the literary world. Do you mix with the Parisian literary society?

YOURCENAR

I do not know what “being lionized” means, and I dislike all literary worlds, because they represent false values. A few great works and a few great books are important. They are aside and apart from any “world” or “society.”

INTERVIEWER

I would like to go back again to the early days and talk about your influences. You have been compared to Gide by many people. Was he an influence? For example, they say that Nathanaël, the hero of your *Two Lives and a Dream*, is named after the one in Gide’s *Les Nourritures terrestres*. Is that true?

YOURCENAR

I don’t like Gide very much. I find him dry and sometimes superficial. I chose Nathanaël because it is a Puritan name, and he is a young Dutch sailor from a Puritan family. Other members of the family are called Lazarus or Eli for the same reason. They are Biblical names and have no connection with Gide’s book. We are very far from the state of happy inebriation presented by Gide in the *Nourritures*, and which is no longer possible in our time, in the face of so much madness and chaos.

INTERVIEWER

But *Alexis* has the form of a Gidian *récit* . . .

YOURCENAR

A *récit* in the form of a letter is an old literary French form. I have said that the gratitude young writers felt for Gide was, to a large extent, because of his use of classical prose forms. But why choose any one in particular? There are hundreds of great books in different languages by which we all are or should be influenced.

INTERVIEWER

Of course, but there are always certain affinities with various

writers. Who are they in your case? Baudelaire, Racine, the romantics?

YOURCENAR

Baudelaire certainly; and some of the romantics. The French middle ages much more, and certain poets of the seventeenth century, such as Ménard, “La Belle Vieille,” and many, many other poets, French and non-French. Racine up to a point, but he is such a unique case that no one can be compared to him.

INTERVIEWER

Except for *Britanicus* all his protagonists were women: Phedre, Berenice, Nathalie, Roxane, etcetera . . .

YOURCENAR

Proust had this idea that Racine’s Phedre could be identified with a man as well as a woman. But Racine’s Phedre is much more French than Greek—you will see it at once if you compare her to the Greek Phedre. Her passionate jealousy is a typical theme of French literature, just as it is in Proust. That is why even in Phedre, Racine *had* to find her a rival, Aricie, who is an insignificant character, like a bridal from a popular dress shop. In other words, love as possession, *against* someone. And that is prodigiously French. Spanish jealousy is quite different—it is real hatred, the despair of someone who has been deprived of his or her food. As for the Anglo-Saxon love, well, there is nothing more beautiful than Shakespeare’s sonnets, while German love has produced some wonderful poetry too.

INTERVIEWER

I have this theory that the French do not understand Baudelaire and never have. They speak of his rhetoric, yet he is the least rhetorical of poets. He writes like an Oriental poet—dare I say like a Persian poet?

YOURCENAR

Baudelaire is a sublime poet. But the French don't even understand Hugo, who is also a sublime poet. I have—as Malraux also did—taken titles from Hugo's verses, *Le Cerveau noir de piranèse* and others. Whenever I am passing by Place Vendôme in Paris I recall Hugo's poem in which he is thinking of Napoleon, wondering if he should prefer “la courbe d'Hannibal et l'angle d'Alexandre au carré de César.” A whole strategy contained in one line of alexandrine! Of course there are times when Hugo is bad and rhetorical—even great poets have their off days—but nonetheless he is prodigious.

INTERVIEWER

Is this what Gide meant when he said, “Victor Hugo, hélas”?

YOURCENAR

To have said *hélas* is proof of a certain smallness in Gide.

INTERVIEWER

He also rejected Proust's manuscript of *Swann's Way*, saying, “Here is the story of a little boy who can't go to sleep”!

YOURCENAR

We were talking about jealousy: Maybe Gide was jealous of Proust; or perhaps he honestly could not like the long and subjective beginning of the *Temps perdu*. He was not, as we are, cognizant of Proust's whole work.

INTERVIEWER

So who was a decisive influence on you in youth?

YOURCENAR

As I said in the preface to *Alexis*, at the time it was Rilke. But this business of influence is a tricky one. One reads thousands of books, of poets, modern and ancient, as one meets thousands of people. What remains of it all is hard to tell.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned modern poets. Which ones for example?

YOURCENAR

There is a Swedish poet whom I have never succeeded in introducing to my French friends, Gunnard Ekelof. He has written three little books called *Divans*, I suppose influenced by Persian poetry. And, of course, Borges, and some of Lorca's poems, and Pessoa, Apollinaire.

INTERVIEWER

Talking about Borges, what about other South American writers, the whole school of magical realism?

YOURCENAR

I don't like them—they are like factory products.

INTERVIEWER

What about the literature of your adopted country, the United States?

