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the PARIS REVIEW

Toni Morrison, The Art of Fiction No. 134

Interviewed by Elissa Schappell, with additional material from Claudia Brodsky Lacour

Toni Morrison detests being called a “poetic writer.” She seems to think that the attention that has been paid to the lyricism of her work marginalizes her talent and denies her stories their power and resonance. As one of the few novelists whose work is both popular and critically acclaimed, she can afford the luxury of choosing what praise to accept. But she does not reject all classifications, and, in fact, embraces the title “black woman writer.” Her ability to transform individuals into forces and idiosyncrasies into inevitabilities has led some critics to call her the “D. H. Lawrence of the black psyche.” She is also a master of the public novel, examining the relationships between the races and sexes and the struggle between civilization and nature, while at the same time combining myth and the fantastic with a deep political sensitivity.

We talked with Morrison one summer Sunday afternoon on the lush campus of Princeton University. The interview took place in her office, which is decorated with a large Helen Frankenthaler print, pen-and-ink drawings an architect did of all the houses that appear in her work, photographs, a few framed book-jacket covers, and an apology note to her from Hemingway—a forgery meant as a joke. On her desk is a blue glass teacup emblazoned with the likeness of Shirley Temple filled with the number two pencils that she uses to write her first drafts. Jade plants sit in a window and a few more potted plants hang above. A coffeemaker and cups are at the ready. Despite the high ceilings, the big desk, and the high-backed black rocking chairs, the room had the warm feeling of a kitchen, maybe because talking to Morrison about writing is the intimate kind of conversation that often seems to happen in kitchens; or perhaps it was the fact that as our energy started flagging she magically produced mugs of cranberry juice. We felt that she had allowed us to enter into a sanctuary, and that, however subtly, she was completely in control of the situation.

Outside, high canopies of oak leaves filtered the sunlight, dappling her white office with pools of yellowy light. Morrison sat behind her big desk, which despite her apologies for the “disorder” appeared well organized. Stacks of books and piles of paper resided on a painted bench set against the wall. She is smaller than one might imagine, and her hair, gray and silver, is woven into thin steel-colored braids that hang just at shoulder length. Occasionally during the interview Morrison let her sonorous, deep voice break into rumbling laughter and punctuated certain statements with a flat smack of her hand on the desktop. At a moment’s notice she can switch from raging about violence in the United States to gleefully skewering the hosts of the trash TV talk shows through which she confesses to channel surfing sometimes late in the afternoon if her work is done.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that you begin to write before dawn. Did this habit begin for practical reasons, or was the early morning an especially fruitful time for you?

TONI MORRISON

Writing before dawn began as a necessity—I had small children when I first began to write and I needed to use the time before they said, Mama—and that was always around five in the morning. Many years later, after I stopped working at Random House, I just stayed at home for a couple of years. I discovered things about myself I had never thought about before. At first I didn’t know when I wanted to eat, because I had always eaten when it was lunchtime or dinnertime or breakfast time. Work and the children had driven all of my habits . . . I didn’t know the weekday sounds of my own house; it all made me feel a little giddy.

I was involved in writing *Beloved* at that time—this was in 1983—and eventually I realized that I was clearer-headed, more confident and generally more intelligent in the morning. The habit of getting up early, which I had formed when the children were young, now became my choice. I am not very bright or very witty or very inventive after the sun goes down.

Recently I was talking to a writer who described something she did whenever she moved to her writing table. I don’t remember exactly what the gesture was—there is something on her desk that she touches before she hits the computer keyboard—but we began to talk about little rituals that one goes through before beginning to write. I, at first, thought I didn’t have a ritual, but then I remembered that I always get up and make a cup of coffee while it is still dark—it must be dark—and then I drink the coffee and watch the light come. And she said, Well, that’s a ritual. And I realized that for me this ritual comprises my preparation to enter a space that I can only call nonsecular . . . Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process. For me, light is the signal in the transition. It’s not being *in* the light, it’s being there *before it arrives*. It enables me, in some sense.

I tell my students one of the most important things they need to know is when they are their best, creatively. They need to ask themselves, What does the ideal room look like? Is there music? Is there silence? Is there chaos outside or is there serenity outside? What do I need in order to release my imagination?

INTERVIEWER

What about your writing routine?

MORRISON

I have an ideal writing routine that I've never experienced, which is to have, say, nine uninterrupted days when I wouldn't have to leave the house or take phone calls. And to have the space—a space where I have huge tables. I end up with this much space [*she indicates a small square spot on her desk*] everywhere I am, and I can't beat my way out of it. I am reminded of that tiny desk that Emily Dickinson wrote on and I chuckle when I think, Sweet thing, there she was. But that is all any of us have: just this small space and no matter what the filing system or how often you clear it out—life, documents, letters, requests, invitations, invoices just keep going back in. I am not able to write regularly. I have never been able to do that—mostly because I have always had a nine-to-five job. I had to write either in between those hours, hurriedly, or spend a lot of weekend and predawn time.

