



The PARIS REVIEW Interviews

Writers

JEAN COCTEAU

BLAISE CENDRARS ■ ARTHUR MILLER

NORMAN MAILER ■ ALLEN GINSBERG

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS ■ SAUL BELLOW

EVELYN WAUGH ■ LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE

WILLIAM BURROUGHS ■ HAROLD PINTER

LILLIAN HELLMAN ■ EDWARD ALBEE

JAMES JONES

at Work

**Edited by George Plimpton
and introduced by Alfred Kazin**

3rd SERIES

Writers at Work



The *Paris Review* Interviews

THIRD SERIES

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Introduction

THE *Paris Review* interviews (of which this is the third selection in book form) have been unusually sensitive and adroit exercises in getting contemporary writers to reveal themselves. They have been the best recent examples of the biographical art of the profile. The classic interview, which Boswell and Eckermann practiced in order to write their respective books on Johnson and Goethe, is surely something else—a form of Wisdom Literature. It seeks a Lesson From The Master (traditionally no smaller man is worth interviewing), and in it the interviewer plays the role of disciple. His job is to put the Master's views on life into book form—the most notable recent example is the book that Lucien Price called *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*. Because he is usually dealing with a great thinker's comprehensive and universal philosophy, the many branches of one great tree, he will notice inconsistencies, will draw the Master out on fascinatingly unexpected topics, will provoke the Master into unpremeditated eloquence. The classic interview with a Great Man probably had its origins in religious discipleship, and the purest example of it is still Plato's *Dialogues*. What the interviewer really asks is: How Are We To Live?

A profile, by contrast, is a sketch; what used to be called a "character"—a personality is quickly built up before our eyes. It is not an intellectual biography, such as a book on a single man seeks to become; it is a close-up, a startlingly informative glance—usually sympathetic, and even when it is not openly so, the cov-

erage becomes a form of sympathy. A profile, by common understanding, is due someone currently important. The interview is our way of understanding his fame. It is not wisdom that we are trying to understand; it is exceptionality—in the case of a writer, his reputation as a writer, his hold on our imagination, means that for us he is like no one else. The interview becomes a way of getting the writer to document this exceptionality himself.

It is not required of the writer in these interviews that he be great and wise. We all know, we readers of contemporary literature, that our novelists and poets do not live better than we do. What is required is that the writer be gifted, which ever since the Romantic period has meant vividness, a heightened degree of involvement with himself, a sense of his particular gift or daemon. When we interview a gifted, vivid, intense, highly charged modern writer, we are really saying: What does it feel like to be this gifted? What's it like, day after day, living with a gift like yours? The writer is always glad to tell us. Montaigne, who began the modern habit of painstakingly examining his own thoughts, doubts, quandaries for immediate literary purposes, could not have been interviewed as Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, James Jones, and William Burroughs are here interviewed—he could not have cooperated. Although Montaigne regarded his consciousness as a problem, he thought that it was the human problem. Montaigne would not have imagined that a stranger, chatting with him at home, could isolate this consciousness by describing him in his room, at his work table. But the biographical close-up now satisfies us because we identify the power of art with the uniqueness of personality. Ever since the Romantic period, when the writer became the hero of his own books, a hero to his culture, a hero to himself, the writer has also been taken, not least by himself, as a man of unbounded exceptionality. Trying to cheer up Henry Adams in their old age, Henry James stressed the duty of cultivating one's own consciousness: "It's, I suppose, because I am that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility." This "finality" is so well established that by now a

writer's most trifling personal habits are precious to *everybody*. When a modern writer is interviewed in his study and invited to talk about his manner of life, he understands, under the helpfully flattering questions put to him, that he is being recognized as his ideal—a wholly individual artist-man, a unique force, a truly free man. In such an interview, the writer visibly expands to the truth about himself. Now he rejoices his soul in the fullness of his own idiosyncrasy—his giftedness. His work can hardly be covered in a short interview; only his approach is, and this is delightfully intermingled with himself.

