The PARIS REVIEW Interviews

Writers at Work

LAWRENCE DURRELL
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EZRA POUND ▪ ERNEST HEMINGWAY
ALDOUS HUXLEY ▪ ROBERT FROST
HENRY MILLER ▪ ROBERT LOWELL
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Edited by George Plimpton and
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SECOND SERIES

The Paris Review, founded in 1953 by a group of young Americans including Peter Matthiessen, Harold L. Humes, George Plimpton, Thomas Guinzburg, and Donald Hall, has survived for twenty-seven years—a rarity in the literary-magazine field, where publications traditionally last for a few issues and then cease. While the emphasis of *The Paris Review*'s editors was on publishing creative work rather than nonfiction (among writers who published their first short stories there were Philip Roth, Terry Southern, Evan S. Connell, Samuel Beckett), part of the magazine's success can be attributed to the public interest in its continuing series of interviews on the craft of writing. Reasoning that it would be preferable to replace the traditional scholarly essay on a given author's work with an interview conducted with the author himself, the editors found a form which attracted considerable comment—from the very first interview, with E. M. Forster, which appeared in the initial issue, in which the distinguished author, then considered the greatest novelist in the English language, divulged why he had not been able to complete a novel since 1926. Since that early interview the magazine has continued to complement its fiction and poetry selection with interviews from a wide range of literary personages, which in sum constitute an authentic and invaluable contribution to the literary history of the past few decades.

WRITERS AT WORK

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Introduction

UNLIKE the first collection of interviews from *The Paris Review*, all of which dealt entirely with novelists, this volume deals with several kinds of writers. There are at least five poets, Robert Frost, Eliot and Pound, Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, with essayists like Mary McCarthy who also writes novels, the humorist S. J. Perelman, and Henry Miller. They are individualists, one and all, diverse in their talents as in their kinds, but one generalization seems quite clear, that there is little difference any longer between the American mind and the European. When one thinks of the prewar world and the authors who were outstanding then, Rudyard Kipling, Henrik Ibsen, and Anatole France—all redolent of their countries and so unlike—most of the writers who have lived through the world wars seem to have been denationalized in quality and type. There is nothing local in their points of view, nothing in any way provincial. While they are unique in the outlook of each and the surroundings of their lives, they seem, in these well-prepared interviews, to represent the one world toward which the modern mind is aiming.

Where these writers spend their lives seems to be immaterial, Hemingway in Cuba, Aldous Huxley in California, Eliot in England, Lawrence Durrell in Cyprus and Greece. For everybody lives everywhere at present. But while the motives they exhibit are common to the whole Western world, there are still plenty of other differences among these individuals—for example, between Hemingway, so much a child of the twenties in Paris, and Katherine Anne Porter, who was in Mexico then. To her, everything in Paris in the twenties was "shallow, trivial, and silly" and

Scott Fitzgerald was anything but a great writer. She is happy rather to have been involved in the Obregón Revolution. Everyone was talking of the renaissance in Mexico, and she had a marvelous experience in the midst of that.

These writers all have intense convictions and high animal spirits, but after they had passed their adolescence and found their own direction they never belonged to any group. "You are more alone," Hemingway says, "because that is how you must work and the time is shorter all the time." Henry Miller is "against groups and sets and sects and cults and isms," and, always a lone wolf, he never met Gertrude Stein in Paris or any of the set that followed her. Not even a friend of George Orwell, who was "down and out in Paris" at about that time, Miller likes only what is alien and has felt an alien wherever he was, in Paris or at Big Sur. Finding America hostile, he has always had better contact with Europeans, and he feels that America is essentially against the artist who stands for individuality and creativeness. "America," he says, "is the most mechanized and robotized of countries," yet he feels "a hundred per cent American, and I know it more and more every day." Lawrence Durrell says he feels in England like a sort of refugee. Everyone there is worried to death about moral uplift and moral downfall, and everyone feels separated from the artist, whereas in France he feels "on a par with a good cheese or a bad one." That is why, he says, it is so vitally important to identify oneself more and more with Europe. "As for me, I have joined the Common Market, as it were." When Robert Frost was living in England, "my instinct," he says, "was not to belong to any gang," and he adds, "I don't 'belong' here, either." Yet Ezra Pound says, "A man who fits in his milieu, as Frost does, is to be considered a happy man." Pound himself, for whom Italy was disappointing when he returned there from St. Elizabeth's Hospital, has moments when he would "like very much to live in America." He feels "more American all the time," and he would like at least to spend a month or two a year in the United States.