INTERVIEWER

Could you write after work?

MORRISON

That was difficult. I've tried to overcome not having orderly spaces by substituting compulsion for discipline, so that when something is urgently there, urgently seen or understood, or the metaphor was powerful enough, then I would move everything aside and write for sustained periods of time. I'm talking to you about getting the first draft.

INTERVIEWER

You have to do it straight through?

MORRISON

I do. I don't think it's a law.

INTERVIEWER

Could you write on the bottom of a shoe while riding on a train like Robert Frost? Could you write on an airplane?

MORRISON

Sometimes something that I was having some trouble with falls into place, a word sequence, say, so I've written on scraps of paper, in hotels on hotel stationery, in automobiles. *If* it arrives you *know*. If you know it *really* has come, then you *have* to put it down.

INTERVIEWER

What is the physical act of writing like for you?

MORRISON

I write with a pencil.

INTERVIEWER

Would you ever work on a word processor?

MORRISON

Oh, I do that also, but that is much later when everything is put together. I type that into a computer and then I begin to revise. But everything I write for the first time is written with a pencil, maybe a ballpoint if I don't have a

pencil. I'm not picky, but my preference is for yellow legal pads and a nice number two pencil.

INTERVIEWER

Dixon Ticonderoga number two soft?

MORRISON

Exactly. I remember once trying to use a tape recorder, but it doesn't work.

INTERVIEWER

Did you actually dictate a story into the machine?

MORRISON

Not the whole thing, but just a bit. For instance, when two or three sentences seemed to fall into place, I thought I would carry a tape recorder in the car, particularly when I was working at Random House going back and forth every day. It occurred to me that I could just record it. It was a disaster. I don't trust my writing that is not written, although I work very hard in subsequent revisions to remove the writerly-ness from it, to give it a combination of lyrical, standard, and colloquial language. To pull all these things together into something that I think is much more alive and representative. But I don't trust something that occurs to me and then is spoken and transferred immediately to the page.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever read your work out loud while you are working on it?

MORRISON

Not until it's published. I don't trust a performance. I could get a response that might make me think it was successful when it wasn't at all. The difficulty for me in writing—*among* the difficulties—is to write language that can work quietly on a page for a reader who doesn't hear anything. Now for that, one has to work very carefully with what is *in between* the words. What is not said. Which is measure, which is rhythm, and so on. So, it is what you don't write that frequently gives what you do write its power.

INTERVIEWER

How many times would you say you have to write a paragraph over to reach this standard?

MORRISON

Well, those that need reworking I do as long as I can. I mean I've revised six times, seven times, thirteen times. But there's a line between revision and fretting, just working it to death. It is important to know when you are fretting it; when you are fretting it because it is not working, it needs to be scrapped.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever go back over what has been published and wish you had fretted more over something?

MORRISON

A lot. Everything.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever rework passages that have already been published before reading them to an audience?

MORRISON

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the PARIS REVIEW

Ernest Hemingway, The Art of Fiction No. 21

Interviewed by George Plimpton

HEMINGWAY

You go to the races?

INTERVIEWER

Yes, occasionally.

HEMINGWAY

Then you read the Racing Form ... There you have the true art of fiction.

—Conversation in a Madrid café, May 1954

Ernest Hemingway writes in the bedroom of his house in the Havana suburb of San Francisco de Paula. He has a special workroom prepared for him in a square tower at the southwest corner of the house, but prefers to work in his bedroom, climbing to the tower room only when “characters” drive him up there.

The bedroom is on the ground floor and connects with the main room of the house. The door between the two is kept ajar by a heavy volume listing and describing *The World’s Aircraft Engines*. The bedroom is large, sunny, the windows facing east and south letting in the day’s light on white walls and a yellow-tinged tile floor.

The room is divided into two alcoves by a pair of chest-high bookcases that stand out into the room at right angles from opposite walls. A large and low double bed dominates one section, oversized slippers and loafers neatly arranged at the foot, the two bedside tables at the head piled seven-high with books. In the other alcove stands a massive flat-top desk with a chair at either side, its surface an ordered clutter of papers and mementos. Beyond it, at the far end of the room, is an armoire with a leopard skin draped across the top. The other walls are lined with white-painted bookcases from which books overflow to the floor, and are piled on top among old newspapers, bullfight journals, and stacks of letters bound together by rubber bands.

It is on the top of one of these cluttered bookcases—the one against the wall by the east window and three feet or so from his bed—that Hemingway has his “work desk”—a square foot of cramped area hemmed in by books on one side and on the other by a newspaper-covered heap of papers, manuscripts, and pamphlets. There is just enough space left on top of the bookcase for a typewriter, surmounted by a wooden reading board, five or six pencils, and a chunk of copper ore to weight down papers when the wind blows in from the east window.

A working habit he has had from the beginning, Hemingway stands when he writes. He stands in a pair of his oversized loafers on the worn skin of a lesser kudu—the typewriter and the reading board chest-high opposite him.

