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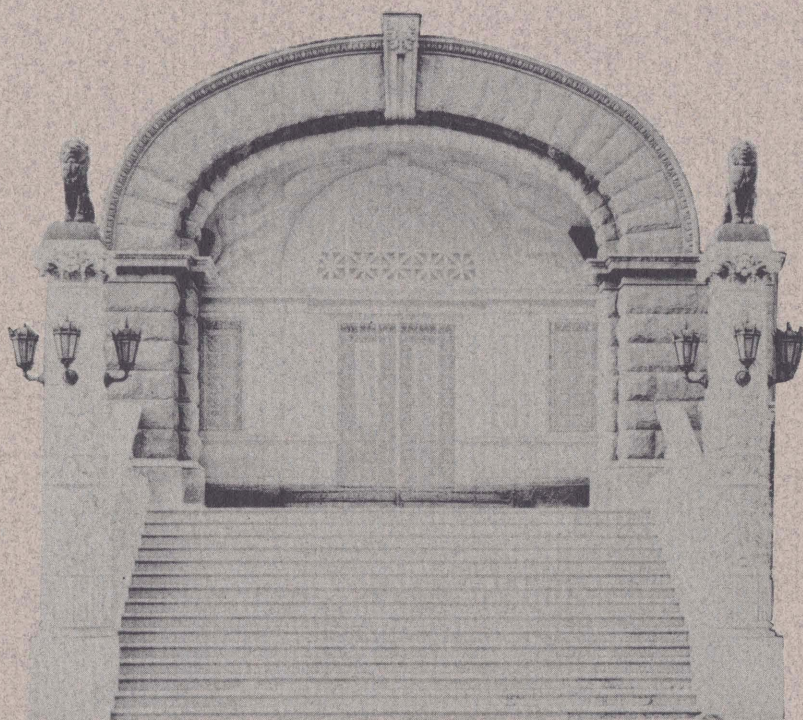
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Memories of Marguerite Yourcenar

BY MARY H. MARSHALL

This paper is an amplification of Professor Marshall's introductory remarks to her lecture "Marguerite Yourcenar: Her Mythical and Historical Imagination", which was given to the Syracuse University Library Associates on 20 February 1990. At the end the reader will find responses to additional specific interview questions, as well as transcribed selections from a few Yourcenar–Marshall letters. Because of her friendship with Professor Marshall, Marguerite Yourcenar gave to the Syracuse University Library several early inscribed editions of her works.

Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–1987), the first woman ever elected to the Académie Française, lived in the United States for forty-eight years, and I knew her for this whole period. We were good friends, though I saw her rarely. I first met her in 1937, when she came to this country for a visit, and became her friend through our friend in common, Grace Frick, sometime in 1939, when Marguerite Yourcenar arrived here to take up residence. I had known Grace Frick in the Yale Graduate School when she was working there on a doctorate in English, and I, who had finished earlier, was in and out of New Haven on various research leaves from the college where I was teaching. As the World War broke out, Grace Frick invited Marguerite Yourcenar to this country, providing her a base, and from that time they lived together. All I remember of first meeting Marguerite, in that shabby little Orange Street apartment in New Haven, was the image of an attractive dark-browed young French woman, with a light accent, which she never lost—and an immediate impression of charm, intelligence, and very blue eyes.

My acquaintance with them ripened in the 1940s when they lived in New York and then in Hartford, while I was much in New Haven on sabbatical leave and living on research grants. We were all of the same age, with many literary and historical interests in common. From 1942 and for several years, Marguerite Yourcenar taught French

and art history at Sarah Lawrence, while Grace Frick taught English at Barnard and then at a junior college in Hartford. During the 1940s, when they lived first briefly in an apartment in Morningside Heights, New York, and then in West Hartford, I visited them several times, and Marguerite Yourcenar occasionally came to New Haven, to use the Yale library. Once on my invitation she came to hear a lecture by Professor Gustave Cohen, a rather flamboyant exile, whose seminar in French medieval drama I was attending. I was impressed by the shining French formal courtesy of her congratulations to the speaker—a glimpse of another world to me.