The fascination of these contemporary interviews, for me, is that each brings vividly before us, as a person seemingly different, gifted with a more instinctive sense of freedom, a writer who can never be sure that his emotions, his habits, his childhood, his loves and enmities, are not crucial to his work. The modern writer is likely to feel that his life and his work speak for each other; when an interviewer gently presses him to tell more, he will gladly try, for in the writer's own mind clarity about a seemingly personal matter seems to advance that moral clarity which is tantamount to literary power. Power, technical and intellectual power, the power to shape words that open up new realities in the mind, is what writers live for. And since, in modern times, writers feel that this power is in themselves alone, one can see why the gifted writer is enthralled by his own experiences, is gripped by himself in ways that are of *technical* interest to the rest of us. There is always something professional and impersonal in a writer's concern with his own experience. Even his eloquence about it shows gratitude for what he can make of himself.

The *Paris Review* interviews have made the best profiles of contemporary writers because writers are so adept at portraying themselves. Writers have been interviewing themselves, in notebooks, diaries, and in the presence of their friends, most of their lives, and are enchanted to carry on in interviews that add to their confidence by eliciting further self-knowledge. Moreover, writers are so aware of other writers, are so much concerned with skill—which is an

instinct—that the shop talk in these interviews, too sparse and marginal to build a rounded philosophy of art in the style of Johnson or Goethe, is further characterization of the person being interviewed. Even the playwrights Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Arthur Miller, working with supposedly the most “objective” of literary forms, portray themselves here as dependent on their creative daemon, working catch-as-catch-can to be “true”—Pinter’s key word—to their immediate creative mood.

So it is the modern writer’s sense that he inhabits some mysterious power over his own life, that his gift and his life are really versions of each other, that his habits and beliefs occupy some mysterious center of creativity that is still not the same thing as “himself” but is his private god, his daemon, the mystery of his own creativity—this is the fascinating subject of these interviews. The interviewers are all really saying to these gifted writers: What’s it like being *You*? And the writer, equally fascinated, is saying: I can describe it all willingly—you can see how willingly!—but I don’t really know, for it is my Gift that is really *Me*, yet I can only describe this Gift allegorically, as if it were the same thing as a Person—for instance, *Me*!

However, in the interview with Allen Ginsberg, the writer says plainly that writing consists only in being oneself. Writing is a public art, but we live privately. The way to write—to write well, to reach new ground—is to break through this convention of privacy, and to talk to the reader as you talk to your friends. “We all talk among ourselves and we have common understandings, and we say anything we want to say, and we talk about our assholes, and we talk about our cocks . . . anybody tells one’s friends about that. So then—what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or your friends. . . .” This (like the whole Ginsberg interview) offers up the pure Transcendentalist or religious notion that literature is identical with sincerity, that we are all equally vessels of God’s

truth, but that only the poet-as-prophet has the vision to yield up what is in him. It has been my observation that this is notoriously unsafe doctrine for poets. Yet in his interview Ginsberg comes through as a singularly appealing person, and I now understand why he has become a kind of guru or spiritual authority to so many young people all over the world. He is always himself, and as himself is always before us, in his poetry and as a personal resistant to the big state and its heartless wars. How wonderful it must be, the reader thinks, to be as unself-conscious and radiantly confident as that! But the reader of these interviews is also likely to feel *that* about so wily a personality as Jean Cocteau, who talks about himself by talking about his friends. Cocteau invoking the freedom and audacity of Picasso is as charming a "personality" as Allen Ginsberg straightforwardly describing physical intimacies with his friends. In both cases, as with so many openly homosexual writers, there is an explicit reliance on the "difference," the exceptionality, as a wholly personal fact which honesty raises to creativity. As it happens, Cocteau makes this point by talking about his friend Marcel Proust. That is the point of the marvelous Proustian anecdote: "I beg of you, Jean, since you live in the rue d'Anjou in the same building with Mme. de Cheigné, of whom I've made the Duchesse de Guermantes; I entreat you to get her to read my book. . . ."

No proper writer in an interview of this type can afford to lie, for a kind of aristocratic self-approval, a sense of his own right and authentic power, is the blood that keeps him warm. But no writer can resist the invitation to explain himself further and further, to locate the myth, the imaginative setting, that keeps him in business. James Jones, who is obsessed with the "current of violence just under the surface," finds his necessary ideal in all those oddities, like Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity*, who can resist the tragic emphasis that the human race puts on "bravery . . . a horrible thing . . . left over from the animal world and we can't get rid of it." Saul Bellow praises Dreiser for being "rich in a kind of feeling which has been ruled off the grounds by contemporary writers—

the kind of feeling that every human being intuitively recognizes as primary. Dreiser has more open access to primary feelings than any American writer of the twentieth century." This leads Bellow to what he calls his internal prompter— ". . . a kind of readiness to record impressions arising from a source of which we know little." This prompter is Bellow's example of what the writer must depend on in order to be himself, and explains why, as a writer, "I seem to have the blind self-acceptance of the eccentric who can't conceive that his eccentricities are not clearly understood."

