



Avanzi del Tempio del Dio Canopo nella Villa Adriana in Tivoli.  
A. Nicchie e fontane che erano rivestite di tartari. B. Volta ch'era ricoperta di mosaici bianchi  
e di altri colori. Le pareti C. erano rivestite di lastre di marmo. Il dietro di questo tempio  
è circondato di colonne d'acqua e di naturaioni. Due tali contraegni crederei ch'egli dovesse  
appartenere al Dio Nettuno più che ad altro Deità. D. Due gran macigni caduti dalla Volta

## Marguerite Yourcenar: Piranesi at Petite Plaisance

By Carl Little



Richard Estes, Marguerite Yourcenar, Oil on canvas, 1985, 95 by 45½ centimeters, FNAC 35381, Centre national des arts plastiques Dépôt du Centre national des arts plastiques au Sénat depuis 2009, ©Richard Estes/CNAP. *Courtesy of the artist*

When I moved to Mount Desert Island with my family in 1989, we lived in the first house on the left on Oak Hill Road, in what we came to call, with a smile, "downtown Somesville." The property, my mother's, backed onto Brookside Cemetery, one of the most charming and idyllic sites of final repose in New England.

Not long after settling in, I learned that the world-famous novelist Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–1987) was buried there alongside her longtime companion and translator, Grace Frick (1903–1979). Interested in literary things, I set out to learn more about this writer who, in 1981, was the first woman to be admitted to the French Academy since it had been founded by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635.<sup>1</sup>

I started by reading her masterwork, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, and wrote a short review of it for the Somesville Library and Mount Desert Island Historical Society newsletter, *Betwixt the Hills*. First published in 1951, the book takes the form of an extended letter written by the dying Roman Emperor Hadrian to his adopted grandson, Marcus Aurelius. Hadrian reigned from 117 to 138 AD. The book demonstrates Yourcenar's special genius for reviving the past.<sup>2</sup>

In my review, I noted how parts of the book were relevant to our times. "If one substitutes presidents for emperors, the following statement seems as applicable to our country as it is to ancient Rome: 'experience shows that in spite of our infinite

Previous page: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Avanzi del Tempio del Dio Canopo della Villa Adriana in Tivoli (Remains of the Temple of the God Canopus at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli), from *Vedute di Roma* (Views of Rome), 1768, etching, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/178353>

care in choosing our successors, the mediocre emperors will always outnumber the wise, and that at least one fool will reign per century."<sup>3</sup>

Over time, I learned more about Yourcenar. I read her books, including her remarkable tribute to the eighteenth century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), and wrote about her on several occasions. In a review of Yvon Bernier's book about Petite Plaisance, Yourcenar's home in Northeast Harbor, I expressed regret at having arrived on Mount Desert Island the year after her death and offered a fantasy account of meeting the great writer:

It's in the Northeast Harbor Library or perhaps at the Colonel's bakery, and I introduce myself, speaking the French I have recently acquired through graduate studies at Middlebury College. Yourcenar is pleased with my accent and appearance and invites me home for tea. We sit in her kitchen ...and speak of Piranesi's prison series, of Hadrian, of Brookside Cemetery (where, I tell her, my children play hide-and-seek among the tombstones).<sup>4</sup>

Born in Belgium and raised in France, Yourcenar first came to the United States in 1937, to live with Grace Frick. She and Frick spent several years in Hartford, Connecticut. Frick was academic dean at Hartford Junior College and then taught at Connecticut College, and Yourcenar lectured on French literature and taught part-time at Sarah Lawrence. "They spent their first 'married' years there," writes Yourcenar's biographer Josyane Savigneau.<sup>5</sup> The women spent their first summer on Mount Desert Island in 1942. Some of their earliest stays were in a small cabin on Brookside Road, which runs into the cemetery where their ashes would eventually be interred. They were enchanted by this "storybook" setting.<sup>6</sup>

The couple started looking at properties on the island in the summer of 1948, and they purchased a house in Northeast Harbor in 1952. French literary critic Matthieu Galey, who interviewed Yourcenar at her Maine home in the 1970s, likened Petite Plaisance to an "idyllic shepherd's cottage of the past century: all wood, modest but livable, comfortable without affectation, full of books and other well-used objects—it is a house that is lived in, in which even the least significant item has its special history or symbolic importance."<sup>7</sup>