In that time of our early friendship, I knew nothing of Marguerite Yourcenar's early life and publications, except that I gathered (largely from Grace) that she had travelled much and had lived in Greece and Italy—in a villa on Capri in the summer of 1939. Much later I learned more of her youth and the development of her ideas, particularly from the three volumes of family and social history: *Souvenirs pieux* (1974), *Archives du nord* (1977), and the posthumous volume, *Quoi? L'Eternité* (1988). The limitations of my command of French meant that the first time I read her earlier novels, *Alexis* (1929) and *Le Coup de grace* (1939), it was as through a glass darkly, a state not conducive to extended literary discussion with the author. But happily, from that time, she had her publisher Gallimard send me almost all of her books as they came out, and I came to know her work far better.

At that time, Marguerite Yourcenar felt bitterly cut off from any outlet for her writing. Having spent many years developing her French style, she felt that she could not write in English with the same control or power. Though she did not complain, her early period in the United States was a difficult time of adaptation. I remember that she felt muzzled—having already published several books, but no longer having a publisher, no longer able to publish substantially in French. Compared to her previous work, she was now earning her living in a rather dull way. But I was hardly made aware of all that. We laughed and we ate, and talked little of large and serious things. We pored over pictures of Greek sculpture, over Panofsky's *Dürer*, and perhaps a folio of Piranesi.

The 1940s were hard for all European exiles. They were filled with grief as the news of destruction poured in. Marguerite bore the special pain of being cut off from any French publisher and audience.

In spite of her excellent knowledge of English, she felt that having developed her particular style in French, she could not draw on her full creative energy in English. Her long-held project of writing about the Roman emperor Hadrian (died A.D. 138) was put in abeyance, until its miraculous revival in 1948, when some of her old books and manuscripts were returned to her from Switzerland. She then embarked upon the concentrated research and effort of creation that produced in 1951 her *Memoirs of Hadrian*.

During the war years almost her only outlet for an occasional short piece was a journal published in Argentina for exiled French writers, *Les Lettres françaises*, edited by Roger Caillois. By chance it was Roger Caillois's chair in the Académie Française to which she succeeded in 1981, and her inaugural address dealt with his work.

These wartime six or eight years were also the only ones in her life when she was relatively poor. A major alleviation to the bleakness of city living was the friendship with two dear English professor friends of mine, who taught at Hunter College and were both of distinguished mind and sensibility—Katherine Gatch and Marion Witt. Like Grace Frick, Katherine Gatch was a Wellesley graduate, as well as a Yale Ph.D., and they may already have known each other. These friends had a car, and from time to time would drive Marguerite Yourcenar and Grace Frick on jaunts into the country. I well remember hearing how entranced Marguerite was by a field of wild flowers. These friendships enriched all the rest of our lives, for the five of us kept in touch at least several times a year.

In 1950 when her earlier publications started to sell again, Marguerite (with Grace, who also had some money) was able to buy a little house, Petite Plaisance, in Northeast Harbor, Maine, where she lived for the rest of her life. The French found this exotically unworldly—to live on L'Île des Monts-Déserts! It sounded close to the Indian wilderness. But actually, Northeast Harbor is a nice little New England village, with pleasant inhabitants, interesting Maine neighbors, and then in summer, floods of people from more distant horizons. A near summer neighbor, for instance, and friend, was Samuel Eliot Morison. It was far from being totally out of the world, and it suited her well. When an interviewer, Matthieu Galey (in Marguerite Yourcenar's *With Open Eyes: Conversations with Matthieu Galey*), once asked, "Why did you choose this? Was it purification?", she answered, "No, simplification". She lived the life of the mind,



Marguerite Yourcenar in her Petite Plaisance office, ca. 1955.
Courtesy of the Estate of Marguerite Yourcenar.

studying and working with the refreshment of beautiful natural surroundings and warm neighborliness. It was ideal for her work, and with a fair amount of ease she could get to the libraries of Bowdoin and Harvard and Yale.

