



INTERVIEW:

Marguerite

Marguerite

Yourcenar,

French Author,

Academician

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emperor. Her choice of subject is less surprising than it might at first seem. Having been trained in Greek and Latin by private tutors she felt at home in the classical world and all the more drawn to it by this sentence she found in Flaubert's correspondence: "Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone." Ultimately, Marguerite Yourcenar would "do, from within, the same work of reconstruction which the 19th century archaeologists (had) done from without."

Yet even though author and subject made a good match, 28 years were to pass before her self-assigned task was completed. Throughout this period her readings in the Greek and Roman classics remained nearly continuous, whereas her efforts at the writing table were fitful at best. Because it was her practice to destroy almost everything she wrote just as soon as she found it displeasing, she never had more than a few scraps to build on, or to sustain the hope that she actually did have a book in hand. Though she does not report how many manuscripts, whether partial or complete, she simply threw out, it is clear there must have been a fair number. Nevertheless she found the courage to begin work from scratch over and over again, despite years of blundering down blind alleys. Eventually, though, and perhaps inevitably, she scraped bottom. "From 1939 to 1948 the project was wholly abandoned. I thought of it at times, but with discouragement, and almost indifference, as one thinks of the impossible. And with something like shame for ever having ventured upon such an undertaking (*Reflections*, p.323)." It was during this period that she went to the length of burning her research notes: "They seemed to have become ... completely useless."

But then by chance this rumor of a would-be book returned to life in December 1948. While rooting about in a trunkful of half-forgotten belongings she hadn't seen in 10 years, she came upon "four or five typewritten sheets, the paper of which had turned yellow." Here was a fragment, indeed one of the very few, to have survived her ruthless rejections, and "from that moment there was no question but that this book must be taken up again,

whatever the cost." How many would dare to resume work at age 45 on a project first conceived at age 20 when repeated efforts during the intervening 25 years had led absolutely nowhere at all?

Philosophers of craft distinguish between the patience of waiting and the patience of doing. In writing *Memoirs of Hadrian* Marguerite Yourcenar demonstrated a rare capacity for patience of both kinds. While waiting she learned to discriminate between the vision of the book she might at long last write and her failed attempts to realize that vision which had to be discarded. By remaining clear about this distinction she managed to spare the baby. It was only the bath water that got thrown out. Endowed as well with the patience of doing, she never quit writing altogether, with the result that by the time she had matured to the degree her subject required, she had perfected a style exactly suited to her needs.

After nearly 60 years at the typewriter, Marguerite Yourcenar won unforeseen fame when in January 1981 she was elected to the Academie Francaise. She is the first woman to be so honored, and it redounds to the credit of her French peers that in breaking with a tradition of more than three hundred years' standing they could bring themselves to accept as one of their own a candidate who happened also to be an American citizen. Madame Yourcenar has lived in this country since the late 1930s, having been stranded here by the war. Though she writes only in French and primarily for a French audience, she has been translated by her companion, the late Grace Frick, so that American readers have ready access to her principal works. It remains for her adopted country to take due notice.

Since 1950 Madame Yourcenar has lived on Mt. Desert Island down east off the coast of Maine. For 31 years the local press had left her in peace, but her election to the Academie was thought to make good copy. Overnight she became every editor's first priority for an interview, and finding myself in Maine at the time I volunteered. From the first I had misgivings about the assignment because the editor was emphatic in professing his total lack of interest in anything to do with her work. What his readers would want to find out, he

# 3 GREAT REASONS . . .

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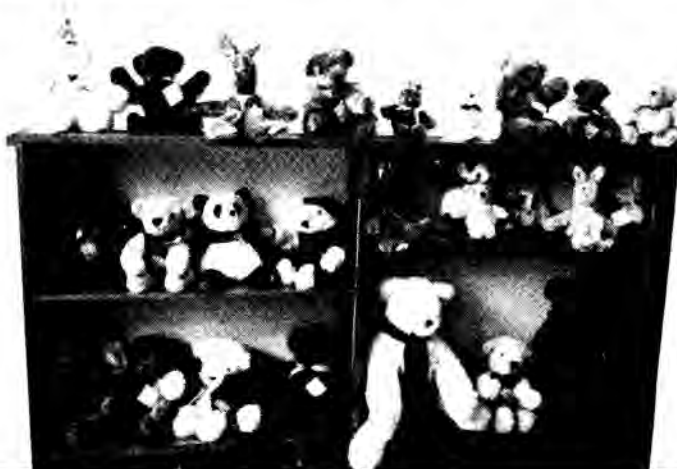
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warned, was the name of her dog and how her roses were doing. I went through with the interview nevertheless because *Memoirs of Hadrian* was a book of special importance to me, having served as a kind of preparation for the study of Montaigne. The opportunity to meet the author was not to be passed up, for there was reason to hope that an interview might yield a clue to the source of her exemplary patience. So I set out for Northeast Harbor.