Norman Mailer, of course, finds his working myth in the writer's willingness to go the limit. Too often, he says, writers who lack the courage to risk the unknown settle for "craft." What are they afraid of? Of discovering the ignoble in oneself. As for himself, he cites the man who said he wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion, and mood available to him, and says he "was struck with this . . . because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. . . . By the time I'm done with writing I care about I usually have worked on it through the full gamut of my consciousness." This vision of the writer as an athlete of existentialism, a man who must above all be a hero to himself, stands in interesting contrast to Evelyn Waugh's ideal—the writer is someone simply obsessed with language. "I have no technical psychological interest. It is drama, speech, and events that interest me." Waugh, as is well known, found his necessary image of the writer in a kind of aristocratic dandyism that he wore as an actor might wear a costume or recite a set speech. How delightful it is to find Waugh asking the interviewer who had mentioned Edmund Wilson—up to *Brideshead Revisited* Wilson had been one of Waugh's greatest admirers—"Is he an American?" "Yes." "I don't think what they have to say is of much interest, do you? . . ."

William Burroughs, whose work habits sound as technically complicated as the adding machine his grandfather helped to develop, comes on here—at least in his opening remarks—as an

engineer of the pen, a calmly interested specialist in new processes. But the obsession that makes his work interesting reveals itself in his claims that his "cutups," the material he clips from newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and then mixes with his elaborate personal notes, offers us simultaneous perception of many different orders of reality. When Burroughs makes philosophic and scientific claims for his disorderly collections of data, we happily recognize, under the externally calm surface of the interview, the kind of inner frenzy that is his genius—and to which, in all of us, his books make an appeal. We are grateful to him for filling out our intuitive picture of him. It turns out that Burroughs has the same idea of himself—of the source of his power—that we do. When Evelyn Waugh arrives for his interview only to get into bed wearing a pair of white pajamas and smoking a cigar, we recognize with rapture that the comic genius behind *Decline and Fall*—a genius for small, deadly particulars—never left him in life. He always impersonated the value of tradition, and who, in an age that has seen modernism do its worst, can call him altogether mistaken? "Experiment? God forbid! Look at . . . Joyce. He started off writing very well, then you can watch him going mad with vanity. He ends up a lunatic."

The writers in these interviews usually offer their temperamental urges as their creative life stories. Yet the most remarkable interviews are often those in which the stuff of a writer's life is described but remains too deep for an interview. For this reason, my favorite interviews in this book are those with Blaise Cendrars and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Some of the Americans in this book are perhaps a little too eager to explain themselves. All that has ever really happened to them, one feels, is the experience of being writers. When they talk about themselves, these "selves" become sacred objects. As so often happens with Americans, the terror of failure hangs over them. They have had to train themselves somewhat harder than writers from older cultures do, for in America writers always start from themselves, and knowing the perils of this better than anyone, they have to prepare their position, to anticipate their

difficulties. This puts a further strain on the willed intelligence by which they work.

By contrast, Blaise Cendrars seems carelessly bountiful of everything, and recounts his life, his friends, his many countries and adventures simply as anecdote and observation, for the pleasure of talking about them. His interview makes an extraordinary impression on us who are saturated in literature: this is not merely a writer seeking to be a writer, this is a man who has lived. Encountering Cendrars' headlong directness, one recognizes the extraordinary simplicity of heart and boldness of mind, the natural love of life, freedom, chance, and experiment, that went to make up the great modern revolution, early in this century, on which we still live. Everything that was fresh, hopeful, radical, daring in the arts before 1914—and gave the illusion in the twenties that it would go on forever—can still be heard in the voice and pace of Blaise Cendrars as he is interviewed. The man gives himself. Writers, as he says, like to exaggerate the difficulties of writing in order “to make themselves sound interesting.” But writing is a privilege “compared with the lot of most people, who live like parts of a machine, who live only to keep the gears of society pointlessly turning.” The greatest danger for a writer is to fall victim to his own legend.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline was an extraordinary and terrifying presence in the twentieth-century novel. He was never altogether sane after suffering head wounds in the First World War, and by the Second, like other wounded and desperate French writers who had come to despair of history, he allied himself with the most evil forces in Europe in order to protest the cruelty and injustice that had always been under his eye when he practiced medicine in the slums of Paris. Céline was an amazingly powerful writer who when interviewed did not make very much of being a writer. He thought it enough for a man to tell a story; he must tell it in order to be released from life's order; only then can he die in peace. It is doubtful that Céline died in peace. But he was so strong and original a writer—surely he is the only genius of the