She was highly discriminating, of course, and disciplined in work habit. In Maine she customarily went to her desk immediately after breakfast. Always courteous, she managed somehow to remain aloof from social summer inhabitants, accepting no luncheon engagements. As her novels became more famous, Grace Frick wrote me of encroachments on Marguerite's time, such as persistent requests for interviews (sometimes from people too ill-prepared for discernment or profit) or for advice and commentary on dissertations about her work. Some interviews she gave gladly. Once a French television team stayed for over a week, and there were long work-periods with her later translators. Her correspondence was enormous. Of necessity, to preserve herself, she became more selective in her responses.

She was a passionate traveller and usually travelled two or three months a year, though never by air. As a young woman she had travelled widely, at first with her father, then on her own or with friends. She had lived much abroad, especially in Greece and Italy. There was always money, however diminished, for travel, for in seeing the world she found an infinite source of stimulation and refreshment. One of the heroes in her novels said about his travels that he thought it stupid not to make the tour of one's prison. She herself quoted "Hamlet": "Denmark's a prison. . . . Then is the world one", suggesting (in various contexts) that the way out lies in looking at things as they are, undeceived and with eyes open. That candid vision was one of her distinctions.

She was one of the most intelligent and erudite persons I have ever known, and delightful company. At the age of thirty-five or so, when I first knew her, she was vivid, lively, energetic, and beautifully dressed. In her later life, she abjured fashion and became progressively heavy-bodied. Her hair was cut short. Yet she had a sense of her own style, wore loose dark trousers and tunics, or robes like a blanket, great engulfing capes, a white scarf or jabot—things of that sort. Always with a style, but never a fashionable style.

Her learning included an exact knowledge and appreciation of the full range of Greek and Latin literature—that in itself a great accomplishment. When in 1948 she started to write the *Memoirs of Had-*

rian, she realized that she had been reading attentively almost all the literature and philosophy in Latin and Greek that Hadrian himself would have known. She knew French literature, of course. She knew English literature, too, and knew it well. I remember her alluding to various plays of Shakespeare and other Elizabethans, and she had read widely in all the major European languages. Late in her life, at the time she was writing about Yukio Mishima, she studied Japanese. She was fascinated with Chinese and Japanese literature and even wrote an extra episode for the eleventh-century *Tale of Genji*. Having a strong bent toward mysticism, she studied the religious treatises, epics, and poems of India, to the extent that she wrote about them in various aspects, and even practised their meditative techniques. She treasured amusing and strange folk tales from esoteric literatures, as well as the Greek myths, and wrote her own versions of them, in tales and plays. Profoundly moved by Negro spirituals, she published a collection of her own translations of them with commentary and sponsored the issue of the phonographic album, *Blues et gospels* (1964).

She delighted in simple people and simple things. All her life long she made and kept devoted friends, of many kinds. She enjoyed talking with the workmen who came to do repairs, or with artists and scholars and writers, fellow bird-watchers and ecologists, and soul singers. She visited James Baldwin in the south of France and he came to see her in her home. Jorge Luis Borges she interviewed for her last major article, which is published in *En Pèlerin et en étranger*. In her later life she called the charming secretary Jean Lunt and other close friends and helpers in Northeast Harbor her children. She liked to cook, and did so daily on a wood stove, and with great respect for pure ingredients. She detested artificial preservatives, all of the familiar modern adulterations. In that crowded little kitchen, she kneaded her own dough, baked her own bread. Like her Emperor Hadrian, she said that anything one did three times a day for a lifetime deserved thought and care. She enjoyed tradition and for Epiphany—Kings' Day—always baked a cake with a coin in it.

Marguerite's passion for animals was part of her extended sensitivity to countless forms of life. Among the usual ecological and humane causes that she sponsored was, delightfully, a home in France for worn-out workhorses. She was keenly sensitive to nature, to the whole natural world, to growing things and landscape, to birds and

animals. When she was eleven years old, in 1914, on the last refugee steamer leaving the Belgian coast for England, she had had the indelible experience of seeing a school of dolphins leaping out of the sea in great arcs of freedom. Later, she put those feelings into words. "This animal grace [allégresse] belonged to a world purer and more divine than the one where men made men suffer." She was a passionate ecologist, filled with dismay at all the cruelty, and the envi-



Marguerite Yourcenar in her Petite Plaisance kitchen, November 1979.
Photo: Jean-Pierre Laffont/SYGMA.

ronmental pollution and destruction of our time. She always had a dog. She told me of one, called Monsieur, which she had named after the magic dog of the sixteenth-century necromancer Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim. That little black dog was supposed by many to be Satan himself, or at least a demon, and was politely addressed as Monsieur, so as not to offend the evil power. Marguerite Yourcenar's last dog was named Zoë, *life*.