YOURCENAR

I'm afraid I haven't read much. I have read a lot of things unconnected with Western literature. At the moment I am reading a huge book by a Moroccan Sufi poet, books on ecology, sagas from Iceland, and so on.

INTERVIEWER

But surely you must have read writers like Henry James, Faulkner, Hemingway, Edith Wharton?

YOURCENAR

Some. There are great moments in Hemingway, for example "The Battler" or, even better, "The Killers," which is a masterpiece of the American short story. It is a tale of revenge in the under-

world, and it is excellent. Edith Wharton's short stories seem to me much better than her novels. *Ethan Frome*, for example, is the story of a peasant of New England. In it the protagonist, a woman of the world, puts herself in his place and describes the life of these people in winter, when all the roads are frozen, isolated. It is short and very beautiful. Faulkner brings with him the true horror of the South, the illiteracy and racism of poor whites. As for Henry James, the best definition is the one by Somerset Maugham, when he said that Henry James was an alpinist, equipped to conquer the Himalayas, and walked up Beaker Street! Henry James was crushed by his stifling milieu—his sister, his mother, even his brother who was a genius but of a more philosophical and professorial kind. James never told his own truth.

#### INTERVIEWER

You have just translated *The Amen Corner*, and I know that you admire James Baldwin and are a friend of his. What do you think of his work now?

#### YOURCENAR

Baldwin has written some admirable pages, but he does not have the courage to go to the end of his conclusions. He should have hit much harder. His life has been hard. He was one of nine children in Harlem, poor, a preacher at fifteen, a runaway at eighteen, working as a laborer, first in the army during the war and later in the street, earning barely enough to survive. Somehow he gets to Paris where he manages to get himself incarcerated for the crime of having no fixed address and no profession. He has a drink problem now, but many American writers have had problems with drinking; perhaps it is due to the puritanism that has reigned over the American soul for so long. But at the same time, when the Americans are generous, cordial, intelligent, they are somehow more so than the Europeans. I know at least five or six Americans like that.

INTERVIEWER

You are also interested in Japanese literature and your book on Mishima is considered one of the best essays on him. When did you get involved with Japan?

YOURCENAR

My interest in Japanese literature goes back to when I was about eighteen and first discovered it through certain books. I read Mishima in French when he first appeared and found some of his work very beautiful. Later I saw that a great deal of absurdities were written about him and decided to write my book in order to present a more genuine Mishima. Now they have even made a detestable film of his life. Mrs. Mishima went to Hollywood and tried to stop it, but in vain. Four years ago I started learning Japanese, and after a while with the help of a Japanese friend translated Mishima's *Five Modern No Plays* into French. They are beautiful.

INTERVIEWER

Traveling extensively as you do, how do you manage to write? Where do you find so much energy, and what is your work routine?

YOURCENAR

I write everywhere. I could write here, as I am talking to you. When in Maine or elsewhere, when I am traveling, I write wherever I am or whenever I can. Writing doesn't require too much energy—it is a relaxation and a joy.

INTERVIEWER

Looking back on your life, do you feel that you have had a "good" life, as the expression goes?

YOURCENAR

I don't know what a good life is. But how can one not be sad looking at the world around us at present? But there are also

moments when I feel—to use a military expression my father liked—that “it is all counted as leave.” *Tout ça compte dans le congé!* Happiness sometimes exists.

#### INTERVIEWER

You are also interested in Sufism, and are planning an essay on Jahanara. What attracts you to it? I am particularly interested because I come from that tradition.

#### YOURCENAR

It is a philosophy that deals with the divine as the essence of perfection, which is the friend, and which the Buddhists seek within themselves, knowing that it comes from themselves, that liberation is from within. But I can't say that I am a Buddhist or a Sufi—or a socialist. I don't belong to any doctrine in particular. But there are spiritual affinities.

#### INTERVIEWER

It seems crass to ask of someone as remarkably youthful and energetic as you are whether you ever think of death?

#### YOURCENAR

I think about it all the time. There are moments when I am tempted to believe that there is at least a part of the personality that survives, and others when I don't think so at all. I am tempted to see things as Honda does, in Mishima's last book, the one he finished the day he died. Honda, the principal character, realizes that he has been lucky enough to have loved four people, but that they were all the same person in different forms, in, if you like, successive reincarnations. The fifth time he has made a mistake and the error has cost him dearly. He realizes that the essence of these people is somewhere in the universe and that some day, perhaps in ten thousand years or more, he will find them again, in other forms, without even recognizing them. Of course, reincarnation here is only a word, one of the many possible words to stress a *cer-*

*tain* continuity. Certainly all the physical evidence points to our total annihilation, but if one also considers all the metaphysical *données*, one is tempted to say that it is not as simple as that.