French novel since Proust—that when he tells his “story” the impact of his life experience becomes one of those blows which we suffer with gratitude. He describes his childhood in Paris—the mother, a lacemaker, made the family live on noodles because more pungent foods left odors in the lace—he touches on the First World War, on his doctoring. It is extraordinary how much, in these few pages, he says about the human condition. Politically, Céline was a maniac. Yet his gift for describing things as they are was great, and the compassion he shows in his books is striking. Still, he said (in another interview) that his books were defective, for “great literature is never personal, like that.” The “personal” is more and more the theme, the opportunity, the dilemma of contemporary literature. Rarely will one see the eloquence and the danger of the personal mode so clearly revealed as it is in these interviews.

ALFRED KAZIN

Contents

<i>Introduction by Alfred Kazin</i>	vii
1. WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS	3
2. BLAISE CENDRARS	31
3. JEAN COCTEAU	57
4. LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE	83
5. EVELYN WAUGH	103
6. LILLIAN HELLMAN	115
7. WILLIAM BURROUGHS	141
8. SAUL BELLOW	175
9. ARTHUR MILLER	197
10. JAMES JONES	231
11. NORMAN MAILER	251
12. ALLEN GINSBERG	279
13. EDWARD ALBEE	321
14. HAROLD PINTER	347

WRITERS AT WORK

Third Series



1. William Carlos Williams



William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, on September 17, 1883. After schooling in Geneva, Paris, and New York, he was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1906. He then did graduate work in pediatrics at the University of Leipzig. In 1910 he returned to Rutherford, where he practiced medicine until his retirement in 1951.

His first collection, *Poems* (1909), and those immediately following were strongly influenced by Ezra Pound (whom he had known in Pennsylvania and later in Europe). It was several years later that Williams developed his own style.

Among his many published volumes are *Collected Poems 1921-1931* (1934), *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935), *The Complete Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams 1909-1938* (1938), *Collected Later Poems* (1950), *Collected Earlier Poems* (1951), *The Desert Music* (1954), and *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). Most important, perhaps, is his "personal epic" poem, *Paterson*, which appeared in five stages (1946-1958). He wrote four novels: *A Voyage to Paganry* (1928), *White Mule* (1937), *In the Money* (1940), and *The Build-Up* (1952); and numerous books of nonfiction, most notably *In the American Grain* (1925), *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1951), and *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (1954). *Many Loves, and Other Plays: The Collected Plays of William Carlos Williams and The Farmers' Daughters*, short stories, appeared in 1961. *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* was published in 1957. In 1950 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and the same year won the National Book Award for poetry. He and Archibald MacLeish shared the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1952. Williams died in Rutherford in March 1963.

As Washington ~~add~~ to Hamilton
~~to~~ to Providence we'll say, he hated it
 of which he knew nothing and cared less
 and used it in his schemes - so
 founding the ^{try} founding which was to
 increase to be the wonder of the world
 in its day

which was to exceed his London on which he patterned it

(A key figure in the development)

If any one is important more important
 than the ^{- point of a dagger -} edge of a knife or a poem is: or an irrelevance of
 in the life of a people: see Da Da or the murders of a
 Staline

or a Li Po

or an obscure Montezuma

or a forgotten Socrates or Aristotle before the destruction
 of the library of Alexandria (as noted derisively by Berad Shaw)
 by fire in which the poems of Sappho were lost

and brings us (Alex was born out of wedlock)

illegitimately perversion ~~///~~ righted though that alone
 does not make a poet or a statesman

- Washington was a six feet four man with a weak voice and a slow
 mind which made it inconvenient for him to move fast - and so he
 stayed. He had a will bred in the slow woods so that when he
 moved the world moved out of his way.

Fragment of the continuation of Paterson