She was the product of a very European culture, and the child of old established families of France—French Flanders—and Belgium. Her sense of the past, as both underlying and existing in the present, was nurtured in an old country that had been fought over for hundreds, even thousands, of years—by Celts, Romans, Gauls, Burgundians, English, Spanish, French, and Germans. Her forebears were of the upper-bourgeoisie and minor noblesse. Her mother was Belgian, Fernande de Cartier de Marchienne, and her father was French, Michel de Crayencour. 'Yourcenar' is a pen name, made by a kind of anagram of Crayencour, later to be legally assumed. It amused Marguerite that the older Flemish family name was Cleenewerck—the same kind of thing we have in the English 'Doolittle'. Like many old families with property, her people had taken their name from their property—Cleenewerck de Crayencour, reduced later to de Crayencour. They lived near the town Bailleul, not far from Armentières and Ypres, in northwestern France, and they wintered in Lille. The family seat, 'Mont Noir', was destroyed in World War I.

Marguerite's mother died just after her birth. Her widowed father took her with her nurses to the family house. Her earliest years were spent under the jurisdiction of a rigid, greedy grandmother, a woman detested by both her son and her unloved granddaughter. Actually, like many children of the rich, Marguerite grew up mostly with servants. In after years, she felt that she had learned an enormous amount from the servants' hall, the *salle des gens*, where she heard every kind of legend and wild tale, obscenity, gossip from the earthy life going on below stairs, and where she found warmer friends than in such of her family as her much older step-brother. From the time she was quite small, her father took her regularly, with her nurses, to the Riviera and on other travels.

Having been born a Catholic, she had the luck of a bit of Catholic instruction from the good sisters in an infant school. In that culture, her imagination was fed with stories, images, and symbols. She loved

the dressing up for First Communion, or for a St. John's Day celebration, or as St. Elizabeth of Hungary. She dwelt in the midst of a still vital mythology, where the servants believed that a well of St. Apolline had the healing powers to cure toothache. She was moved by the carved figures in a Provençal crèche, and most deeply moved by another figure of Christ, tragically alone. We sometimes talked of the imaginative stories of saints in the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*. She very early lost all faith in God, who allowed cruelty to animals, and injustice—a realization that, along with the war, crashed down on her when she was very young. She had a Catholic sensibility without Catholic belief. Recognizing that in later life she had moved into a spirituality more Eastern than specifically Christian, I once asked her if she had ever definitely withdrawn from the Catholic Church. Her startled "No!" taught me how deep those roots were—the result of religious training, tradition, and perhaps too, of caste.

Her sense of myth and her sense of history matured together. One of the things that always struck me was that she knew every great picture I had ever even heard of, knew them fully, exactly, and with vivid response. When she was still very young—perhaps nine or ten, and living with her father in Paris, she went often to the Cluny Museum, where she saw the Roman baths and the medieval unicorn tapestries. She remembered feeling there a sense of history for the first time—a sense of all those layers beneath the feet. Also, she went constantly to the Louvre, where she awoke to what she called the dream of history—the world made up of everyone who had ever lived in the past. She said that if one loved life, one must love the past, for there is so much more of life in the past than in the present. In the one year that she and her father spent together in England, living in Putney just outside London, they went often into the city to the museums. Here again, her historical sense was stimulated, notably by the medieval tombs in Westminster Abbey. A show of Meštrović sculpture impressed her greatly and inspired her later tales of Prince Marko, the legendary hero of the South Slavs.

She loved religious festivals and ritual. She said and wrote that they gave her a sense of the sacred, that they opened a capacity for mystical intuition, a feeling that the very structure of reality is permeated by the sacred. Similarly, a myth to her was a vehicle for expressing humanity's constant closeness to the eternal, incorporat-

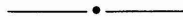
ing the great truths which go beyond us and which we need in order to live.