When Hemingway starts on a project he always begins with a pencil, using the reading board to write on onionskin typewriter paper. He keeps a sheaf of the blank paper on a clipboard to the left of the typewriter, extracting the paper a sheet at a time from under a metal clip that reads “These Must Be Paid.” He places the paper slantwise on the reading board, leans against the board with his left arm, steadying the paper with his hand, and fills the paper with handwriting which through the years has become larger, more boyish, with a paucity of punctuation, very few capitals, and often the period marked with an X. The page completed, he clips it facedown on another clipboard that he places off to the right of the typewriter.

Hemingway shifts to the typewriter, lifting off the reading board, only when the writing is going fast and well, or when the writing is, for him at least, simple: dialogue, for instance.

He keeps track of his daily progress—“so as not to kid myself”—on a large chart made out of the side of a cardboard packing case and set up against the wall under the nose of a mounted gazelle head. The numbers on the chart showing the daily output of words differ from 450, 575, 462, 1250, back to 512, the higher figures on days Hemingway puts in extra work so he won’t feel guilty spending the following day fishing on the Gulf Stream.

A man of habit, Hemingway does not use the perfectly suitable desk in the other alcove. Though it allows more space for writing, it too has its miscellany: stacks of letters; a stuffed toy lion of the type sold in Broadway nighteries;

a small burlap bag full of carnivore teeth; shotgun shells; a shoehorn; wood carvings of lion, rhino, two zebras, and a wart-hog—these last set in a neat row across the surface of the desk—and, of course, books: piled on the desk, beside tables, jamming the shelves in indiscriminate order—novels, histories, collections of poetry, drama, essays. A look at their titles shows their variety. On the shelf opposite Hemingway's knee as he stands up to his "work desk" are Virginia Woolf's *The Common Reader*, Ben Ames Williams's *House Divided*, *The Partisan Reader*, Charles A. Beard's *The Republic*, Tarle's *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia*, *How Young You Look* by Peggy Wood, Alden Brooks's *Shakespeare and the Dyer's Hand*, Baldwin's *African Hunting*, T. S. Eliot's *Collected Poems*, and two books on General Custer's fall at the battle of the Little Big Horn.

The room, however, for all the disorder sensed at first sight, indicates on inspection an owner who is basically neat but cannot bear to throw anything away—especially if sentimental value is attached. One bookcase top has an odd assortment of mementos: a giraffe made of wood beads; a little cast-iron turtle; tiny models of a locomotive; two jeeps and a Venetian gondola; a toy bear with a key in its back; a monkey carrying a pair of cymbals; a miniature guitar; and a little tin model of a U.S. Navy biplane (one wheel missing) resting awry on a circular straw place mat—the quality of the collection that of the odds-and-ends which turn up in a shoebox at the back of a small boy's closet. It is evident, though, that these tokens have their value, just as three buffalo horns Hemingway keeps in his bedroom have a value dependent not on size but because during the acquiring of them things went badly in the bush, yet ultimately turned out well. "It cheers me up to look at them," he says.

Hemingway may admit superstitions of this sort, but he prefers not to talk about them, feeling that whatever value they may have can be talked away. He has much the same attitude about writing. Many times during the making of this interview he stressed that the craft of writing should not be tampered with by an excess of scrutiny—"that though there is one part of writing that is solid and you do it no harm by talking about it, the other is fragile, and if you talk about it, the structure cracks and you have nothing."

As a result, though a wonderful raconteur, a man of rich humor, and possessed of an amazing fund of knowledge on subjects which interest him, Hemingway finds it difficult to talk about writing—not because he has few ideas on the subject, but rather because he feels so strongly that such ideas should remain unexpressed, that to be asked questions on them "spooks" him (to use one of his favorite expressions) to the point where he is almost inarticulate. Many of the replies in this interview he preferred to work out on his reading board. The occasional waspish tone of the answers is also part of this strong feeling that writing is a private, lonely occupation with no need for witnesses until the final work is done.

This dedication to his art may suggest a personality at odds with the rambunctious, carefree, world-wheeling Hemingway-at-play of popular conception. The fact is that Hemingway, while obviously enjoying life, brings an equivalent dedication to everything he does—an outlook that is essentially serious, with a horror of the inaccurate, the fraudulent, the deceptive, the half-baked.

Nowhere is the dedication he gives his art more evident than in the yellow-tiled bedroom—where early in the morning Hemingway gets up to stand in absolute concentration in front of his reading board, moving only to shift weight from one foot to another, perspiring heavily when the work is going well, excited as a boy, fretful, miserable when the artistic touch momentarily vanishes—slave of a self-imposed discipline which lasts until about noon when he takes a knotted walking stick and leaves the house for the swimming pool where he takes his daily half-mile swim.

INTERVIEWER

Are these hours during the actual process of writing pleasurable?

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Very.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something of this process? When do you work? Do you keep to a strict schedule?