While most of these writers had wished from the first to be writers—like Lawrence Durrell, "madly scribbling . . . since the age of eight"—they usually seem glad to talk of anything but the business of writing. Robert Lowell is the exception. He not only

revises "endlessly" but he likes to dwell on technique. On the other hand, Henry Miller says, "I know what I want to write about, but I'm not concerned too much with how I say it"; and Ezra Pound, who has replaced his interest in form with an interest in content, says, "The *what* is so much more important than *how*." Hemingway thinks it is "bad for a writer to talk about how he writes"; he feels that ideas on writing should remain unexpressed. One trait all these writers show is a great exactness of thought and speech but, whether they find writing difficult or easy, they prefer to discuss their subjects rather than their form. "I never think about form at all," Katherine Anne Porter says, nor has she ever taken or adopted a symbol. Henry Miller even feels that "It's bad to think . . . a writer shouldn't think too much," as if the process of cogitation inhibited the natural flow of feeling. "A writer is a man who has antennae, . . . knows how to hook up the currents which are in the atmosphere." He believes one should dive into the unconscious, follow one's impulses of the heart or the guts. He is still working on a project laid out in 1927 that covers everything he has done since then.

One might suppose that Marianne Moore and Robert Frost had little in common, and in fact on one matter they disagree totally. Marianne Moore is interested in mechanical things, in, as she puts it, machines in general, and one remembers the episode of the Ford Company and how Miss Moore was asked to find a name for the new car. Frost, on his part, actively dislikes machines, detests them as much as Willa Cather did, and he says that people "like to hear me say nasty things about machines." But both are equally interested in science, the "greatest adventure of man," says Frost, "the adventure of penetrating into matter, into the material universe." It seems to Marianne Moore that the poet and the scientist work analogously, that both are attentive to clues and strive for precision, though she says, "What I write could only be called poetry because there is no other category in which to put it." Frost is especially interested in astronomy. He is able to name twenty of his poems that have astronomy in them, and he says that a book on astronomy was one of the first he read when he began to read a book through. Henry Miller thinks that the scientists, not the artists, are at present ahead of their time. "The

artist is lagging behind," he says. "His imagination is not keeping pace with the men of science."

On the best time of day for writing, on politics, on teaching, several of these writers have interesting things to say. They agree that morning is best for work, although Henry Miller at one time wrote from midnight until dawn. Aldous Huxley works in the morning, three or four hours a day, while he writes everything many times over, and Hemingway writes, or wrote, early after the first light and continued usually until noon, when he went for a swim. "There is no one to disturb you," he says, "and it is cool or cold and you come to your work and warm as you write." Katherine Anne Porter, who works "whenever I'm let," used to do the day's housework and then write at night; "but I prefer," she says, "to get up very early," when there is perfect silence, and work "until the vein is out." This is the way she worked on *Ship of Fools* during the three years she spent in Connecticut. In fact, as compared with certain writers of the past, there is something oddly "normal" about these twentieth-century writers. They do not seem to depend on opium, as Coleridge and De Quincey did, or the fifty thousand cups of strong coffee that enabled Balzac to do his work, nor do they live, like Proust, in cork-lined bedrooms.

About teaching, for writers, there is a certain agreement that it makes them more cautious and makes them write less. Robert Lowell says, "It means a lot to me as a human being, though the danger is that it's much too close to what you're doing." Ezra Pound says, "A man's got to get his rent somehow," and Hemingway's main doubt is that it might limit one's growth in knowledge of the world. Eliot believes he would have been handicapped if he hadn't had to bother about earning a living. Exercising activities other than writing and reading prevented him from writing too much rather than concentrating on and perfecting smaller amounts. As for politics, Henry Miller feels the political world is foul and rotten, and about the work of politically minded writers Hemingway is sure that one must skip the politics when one reads them. But Mary McCarthy was deeply involved in politics at the time she was swept into the Trotskyite movement; and politics has been important in the life of Ezra Pound. Robert Lowell

thinks that social credit and Fascism were a tremendous gain to Pound; for even when they were bad beliefs, and sometimes they were terrible, they brought him closer to life. Hemingway thought that Pound should be released from St. Elizabeth's on an understanding by him to abstain from politics, and Robert Frost, who helped to have him released, thought that Pound was "*very* foolish in what he bet on." Pound himself, who says, "I may have been completely nuts," feels that he was not committing treason. He believed that he was fighting an "internal question of constitutional government." But most of these writers seem to be politically passive. In the atomic age, political issues have become at once too simple and too massive, beyond the scope of writers and literary thinking.