Her father, Michel de Crayencour, the central figure of her youth, had no specific intellectual interests, but he had good literary taste, and delighted in English literature. He taught her Latin when she was ten, and started her on Greek when she was twelve and already reading widely. In her teens they read the great nineteenth-century novels together, especially the English and the Russian. She had tutors, but I think never went to school except infant school, nor did she attend a university. At the age of sixteen she passed the examination for the baccalauréat in classics at Nice.

Her father was an *homme du monde* in both senses, that is, he was a member of good society in the French sense, and he was a man who had “been about” in the English sense. He was a compulsive gambler and a man who loved women. There was always a mistress: sometimes Marguerite liked them, sometimes she didn’t. One she adored and he adored too, all his life long, but that one refused to marry him. He was a free spirit, to whom nothing human was alien. Late in her life, in her posthumously published *Quoi? L’Eternité*, she wrote that, at the age of twenty and troubled in spirit, she had told him of concern about a young man friend who seemed different from the others. Her father’s unshocked and matter-of-fact acceptance of homosexuality as part of life, as unremarkable as a turning of footsteps in one direction or another, lifted whatever psychological burden she had felt about her own sexual orientation. The implication was that love is love, though its expression may vary, and that carnal warmth (his phrase) is a general need. His only advice was to guard against a tendency to dramatize life. In the same passage, she again made mention of her father’s acceptance of life in an account of his conversation with Egon de Reval, the homosexual husband of Jeanne, the woman whom Michel had always loved, but who remained loyal to that difficult husband. Encouraged by her father’s character and attitudes, Marguerite Yourcenar used these materials in her novel *Alexis* (1929), drawing on her own little story, and on the sad, protracted experience of Egon and Jeanne. “In both cases,” she wrote, “Michel had tried to calm a troubled spirit or sensibility”. This is probably the most intimate disclosure in all her work.

She was a reserved and poised woman, of patrician breeding, lively in conversation, but not at all one to talk about her personal life, nor to write directly about it either, except in brief glimpses, chiefly

of her youth. In her third and unfinished volume of family history, she had planned to spend only the final fifty pages on her own personal history from the age of twenty-five. When she was inducted into the French Academy in 1981, the first woman ever to have been so elected, Marguerite Yourcenar, who had been something of a recluse, became suddenly a celebrity. But her intellectual stance remained just the same; she was utterly unimpressed by adulation. She had refused to make the obligatory visits to secure votes for election, and she also refused to adapt the green and gold uniform of the academicians. Instead, not without a sense of drama, she had her costume made by Yves Saint-Laurent. The French are always French! In black, a great black velvet robe, with a white hood and stole, she made a stunning contrast. Nothing could have been more eye-catching amid the green and gold. In the tiered chamber, photographs show Giscard d'Estaing seated below the academicians, more or less at her feet—a fact which, as journalists have noted, might be symbolic of the respect in France for literature.



Interviewer: *Grace Frick seems to have played a very important role in Marguerite Yourcenar's life and success. Can you tell us more about what sort of a person she was?*

Grace Frick, with whom Marguerite Yourcenar spent forty years of her life, was the kindest and most generous of women, with a slightly offbeat intelligence—a bit eccentric, more than a bit compulsive. She loved literature, was interested in problems of style, and willing, as Marguerite Yourcenar wrote, to discuss matters of phrasing again and again, with total concentration. She had great physical energy, and was a strong swimmer, swimming recklessly far out to sea, I remember. She became Marguerite Yourcenar's fine translator and also her agent in dealing with professional matters of scheduling and correspondence as well as the many practical matters of household. She was Marguerite Yourcenar's buffer state, in fact, until her health failed in the 1970s.

Grace Frick had grown up in St. Louis, and after Wellesley, she did graduate work in English at Yale, but did not complete a dissertation. She taught English briefly at Barnard and at Hartford, where she also served as dean, but by 1951 had given up such efforts in order to move to Maine with Marguerite. She had found someone

worth a lifetime's devotion, and lived to serve. Marguerite Yourcenar cherished Grace's integrity and affection, and trusted Grace's ear for language. Marguerite, of course, knew English very well, and always collaborated with her translators. Grace knew French well, but I have heard was reluctant to speak it more than necessary.