HEMINGWAY

When I am working on a book or a story I write every morning as soon after first light as possible. There is no one to disturb you and it is cool or cold and you come to your work and warm as you write. You read what you have written and, as you always stop when you know what is going to happen next, you go on from there. You write until you come to a place where you still have your juice and know what will happen next and you stop and try to live through until the next day when you hit it again. You have started at six in the morning, say, and may go on until noon or be through before that. When you stop you are as empty, and at the same time never empty but filling, as when you have made love to someone you love. Nothing can hurt you, nothing can happen, nothing means anything until the next day when you do it again. It is the wait until the next day that is hard to get through.

INTERVIEWER

Can you dismiss from your mind whatever project you're on when you're away from the typewriter?

HEMINGWAY

Of course. But it takes discipline to do it and this discipline is acquired. It has to be.

INTERVIEWER

Do you do any rewriting as you read up to the place you left off the day before? Or does that come later, when the whole is finished?

HEMINGWAY

I always rewrite each day up to the point where I stopped. When it is all finished, naturally you go over it. You get another chance to correct and rewrite when someone else types it, and you see it clean in type. The last chance is in the proofs. You're grateful for these different chances.

INTERVIEWER

How much rewriting do you do?

HEMINGWAY

It depends. I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

INTERVIEWER

Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?

HEMINGWAY

Getting the words right.

INTERVIEWER

Is it the rereading that gets the "juice" up?

HEMINGWAY

Rereading places you at the point where it *has* to go on, knowing it is as good as you can get it up to there. There is always juice somewhere.

INTERVIEWER

But are there times when the inspiration isn't there at all?

HEMINGWAY

Naturally. But if you stopped when you knew what would happen next, you can go on. As long as you can start, you are all right. The juice will come.

INTERVIEWER

Thornton Wilder speaks of mnemonic devices that get the writer going on his day's work. He says you once told him you sharpened twenty pencils.

HEMINGWAY

I don't think I ever owned twenty pencils at one time. Wearing down seven number-two pencils is a good day's work.

INTERVIEWER

Where are some of the places you have found most advantageous to work? The Ambos Mundos hotel must have been one, judging from the number of books you did there. Or do surroundings have little effect on the work?

HEMINGWAY

The Ambos Mundos in Havana was a very good place to work in. This Finca is a splendid place, or was. But I have worked well everywhere. I mean I have been able to work as well as I can under varied circumstances. The telephone and visitors are the work destroyers.

INTERVIEWER

Is emotional stability necessary to write well? You told me once that you could only write well when you were in love. Could you expound on that a bit more?

HEMINGWAY

What a question. But full marks for trying. You can write any time people will leave you alone and not interrupt you. Or rather you can if you will be ruthless enough about it. But the best writing is certainly when you are in love. If it is all the same to you I would rather not expound on that.

INTERVIEWER

How about financial security? Can that be a detriment to good writing?

HEMINGWAY

If it came early enough and you loved life as much as you loved your work it would take much character to resist the temptations. Once writing has become your major vice and greatest pleasure only death can stop it. Financial security then is a great help as it keeps you from worrying. Worry destroys the ability to write. Ill health is bad in the ratio that it produces worry which attacks your subconscious and destroys your reserves.

INTERVIEWER

Can you recall an exact moment when you decided to become a writer?

HEMINGWAY

No, I always wanted to be a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Philip Young in his book on you suggests that the traumatic shock of your severe 1918 mortar wound had a great influence on you as a writer. I remember in Madrid you talked briefly about his thesis, finding little in it, and going on to say that you thought the artist's equipment was not an acquired characteristic, but inherited, in the Mendelian

sense.

HEMINGWAY

Evidently in Madrid that year my mind could not be called very sound. The only thing to recommend it would be that I spoke only briefly about Mr. Young's book and his trauma theory of literature. Perhaps the two concussions and a skull fracture of that year had made me irresponsible in my statements. I do remember telling you that I believed imagination could be the result of inherited racial experience. It sounds all right in good jolly post-concussion talk, but I think that is more or less where it belongs. So until the next liberation trauma, let's leave it there. Do you agree? But thanks for leaving out the names of any relatives I might have implicated. The fun of talk is to explore, but much of it and all that is irresponsible should not be written. Once written you have to stand by it. You may have said it to see whether you believed it or not. On the question you raised, the effects of wounds vary greatly. Simple wounds which do not break bone are of little account. They sometimes give confidence. Wounds which do extensive bone and nerve damage are not good for writers, nor anybody else.

INTERVIEWER

What would you consider the best intellectual training for the would-be writer?

HEMINGWAY

Let's say that he should go out and hang himself because he finds that writing well is impossibly difficult. Then he should be cut down without mercy and forced by his own self to write as well as he can for the rest of his life. At least he will have the story of the hanging to commence with.

INTERVIEWER

How about people who've gone into the academic career? Do you think the large numbers of writers who hold teaching positions have compromised their literary careers?