In these interviews there is much autobiography, an account of the meeting, for instance, between Pound and Frost in England. Pound wrote the first favorable review of Frost's work, and he gave Frost a lesson in jiu-jitsu at a restaurant in Soho. He grabbed Frost's hand, tipped backward, and threw Frost over his head. Pound had gone to London, he said, because he thought Yeats knew more about poetry than anybody else, and he spent his evenings with Yeats and his afternoons with Ford Madox Hueffer. His great friends were Gaudier-Brzeska and Hueffer, or Ford, until he heard that a young man was arriving from Harvard and presently fell in with T. S. Eliot. Pound's father was in charge of a government land office in Idaho, where his grandfather had built a railroad and where he spent his first eighteen months, but he had grown up in suburban Philadelphia. There his father was connected with the mint. Later, Pound felt that monetary reform was the key to good government and his interest in coinage had begun with his father's work. He had seen the smelting room and been told that he could take away a large bag of gold—if he could lift it. In England a Confucian, in contrast to Eliot, he won the disapproval of Wyndham Lewis, for Lewis said that Pound never noticed how wicked, what "S.O.B.'s," people were. "I wasn't interested," Pound says, "in the vices of my friends, but in their intelligence." Henry Miller, who began to write when he was working for the Western Union, tried to do a book on D. H. Lawrence, but after being in Lawrence's grip he became bewildered and

ceased to be able to place Lawrence amid all his contradictions. Miller loves Lewis Carroll and would give his right arm to have written Lewis Carroll's books. As for Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, who knew him well, quite agrees with Miller about the contradictions. In *The Plumed Serpent*, on one page, he glorifies the Indians with their "dark life of the blood," and later he damns the lazy natives like a British colonel of the days of Kipling. Huxley could not make out what Lawrence was driving at, but Huxley's first wife, a Belgian, who typed the manuscript of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, seemed to understand him. In fact, Lawrence died in her arms. But Lawrence had been profoundly shocked when, not knowing English well, she used in conversation some of his four-letter words.

There are odds and ends of autobiography that now and then bring these authors together. Henry Miller wrote *The Colossus of Maroussi* after he had visited Lawrence Durrell in Greece. Ralph Ellison learned from reading Hemingway how to shoot a bird on the wing, and there was a time when he and his brother hunted and sold game in Dayton for a living. The interviews read like good conversation, usually lively, often gay and always penetrating, in which skillfully thought out questions bring to the surface hidden depths, and the writers draw portraits of themselves. As a rule, these portraits strikingly confirm the impressions which the writers had already created. I think, as interviews, they are the best I have ever read, certainly the most pointed and the most revealing.

VAN WYCK BROOKS

1. Robert Frost

A regional poet who has achieved international stature, Robert Frost was born in San Francisco on March 26, 1874. His father, an editor, politician, and Democrat, had gone there to escape the Republican atmosphere of New England. Sympathizing with the Southern cause, he christened his son Robert Lee Frost. When the senior Frost died, young Robert returned with his mother to New England to live with his paternal grandfather in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Here he soon began, but with little encouragement, his life-long commitment to poetry. He attended Dartmouth but could not abide the academic routine. At twenty-two he entered Harvard, specializing in Latin and Greek during his two years there. He then went to live on a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, teaching, doing occasional work for a local newspaper, and continuing to write his poems. It was a trip to England, however, in 1912, which gave his literary career its decisive push forward. There his first two books were published—*A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*. When he returned to America in 1915, he was already well known, and his future as a poet and teacher was secure.

Mr. Frost received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry four times—in 1924, for *New Hampshire*; in 1931, for *Collected Poems*; in 1937, for *A Further Range*; and in 1943, for *A Witness Tree*. His latest collection, *In the Clearing*, was published in 1962.