They had met in Paris in the 1930s, when both were living in the old Hotel Wagram on the Rue de Rivoli. Grace was there to look after a cousin, a member of a French religious order, who was dying of tuberculosis. Marguerite Yourcenar joined Grace and some other American friends on a vacation trip, and they became friends. When the war broke out, Grace invited Marguerite to come to her in America.

It was Grace, not Marguerite, who informed friends of new honors that came to the writer. They had their little private or neighborly celebrations with champagne, as when in 1974 Marguerite received the Grand Prix National des Lettres for the ensemble of her work. She was pleased to receive this prize at the same time as Alexander Calder received the Grand Prix in art.

Grace Frick died of Hodgkin's disease in 1979, after a long and atrociously painful illness, during which Marguerite took care of her with devotion. Even when she was really too ill to work, Grace insisted on a protracted struggle to finish her translation of *L'Oeuvre au noir* (1968), which finally appeared as *The Abyss* in 1974.

I visited them in Northeast Harbor two or three times, once in 1971 when I was a visiting professor at Colby College, and again in 1973 when Colby College gave Marguerite Yourcenar an honorary degree. Through the later 1970s Grace Frick's ill health precluded visits. Before she died it was a satisfaction to her to learn that Marguerite Yourcenar's election in 1980 to the French Academy was likely.

I was unable to attend that inauguration on 21 January 1981, or her publisher's presentation on the day before of a gold coin of Hadrian, toward which many of her friends contributed. In the summer of 1983, a friend, Deirdre Wilson, brought her to visit me in my Vermont summer home, and that was the last time I saw her.

Interviewer: *How, particularly when living in Maine, did Marguerite Yourcenar go about finding the research sources she needed for her historical novels?*

She had lost to the Nazis her collection of sixteenth-century editions of the classics, but in this country she acquired a substantial working library (which included some survivals of her pre-war collection), and used the libraries of Yale, Bowdoin, and Harvard (where her papers are now deposited), as well as the Bangor Theological Library. For her sixteenth-century novel *The Abyss*, besides many historical studies of the Low Countries of that period, she also made great use of family and local archives of her own ancestors in French Flanders and in Belgium. These supplied her with much specific information, which she used in other tales too, even to some family names like Adriansen and Cleenewerck. For the *Memoirs of Hadrian*, her reading was wide-ranging in the historical sources, including the unreliable but necessary *Historia Augusta*, which she analyzed in an essay in *The Dark Brain of Piranesi*. Since she had read almost all the Greek and Latin literature and philosophy that Hadrian could have read, she was extraordinarily qualified to recreate his mental world. In both of the novels mentioned, she created by imaginative concentration a sense of the mental contents of her protagonists, of their thought and feelings, using a language fitted to the subject, allowing her character no unhistorical concepts or vocabulary, and yet by these scrupulous means, giving a sense of the relation of the past and the present. She does something as remarkable in *Un Homme Obscur*, in creating the inner world of a simple unreflective sixteenth-century artisan as he was blown by chance from one strange adventure to another, from the Old World to the New and back again.

Travel provided her with unlimited intellectual stimulation. From the 1950s into the 1970s, when Grace Frick's health failed, they travelled several months a year. There were the immobilized years of Grace's suffering, and then in the 1980s, more travels with Jerry Wilson. Postcards came to me from delightful places like Tintern Abbey; Hadrian's Wall, and Hadrian's villa at Tivoli; from Bruges, where the invented hero of *The Abyss* had lived in the sixteenth century, and where Marguerite herself on an earlier visit had walked to decide on what street he might have lived; from Montpellier, where the medical faculty did her special honor for her portrait of that Renaissance physician and free spirit. There were postcards too from Burgos, Greece, Morocco, Kyoto, and Kenya, and pictures of Belle Epoque scenes and costumes, of miniatures from medieval illuminated manuscripts, and so on.