HEMINGWAY

It depends on what you call compromise. Is the usage that of a woman who has been compromised? Or is it the compromise of the statesman? Or the compromise made with your grocer or your tailor that you will pay a little more but will pay it later? A writer who can both write and teach should be able to do both. Many competent writers have proved it could be done. I could not do it, I know, and I admire those who have been able to. I would think though that the academic life could put a period to outside experience which might possibly limit growth of knowledge of the world. Knowledge, however, demands more responsibility of a writer and makes writing more difficult. Trying to write something of permanent value is a full-time job even though only a few hours a day are spent on the actual writing. A writer can be compared to a well. There are as many kinds of wells as there are writers. The important thing is to have good water in the well, and it is better to take a regular amount out than to pump the well dry and wait for it to refill. I see I am getting away from the question, but the question was not very interesting.

INTERVIEWER

Would you suggest newspaper work for the young writer? How helpful was the training you had with the *Kansas City Star*?

HEMINGWAY

On the *Star* you were forced to learn to write a simple declarative sentence. This is useful to anyone. Newspaper work will not harm a young writer and could help him if he gets out of it in time. This is one of the dustiest clichés there is and I apologize for it. But when you ask someone old, tired questions you are apt to receive old, tired answers.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote in the *Transatlantic Review* that the only reason for writing journalism was to be well paid. You

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the PARIS REVIEW

Carlos Fuentes, The Art of Fiction No. 68

Interviewed by Alfred Mac Adam, Charles E. Ruas

Carlos Fuentes was interviewed on a snowy December day at his home in Princeton, New Jersey—a large Victorian house in the old residential section. He is a tall, heavyset man, dressed on that winter's day in a turtleneck sweater and jacket. The Fuenteses' house was lightly heated in the European manner, and felt chilly. A Christmas tree stood in the drawing room. His two young children were out ice skating with Mrs. Fuentes. A considerable art collection was on display in the room—Oriental bronzes, pre-Columbian ceramics, and Spanish colonial Santos—reflecting Fuentes's cultural background and his various diplomatic assignments. On the walls were paintings and prints by Picabia, Miró, Matta, Vasarely, among others—most of them gifts given him by artist friends.

The interview was conducted in the library in front of a blazing fire with a hot pot of coffee available. The walls were lined with books. It is at a simple desk in this room that Carlos Fuentes does his work—in front of a window that on this December day looked out on ice-laden shrubbery and trees barely visible in the snow flurries.

In 1958, he startled Mexico with *Where the Air Is Clear*, a caustic analysis of Mexico after the 1910-20 revolution; *The Good Conscience* (1959), a bildungsroman that describes the education of Jaime Ceballos and his ultimate absorption into the Mexican establishment; *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), inspired in part by Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*; *Holy Place* (1967) and *A Change of Skin* (1968), both of which deal with Mexico, albeit from totally different perspectives: *Holy Place* traces the Oedipal meanderings of a young man infatuated with his mother; *A Change of Skin* studies Mexico in relation to the “outside world” of the sixties by examining the relationships between foreigners and Mexicans.

Terra Nostra (1978) strikes out in a different direction. There Fuentes investigates the Mediterranean roots of Hispanic culture in order to discover where that culture “went wrong.” He finds its fatal sin in Philip II's maniacal search for purity and orthodoxy, his ruthless extirpation of the heterodox (Jewish and Arabian) elements in Spanish culture. *Terra Nostra*, along with Fuentes's recent essays on Cervantes, marks a new epoch in pan-Hispanic studies, a new way to find unity in the fragmented Hispanic world.

The Hydra Head (1978) returns to contemporary Mexico so that Fuentes can study the nature of power, symbolized by Mexico's oil deposits. In 1980, Fuentes published (in Spanish) *Distant Relations*, an examination of the writer's need to know all and tell all, and (in English) *Burnt Water*, a collection of short stories from various periods in the author's career.

During the years he spent as Mexican ambassador to France, Fuentes found it impossible to write, and the interview began with his description of his return to writing after he had left his government post.

FUENTES

I left my post as ambassador to France on the first of April, 1977, and immediately rented a house on the outskirts of Paris, where I could begin to write again. I had not written a word for two years, being a conscientious diplomat. The house I rented, as it turned out, had belonged to Gustave Doré and it brought back all my yearnings for form and terror. Doré's illustrations for “Little Red Riding Hood,” for example: they're so incredibly erotic! The little girl in bed with the wolf! Those were the signs under which my latest novel, *Distant Relations*, was born.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you find it impossible to write while you were ambassador?