Of all the villages on the mussel-bound coast of Maine, Northeast Harbor strikes me as being among the least likely to attract a writer of any kind, let alone a European as cerebral

as Marguerite Yourcenar. As summer colonies go, it is one of the most heavily moneyed, which in Maine is saying rather a lot, and during the season it teems with expensive Philadelphians, few of them much inclined toward ideas or books. Yet Northeast Harbor is home to Madame Yourcenar where she lives in a small white house which she calls "Petite Plaisance," the name originally given to a nearby island by the French explorer, Champlain. "You can live your own life here," she told me, her piercing eyes illuminating a thoroughly French face. "I like the privacy, but I also like living in a village. You can learn so much more

Continued on page 45

Continued from page 35

about people and human nature here – who's getting married, who's getting divorced, who's going to have a baby – than you can leading an upper crust existence in some big city." Possibly so, though it comforts me that I am not the only one from "away," as the Mainers put it, who finds the natives somewhat baffling. In a neighboring village Madame was once overheard to sigh, "I have not zee key to zee peepul."

What Marguerite Yourcenar has instead is zee key to the world of classical antiquity, and it is her seemingly total embrace of the Graeco-Roman view of life that turned out to be the clue I was seeking. We talked about her work, her travels, her election to the Academie, and so on, covering all the topics common to interviews of this sort. But months were to pass before I realized that along the way she had told me what I had most wanted to know. Having had no occasion to call on her since, I cannot say whether she would agree with my conjectures, but I am confident that she would not dismiss them out of hand.

Early in the interview I asked Madame Yourcenar whether she ever felt surprised at having spent more than half her adult life on an island off the coast of Maine, the only French writer of her generation, or perhaps of any other, to have met with that improbable fate. "Surprised?" said she. "Mais non. We don't like to admit how important it is, but everything is influenced by chance. Getting books written is a matter of chance." It struck me at first that this was an extraordinary remark for her to make, that her modesty was altogether excessive. But later I realized that she meant what she had said, and not only because it had indeed been a piece of luck that she should have found a fragment of manuscript in a half-forgotten trunk while looking for something else. Without that stimulus she might never have resumed work. Yet there still seemed reason to wonder why, given her demonstrated capacity for persevering labor, she should have been quite so ready to profess a respect for chance.

Toward the end of our conversation I asked how it happened that the first two or three chapters of *Memoirs* read

as if they might have been written by Montaigne. Flattery was not my intention. Anyone who cares to read these books side by side will soon note that the prevailing tone of *The Essays*, especially of the later ones, seems to reverberate through the opening chapters of *Memoirs*, and this arresting similarity of mood had hooked my curiosity. Madame Yourcenar was by no means displeased with this comparison, but being French through and through she assumed without hesitation that for *un Americain* Montaigne could not possibly be more than a mere name. She thereupon proceeded to sling me a lecture on the who and what of Montaigne, and on the whole she did rather well – a bit vague, perhaps, about some of the biographical detail, but it was nevertheless clear that she did know *The Essays*. Yet this familiarity, as it turns out, proves not to be the reason *Memoirs* is redolent of Montaigne. My question had simply been obtuse. In direct answer to it she explained: "We are both immersed in the classical world."

So that – obviously – was the connection. As a thoroughgoing classicist, like Montaigne before her, she had taken the Graeco-Roman view of life for her own, and central to that view is a respect for Fortune, or what she chose to call chance. This sentiment figures prominently in *The Essays*:

**G**ood and bad luck are in my opinion two sovereign powers. It is unwise to think that human wisdom can fill the role of Fortune. And vain is the undertaking of him who presumes to embrace both causes and consequences and to lead by the hand the progress of his affair ... I will say more, that even our wisdom and deliberation for the most part follow the lead of chance. My will and my reasoning are moved now in one way, now in another, and there are many of those movements that are directed without me. My reason has accidental impulses that change from day to day. (The Essays, III:8:713, Donald Frame trans.)

These passages should make it clear that the Fortune Montaigne learned to respect and trust had nothing to do with the superstitions of late Roman times. As the empire disintegrated, Fortune became a cult and the mindless, passive fatalism thus engendered gave her a bad name that was to last a thousand years until she was rehabilitated during the Renaissance. Montaigne and Marguerite Yourcenar concerned themselves with a much earlier period of Roman history, a time "when man stood alone," when it was necessary to confront the randomness of life without the comfort of belief in Divine Purpose and ultimate salvation, when the notion of Fate had not yet lapsed into fatalism. The Romans of that era, who were able to accept the demonstrable importance of Fortune without disavowing the individual's responsibility, were fond of the saying: Each man's character shapes his fortune. For her part Madame Yourcenar expresses the same view in her autobiographical ruminations, *With Open Eyes*: "I do not believe in an irrevocable, fore-ordained destiny: We change our destinies constantly as we make our way through life. Everything that we do affects our fate for better or worse."

Perhaps the surest, most direct way to affect fate is to accept the reality of it in the first place, to strive for a full awareness of Fortune and the influence of the random on human hopes and plans. Such acceptance, I would speculate, fosters patience of the kind that has sustained Marguerite Yourcenar in a very long literary career. The link is to be found in a paradox. The more wholeheartedly you acknowledge the importance of Fortune, the less you will expect of your own unaided efforts, and these lowered expectations will in turn become a source of perseverance. To assume instead that a desired outcome is and has to be entirely up to you can lead to swift and terminal discouragement. For if you alone are to determine the results of your efforts, you would probably be wise to abandon them the first time they fail. "When it comes to making a book," Madame Yourcenar observes, "you've got to know how to wait." The same lesson would apply to judge from her example, when it comes to making a life.