Interviewer: *Can you describe their house in Northeast Harbor?*

The house in Northeast Harbor was small and white, with crowded bookcases in every room. Several Piranesis were hung on the walls, including two views of Hadrian's villa at Tivoli. And I remember a striking bust of Marguerite Yourcenar by Malvina Hoffman. There were two small comfortable living rooms, and behind one of them, the workroom, which contained double desks—Marguerite's desk and facing it, Grace Frick's—an arrangement that facilitated frequent consultation. All of the translations of Marguerite's work were done with the author's collaboration. Upstairs there were three bedrooms—the house was too small for more than one guest at a time. Sometimes guests were put up at a local inn. The small and purposefully cluttered kitchen was a delight, with pots on the wall, fruit and vegetables in a bowl, a wood stove and a two-burner gas or electric stove, a little table, a chair or two, a cushion for the dog.

In the years when I visited them, they had no car or television. Grace could drive, and occasionally they rented a car for special needs, or hired some sort of taxi—not always easy in a small village.

Interviewer: *Did Marguerite Yourcenar have a sense of humor? What was her conversation like?*

Marguerite Yourcenar had a sense of irony rather than of humor. Not that she lacked humor. And she had great capacity for enjoyment, for keen pleasure in the beauty of the world, and in companionship. But her habit of mind was grave and ironic. She was delightful to talk with, whatever the subject—books and writers and artists, or domestic trivia. In later life, her public image may have appeared sibylline, but there was no self-importance about her.

An exile of two great wars, like most sensitive Europeans who had had that destructive experience, and with her own profound feeling for history, she had a tragic sense of life. As Joseph Epstein wrote (*Commentary*, August 1982), she was serious about serious things. She had the personal qualities that *Le Monde* saw in her inaugural address: lucidity, compassion, poetry, and wisdom.

Interviewer: *Can you tell us about Marguerite's letterwriting, and about your correspondence and relationship with her?*

Through the years much of whatever correspondence we maintained was carried on by Grace Frick. Most of my communications

from Marguerite Yourcenar were only fleetingly personal beyond ordinary doings and health until late in our lives, in times of loss—in her exhausted desolation after Grace's death; during her recovery from a bad accident in Nairobi in 1983; and after the death of Jerry Wilson, the gifted young man who was the dear friend and travelling companion of her later life. But over nearly fifty years, in brief notes and Christmas cards and inscriptions in her books, she touched on our common interests, if only by allusion—Greek antiquity, medieval art and architecture, delight in special places, in Villon, Molière, Proust, Ionesco, Bulgakov. She usually wrote to me in English, sometimes shifting into French. Her notes were sometimes typed, but were more usually in her beautiful handwriting. And there would be phone conversations two or three times a year.

The following is literally transcribed from a letter that she wrote to me from Hartford. It deals chiefly with the matter of her new appointment at Sarah Lawrence, which several of us had fostered. A fellow Yale Ph.D., Helen McMaster, was teaching there, and Sarah Lawrence is a college willing to recognize high ability without university degrees.

20 July 1942

Dear Mary,

Many thanks for your kind letter to which I did not answer at once, as I was hoping to see you in New-Haven at the end of the week. I went there, and passed Saturday and Sunday with Valetta, and I tried all the time to find a free moment to 'phone you but Valetta was not very well, and I thought better to stay with her all the time. I came back today in the early morning, rather overpowered by the heat, but having greatly enjoyed my visit, with the only reservation that I did not succeed in seeing you. My cold is much better, but I am not yet restored to complete strength. Nevertheless, I have been working lately with some consistency and some result.

I have received to-day the announcement of my appointment to the Sarah Lawrence post. I am really very pleased, as it seems to clarify (financially) the whole of next year, as

well as permitting me to stay here and to go on with my life as it is. I do hope also that this, commuting from Hartford to New-York will allow me to see more often the friends I have there and from whom I have this year been rather separated. I will write to Helen McMaster to give her my thanks; I am afraid at the beginning I will often tend to turn to her as an invaluable adviser in many matters.

You do not tell me how you are, nor if you are having either some good period of work, or some rest, or both at once, which would be an ideal, and not impossible combination. The College seems to be going better, and Grace is therefore comparatively more rested.