FUENTES

Diplomacy in a sense is the opposite of writing. You have to disperse yourself so much: the lady who comes in crying because she's had a fight with the secretary; exports and imports; students in trouble; thumbtacks for the embassy. Writing requires the concentration of the writer, demands that nothing else be done except that. So I have all this pent-up energy which is flowing out right now. I'm writing a great deal these days. Besides, I have learned how to write. I didn't know how to write before, and I guess I learned by being a bureaucrat. You have so much mental time on your hands when you are a bureaucrat: you have time to think and to learn how to write in your head. When I was a young man I suffered a great deal because I faced the challenge of Mallarmé's blank page every day without knowing exactly what I was going to say. I fought the page, and paid for it with ulcers. I made up for it with sheer vigor, because you have vigor when you are writing in your twenties and thirties. Then later on you have to use your energy wisely. When I look back on it, I think perhaps it was the fact that I was behind an official desk for two years that left my mind free to write within itself, to prepare what I was going to write once I left that post. So now I can write before I sit down to write, I can use the blank page in a way I couldn't before.

INTERVIEWER

Tell us how the process of writing takes place within you.

FUENTES

I am a morning writer; I am writing at eight-thirty in longhand and I keep at it until twelve-thirty, when I go for a swim. Then I come back, have lunch, and read in the afternoon until I take my walk for the next day's writing. I must write the book out in my head now, before I sit down. I always follow a triangular pattern on my walks here in Princeton: I go to Einstein's house on Mercer Street, then down to Thomas Mann's house on Stockton Street, then over to Herman Broch's house on Evelyn Place. After visiting those three places, I return home, and by that time I have mentally written tomorrow's six or seven pages.

INTERVIEWER

You write in longhand?

FUENTES

First I write it out in longhand, and then when I feel I "have" it, I let it rest. Then I correct the manuscript and type it out myself, correcting it until the last moment.

INTERVIEWER

Is the rewriting extensive or is most of the rewriting taken into account during the mental writing?

FUENTES

By the time I get it on paper, it is practically finished: there are no missed sections or scenes. I know basically how things are going and I have it more or less fixed, but at the same time I am sacrificing the element of surprise in myself. Everyone who writes a novel knows he is involved in the Proustian problem of in some way knowing what he is going to write and at the same time being amazed at what is actually coming out. Proust only wrote when he had lived what he was going to write, and yet he had to write as though he knew nothing about it—which is extraordinary. In a way we are all involved in the same adventure: to know what you are going to say, to have control over your material, and at the same time to have that margin of freedom which is discovery, amazement, and a precondition of the freedom of the reader.

INTERVIEWER

It's possible in England and the United States to write a history of editors and their influence on literature. Would such a history be possible in the Hispanic world?

FUENTES

Impossible, because the dignity of Spanish hidalgos would never allow a menial laborer to come and tell us what to do with our own work. It comes from the fact that we are caught in a terrible kind of schizophrenia made up of extreme pride, and extreme individualism which we inherited from Spain. The hidalgo expects everyone else to respect him, just as he kowtows to superior power. If you were to try to edit anyone's text in Latin America, even a hack, he would resign immediately, accusing you of censoring or insulting him.

INTERVIEWER

You would say then that your relationship to your society is rather different from that of an American writer? That, for example, the hidalgo image suggests the greater dignity of writing in your culture?

FUENTES

My situation as a Mexican writer is like that of writers from Eastern Europe. We have the privilege of speech in societies where it is rare to have that privilege. We speak for others, which is very important in Latin America, as it is in Central Europe. Of course you have to pay for that power: either you serve the community or you fall flat on your

face.

INTERVIEWER

Does that mean that you see yourself as the official representative of your culture?

FUENTES

No, I hope not. Because I always remember that remark by the French Surrealist Jacques Vaché, “Nothing kills a man as much as having to represent his country.” So I hope it isn't true.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see a difference between the social roles of American and Latin American writers?

FUENTES

We have to do more things in our culture than American writers do in theirs. They can have more time for themselves and for their writing, whereas we have social demands. Pablo Neruda used to say that every Latin American writer goes around dragging a heavy body, the body of his people, of his past, of his national history. We have to assimilate the enormous weight of our past so we will not forget what gives us life. If you forget your past, you die. You fulfill certain functions for the collectivity because they are obligations you have as a citizen, not as a writer. Despite that, you reserve your esthetic freedom and your esthetic privileges. This creates a tension, but I think it is better to have the tension than to have no tension at all, as sometimes happens in the United States.

INTERVIEWER

In your earlier works you focus on the life of Mexico after the 1910-1920 Revolution. That is your Mexico, and I can see you in those works as a Mexican writer. But after you became so popular internationally, say, with *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, I wonder if your concept of your role changed?

FUENTES

No. I think all writers live off of obsessions. Some of these come from history, others are purely individual, and still others belong to the realm of the purely obsessive, which is the most universal thing a writer has in his soul. My obsessions are in all my books: they have to do with fear. All of my books are about fear—the universal sensation of fear about who might be coming through the door, about who desires me, whom do I desire and how can I achieve my desire. Is the object of my desire the subject of my desire in the mirror I am watching? These obsessions are in all my works, along with the more general, historical context I deal with, but both in history and individuality, my theme is being incomplete because we fear the world and ourselves.