More than any other quality in Frost, his individualism stood out. He spurned what he called "the necessary group." As in other areas of life, he believed "there are too many gangs, cliques, or coteries in poetry. Maybe that's one of the ways they have to manage it. But I'm a lone wolf."

Robert Frost died on January 29, 1963.

I only say it as worth thinking of 1
But loyalty in friendship and in love
In [illegible] lately there might be a different thing
From what they say it used to be O King.

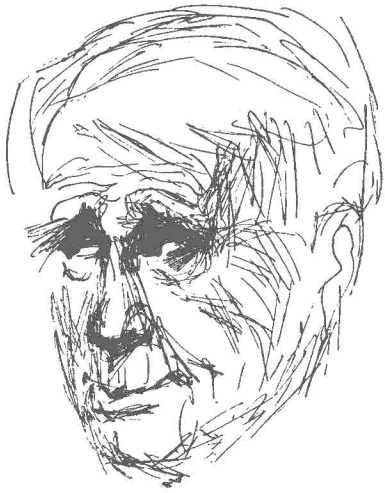
I do not like the way you stuff your eyes
When you say that, the King replies. 2
Stand up and say it." The Vizier stood up
So suddenly he overset his cup.

Never more dangerous than when affable
The King enjoys the moment to the full 4
He looks from face to face all down the board
To see with whom he has or hasn't scored.

The statesman stumbled: "I don't know who started
This argument. But would you call false-hearted
The one who from [illegible] faction 3
Gave an attachment up for an attraction?"
"You stand [illegible] right of extraction.
You won't [illegible] get down in any situation.
Just what are you preparing to forsake
If you can tell us so we stay awake."
The banqueters woke awake with fear
Of what was happening to the Vizier.
Their only comfort in the [illegible] thought
That they were not the traitors being caught

[illegible] That shocks 1

Manuscript page from an unpublished poem by Robert Frost.



HANS BECK

Robert Frost

Mr. Frost came into the front room of his house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, casually dressed, wearing high plaid slippers, offering greetings with a quiet, even diffident friendliness. But there was no mistaking the evidence of the enormous power of his personality. It makes you at once aware of the thick, compacted strength of his body, even now at eighty-six; it is apparent in his face, actually too alive and spontaneously expressive to be as ruggedly heroic as in his photographs.

The impression of massiveness, far exceeding his physical size, isn't separable from the public image he creates and preserves. That this image is invariably associated with popular conceptions of New England is no simple matter of his own geographical preferences. New England is of course evoked in the scenes and titles of many of his poems and, more importantly, in his Emersonian tendencies, including his habit of contradicting himself, his capacity to "unsay" through the sound of his voice what his words seem to assert. His special resemblance to New England,

however, is that he, like it, has managed to impose upon the world a wholly self-created image. It is not the critics who have defined him, it is Frost himself. He stood talking for a few minutes in the middle of the room, his remarkably ample, tousled white hair catching the late afternoon sun reflected off the snow in the road outside, and one wondered for a moment how he had managed over so long a life never to let his self-portrait be altered despite countless exposures to light less familiar and unintimidating. In the public world he has resisted countless chances to lose himself in some particular fashion, some movement, like the Georgians, or even in an area of his own work which, to certain critics or readers, happens for the moment to appear more exotically colorful than the whole. In one of the most revealing parts of this interview, he says of certain of his poems that he doesn't "want them out," the phrase itself, since all the poems involved have been published, offering an astonishing, even peculiar, evidence of the degree to which he feels in control of his poetic character. It indicates, too, his awareness that attempts to define him as a tragic philosophical poet of man and nature can be more constricting, because more painfully meaningful to him, than the simpler definitions they are designed to correct.

More specifically, he seemed at various points to find the most immediate threat to his freedom in the tape recorder. Naturally, for a man both voluble and often mischievous in his recollections, Frost did not like the idea of being stuck, as he necessarily would be, with attitudes expressed in two hours of conversation. As an aggravation of this, he knew that no transcript taken from the tape could catch the subtleties of voice which give life and point to many of his statements. At a pause in the interview, Mr. Robert O'Clair, a friend and colleague at Harvard who had agreed to sit in as a sort of witness, admitted that we knew very little about running a tape recorder. Frost, who'd moved from his chair to see its workings, readily agreed. "Yes, I noticed that," he laughed, "and I respect you for it," adding at once—and this is the point of the story—that "they," presumably the people "outside," "like