I have been working a great deal lately at re-learning Modern Greek, with surprising good results. A lovely feeling, like water flowing again in dry channels.

Dear Mary, I do hope you will from now on worry less about at least one of your friends; I am sure I own in a great proportion this new arrangement to you, and been indebted to you is a lovely thought. We are going to visit friends these two next week-ends. Could you be induced to choose the third to come to Hartford?

With much love from both of us,
Marguerite Yourcenar

At a time near this, after we had been talking about Greece, where she had lived and I had spent six happy archaeological weeks, I sent her a book of photographs, including one of a Cretan calf drinking from an ancient sarcophagus, that moved her greatly. She wrote back as follows:

549 PROSPECT AVENUE
WEST HARTFORD, CONN.

Dear Mary,

The book and photographs arrived yesterday and made me at once terribly happy—and a little sad also—I called Grace all the time—she was doing “papers” To have her admired also, and when I arrived at the picture of the Cretan calf drinking from the ancient sarcophagus, it was nearly to much

549 PROSPECT AVENUE
WEST HARTFORD, CONN.

In the book, there is a quotation
from Thucydides which I feel
I ought to try to express on the
minds of the students:

"For we are lovers of security, yet
without extravagance, and lovers
of wisdom, yet without weakness."

I want to send this alone,
but I will wait, as I can
see Grace will want to
add a few lines.

Yours most sincerely

Marguerite

A page from Marguerite Yourcenar's July 1942 letter about the Cretan calf.
Courtesy of Mary Marshall.

for me. How sad now is the beauty of the world—but how happy we were to be in such way acquainted with it—it is an experience of a thing given—then taken away—that I do feel you and I both share.

The note-book is most precious—and I even prefer your

photos to that of the book. The Sicilian "clichés" are superb. I rush at once to see if the fallen warrior was there. Grace thinks it is perhaps an Amazon.

I am anxious to show the note-book to the girl students, but I will not let it go from my hands, as I cannot trust their carefulness enough. Can you spare it still for a month or so? I am infinitely touched by the fact you thought of lending it to me.

In the book, there is a quotation from Thucydides which I feel I ought to try to impress on the minds of the students:

"For we are lovers of beauty, yet without extravagance, and lovers of wisdom, yet without meanness."

I want to send this at once, but I will wait, as I am sure Grace will want to add a few lines.

Yours most sincerely
Marguerite

Beneath is an excerpt from a particularly expressive letter, dated 16 June 1944, when she and Grace Frick had rented a really primitive cottage in Somesville on Mount Desert Island, before they bought Petite Plaisance. Besides showing her joy in the simple life, it also contains an interesting comment on her play "Electra", written that same year, and her novel *Le Coup de grace*. Grace was away, and Marguerite hated to stay alone.

HYSOM COTTAGE
SOMESVILLE, MOUNT DESERT
MAINE

. . . Have a little maid from a near-by farm coming every day from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., while I am alone: she help washing the dishes and "breeming" ("breeming" is an English word of my invention, and a very good one I think; but she does not "breem" well) and her presence prevents me to dissolve entirely into the magic of night, weeds, and torrent. Rather indeed like the presence of a dog, in a pleasant sense. I can

see her now though the window, sitting under the porch and pounding on an orange she intends to suck, with the ardent possessiveness of a young dog with a bone.

I am working hard, having nearly completed my interpretation of the third and last play I intend to include in my book: ELECTRA. I am pleased with it; and amused also by the fact that ELECTRA under my hands begins to be another COUP DE GRACE. For one does always the same thing. I also read a lot of Homer, and am incredibly thrilled by the eternal actuality of his conception of war.

Bayeux and Caen destroyed. But at least Rome has been saved. The tragedy of the farmer looking at his farm burning, and asking himself if at least this or that building will be spared, we have lived through it for four years now, and should be accustomed.

Life here is divinely simple: I produce pies and bread from a wood stove, wash my clothes in the brook, go and gather wood, and marvel at the beauty of the wild irises and lilies-of-the-valley along the water. You must see them some day.

I am sending your letter to Grace. This is only intended to tell you to come for a week-end later on if you can.

Love from,
Marguerite