INTERVIEWER

You spoke of writing in your head while you were ambassador and continuing to do so now that you are writing again. I wonder if at some point—especially since you are away from your country and speaking a different language—writing first in your head and editing mentally has changed the nature of your writing.

FUENTES

You must understand that I am a peculiar case in Mexican literature because I grew up far from Mexico, because Mexico is an imaginary space for me, and has never ceased to be so, I might add. My Mexico and my Mexican history take place in my mind. Its history is something I have dreamed, imagined, and is not the actual history of the country. When as a young man I finally went to live in Mexico, of course I had to compare my dreams, my fears of that country with reality. This created a profound tension, the result of which was *Where the Air Is Clear*, a book nobody else could have written in Mexico. Nobody had written a novel about the postrevolutionary era as it was reflected in the city, in the social structure, in the survival of so many ancient strands of our imaginary and historical life. This came, I say, out of my discovering Mexico with a sense of fear and enchantment when I was fifteen years old. Being outside of Mexico has always helped me enormously.

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the PARIS REVIEW

Orhan Pamuk, The Art of Fiction No. 187

Interviewed by Ángel Gurría-Quintana

Orhan Pamuk was born in 1952 in Istanbul, where he continues to live. His family had made a fortune in railroad construction during the early days of the Turkish Republic and Pamuk attended Robert College, where the children of the city's privileged elite received a secular, Western-style education. Early in life he developed a passion for the visual arts, but after enrolling in college to study architecture he decided he wanted to write. He is now Turkey's most widely read author.

His first novel, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*, was published in 1982 and was followed by *The Silent House* (1983), *The White Castle* (1985/1991 in English translation), *The Black Book* (1990/1994), and *The New Life* (1994/1997).

In 2003 Pamuk received the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *My Name Is Red* (1998/2001), a murder mystery set in sixteenth-century Istanbul and narrated by multiple voices. The novel explores themes central to his fiction: the intricacies of identity in a country that straddles East and West, sibling rivalry, the existence of doubles, the value of beauty and originality, and the anxiety of cultural influence. *Snow* (2002/2004), which focuses on religious and political radicalism, was the first of his novels to confront political extremism in contemporary Turkey and it confirmed his standing abroad even as it divided opinion at home. Pamuk's most recent book is *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003/2005), a double portrait of himself—in childhood and youth—and of the place he comes from.

This interview with Orhan Pamuk was conducted in two sustained sessions in London and by correspondence. The first conversation occurred in May of 2004 at the time of the British publication of *Snow*. A special room had been booked for the meeting—a fluorescent-lit, noisily air-conditioned corporate space in the hotel basement. Pamuk arrived, wearing a black corduroy jacket over a light-blue shirt and dark slacks, and observed, “We could die here and nobody would ever find us.” We retreated to a plush, quiet corner of the hotel lobby where we spoke for three hours, pausing only for coffee and a chicken sandwich.

In April of 2005 Pamuk returned to London for the publication of *Istanbul* and we settled into the same corner of the hotel lobby to speak for two hours. At first he seemed quite strained, and with reason. Two months earlier, in an interview with the Swiss newspaper *Der Tages-Anzeiger*, he had said of Turkey, “thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it.” This remark set off a relentless campaign against Pamuk in the Turkish nationalist press. After all, the Turkish government persists in denying the 1915 genocidal slaughter of Armenians in Turkey and has imposed laws severely restricting discussion of the ongoing Kurdish conflict. Pamuk declined to discuss the controversy for the public record in the hope that it would soon fade. In August, however, Pamuk's remarks in the Swiss paper resulted in his being charged under Article 301/1 of the Turkish Penal Code with “public denigration” of Turkish identity—a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. Despite outraged international press coverage of his case, as well as vigorous protest to the Turkish government by members of the European Parliament and by International PEN, when this magazine went to press in mid-November Pamuk was still slated to stand trial on December 16, 2005.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about giving interviews?

ORHAN PAMUK

I sometimes feel nervous because I give stupid answers to certain pointless questions. It happens in Turkish as much as in English. I speak bad Turkish and utter stupid sentences. I have been attacked in Turkey more for my interviews than for my books. Political polemicists and columnists do not read novels there.

INTERVIEWER

You've generally received a positive response to your books in Europe and the United States. What is your critical reception in Turkey?

PAMUK

The good years are over now. When I was publishing my first books, the previous generation of authors was fading away, so I was welcomed because I was a new author.

INTERVIEWER

When you say the previous generation, whom do you have in mind?

PAMUK

The authors who felt a social responsibility, authors who felt that literature serves morality and politics. They were flat realists, not experimental. Like authors in so many poor countries, they wasted their talent on trying to serve their nation. I did not want to be like them, because even in my youth I had enjoyed Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Proust—I had never aspired to the social-realist model of Steinbeck and Gorky. The literature produced in the sixties and seventies was becoming outmoded, so I was welcomed as an author of the new generation.

After the mid-nineties, when my books began to sell in amounts that no one in Turkey had ever dreamed of, my honeymoon years with the Turkish press and intellectuals were over. From then on, critical reception was mostly a reaction to the publicity and sales, rather than the content of my books. Now, unfortunately, I am notorious for my political comments—most of which are picked up from international interviews and shamelessly manipulated by some Turkish nationalist journalists to make me look more radical and politically foolish than I really am.

INTERVIEWER

So there is a hostile reaction to your popularity?

PAMUK

My strong opinion is that it's a sort of punishment for my sales figures and political comments. But I don't want to continue saying this, because I sound defensive. I may be misrepresenting the whole picture.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you write?

PAMUK

I have always thought that the place where you sleep or the place you share with your partner should be separate from the place where you write. The domestic rituals and details somehow kill the imagination. They kill the demon in me. The domestic, tame daily routine makes the longing for the other world, which the imagination needs to operate, fade away. So for years I always had an office or a little place outside the house to work in. I always had different flats.

But once I spent half a semester in the U.S. while my ex-wife was taking her Ph.D. at Columbia University. We were living in an apartment for married students and didn't have any space, so I had to sleep and write in the same place. Reminders of family life were all around. This upset me. In the mornings I used to say goodbye to my wife like someone going to work. I'd leave the house, walk around a few blocks, and come back like a person arriving at the office.

Ten years ago I found a flat overlooking the Bosphorus with a view of the old city. It has, perhaps, one of the best views of Istanbul. It is a twenty-five-minute walk from where I live. It is full of books and my desk looks out onto the view. Every day I spend, on average, some ten hours there.

INTERVIEWER

Ten hours a day?

PAMUK

Yes, I'm a hard worker. I enjoy it. People say I'm ambitious, and maybe there's truth in that too. But I'm in love with what I do. I enjoy sitting at my desk like a child playing with his toys. It's work, essentially, but it's fun and games also.

INTERVIEWER

Orhan, your namesake and the narrator of *Snow*, describes himself as a clerk who sits down at the same time every day. Do you have the same discipline for writing?

PAMUK

I was underlining the clerical nature of the novelist as opposed to that of the poet, who has an immensely prestigious tradition in Turkey. To be a poet is a popular and respected thing. Most of the Ottoman sultans and statesmen were poets. But not in the way we understand poets now. For hundreds of years it was a way of establishing yourself as an intellectual. Most of these people used to collect their poems in manuscripts called *divans*. In fact, Ottoman court poetry is called *divan* poetry. Half of the Ottoman statesmen produced *divans*. It was a sophisticated and educated way of writing things, with many rules and rituals. Very conventional and very repetitive. After Western ideas came to Turkey, this legacy was combined with the romantic and modern idea of the poet as a person who burns for truth. It added extra weight to the prestige of the poet. On the other hand, a novelist is essentially a person who covers distance through his patience, slowly, like an ant. A novelist impresses us not by his demonic and romantic vision, but by his patience.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written poetry?

PAMUK

I am often asked that. I did when I was eighteen and I published some poems in Turkey, but then I quit. My explanation is that I realized that a poet is someone through whom God is speaking. You have to be possessed by poetry. I tried my hand at poetry, but I realized after some time that God was not speaking to me. I was sorry about this and then I tried to imagine—if God were speaking through me, what would he be saying? I began to write very meticulously, slowly, trying to figure this out. That is prose writing, fiction writing. So I worked like a clerk. Some other writers consider this expression to be a bit of an insult. But I accept it; I work like a clerk.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that writing prose has become easier for you over time?

PAMUK

Unfortunately not. Sometimes I feel my character should enter a room and I still don't know how to make him enter. I may have more self-confidence, which sometimes can be unhelpful because then you're not experimenting, you just write what comes to the tip of your pen. I've been writing fiction for the last thirty years, so I should think that I've improved a bit. And yet I still sometimes come to a dead end where I thought there never would be one. A character cannot enter a room, and I don't know what to do. Still! After thirty years.

The division of a book into chapters is very important for my way of thinking. When writing a novel, if I know the whole story line in advance—and most of the time I do—I divide it into chapters and think up the details of what I'd like to happen in each. I don't necessarily start with the first chapter and write all the others in order. When I'm blocked, which is not a grave thing for me, I continue with whatever takes my fancy. I may write from the first to the fifth chapter, then if I'm not enjoying it I skip to number fifteen and continue from there.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mean that you map out the entire book in advance?

PAMUK

Everything. *My Name Is Red*, for instance, has many characters, and to each character I assigned a certain number of chapters. When I was writing, sometimes I wanted to continue "being" one of the characters. So when I finished writing one of Shekure's chapters, perhaps chapter seven, I skipped to chapter eleven, which is her again. I liked being Shekure. Skipping from one character or persona to another can be depressing.

But the final chapter I always write at the end. That is definite. I like to tease myself, ask myself what the ending should be. I can only execute the ending once. Towards the end, before finishing, I stop and rewrite most of the early