Yourcenar told Galey that no one was sure exactly when the house was built, but she dated it to around 1866, "rather old for this island, which had few dwellings on it until the middle of the nineteenth century." She reported that the wood used to build it "was cut on the mountain ten or fifteen miles from here and floated down on the sort of glacial fjord [Somes Sound] that cuts the island almost in two."<sup>8</sup>

Mount Desert Island would become Yourcenar's refuge, her home base, to which she would, over the years, return from her extensive travels. While she didn't attach "a great deal of importance to the house itself," it served, she said, "as an asylum, a cell for self-knowledge, as Saint Catherine of Siena might have said."<sup>9</sup>

Petite Plaisance would prove to be the perfect place for writing; Yourcenar completed two of her most acclaimed books, *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *The Abyss*, while in residence, and many of her other works were composed and/or edited there. In her notes, she wrote about the creation of *Memoirs of Hadrian*,

she recalled how, on December 26, 1950, "on an evening of freezing cold and in the almost polar silence of Mount Desert Island off the Atlantic shore," she strived,

to live again through the smothering heat of a day in July in the year 138 in Baiae, to feel the weight of a sheet on weary, heavy limbs, and to catch the barely perceptible sound of that tideless sea as from time to time it reached a man whose whole attention was concentrated upon other murmurs, those of his approaching death. I tried to go as far as the last sip of water, the last spasm of pain, the last image in his mind. Now the emperor had but to die.<sup>10</sup>

Yourcenar's remarkable novella "An Obscure Man" (1982), one of her favorite works, is partly set on Mount Desert Island, in the early seventeenth century, not long after the destruction of a colony of French Jesuits by the English. The island also found its way into her dreams. In *Dreams and Destinies*, she notes that on the night of April 12–13, 1970, she dreamt that she found herself on a road, "roughly the one extending from Northeast Harbor to Seal Harbor," seeking to "arrive at the shore of this last locality in order to lie down beside the water." By the "hills and little lake of the Rockefeller property," she discovered "a horde of wild horses."<sup>11</sup>

Despite what some commentators and biographers have argued, Yourcenar did not live an isolated life, holed up in a small house on a back street in Northeast Harbor. "Madame," as she

was often called by her neighbors, was part of the community. She came to embrace her life on the island in many ways, from inviting neighbors over to celebrate the new year with eggnog, to watching the sunrise from the summit of Cadillac Mountain.<sup>12</sup>

"That's why I like living in very small towns or villages," Yourcenar told Galey. "When the grocer comes to make a delivery, he'll stay and have a glass of wine or cider with me, when he has the time." She continued:

I have as much respect and esteem for my cleaning woman as I might have for a sister. In the summertime, children from the kindergarten come every now and then to play in the yard. The gardener who tends the property across the way is a friend who comes over when it's cold to visit with me and to drink a cup of coffee or tea.<sup>13</sup>

Yourcenar's involvement in the community included activism. At one point, she carried a sign protesting the Vietnam War in a march in Bar Harbor. She recounted: "People passed us by; they weren't terribly interested in our little group of men and women wearing sandwich boards."<sup>14</sup>

Yourcenar credited the island with nurturing her growth as a writer—and enhancing her appreciation of the natural world. "It was here on Mount Desert Island that I began to take a greater interest in trees and animals, in the natural environment as a whole," she told Galey.<sup>15</sup>

The author's strong connections to the greater Mount Desert Island region are highlighted in a short film, *L'Isle heureuse* (Happy Island), made in 1984 by her companion Jerry Wilson. In the film, Yourcenar visits Birdsacre, an avian rehabilitation center in Ellsworth, where an owl perches on her arm. She also travels to Sutton Island, one of the Cranberry Isles, to visit the grave



The figures in the photograph are (left to right): John Reynolds (2), John Reynolds (1), Madame Yourcenar, and Louis Reynolds. They are standing in front of the Manset fishing house on the Stanley Fish Wharf, which was used to keep accounts for buying lobsters and for selling gasoline to the boats. Grace Frick, Marguerite Yourcenar with Three Portuguese Sailors, ca. 1943–1944, black-and-white photograph, 3½ by 5½ inches. *Courtesy of Petite Plaisance*

of her friend, poet Hortense Flexner (1885–1973), whose poems she had translated into French.<sup>16</sup>

From the time of the publication of *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Yourcenar was a literary celebrity. Television crews from around the world showed up in Northeast Harbor to tape interviews. When the film adaptation of her novel *Coup de Grâce* came out in 1977, a private screening was held at the Maine Coast Mall cinema in Ellsworth.<sup>17</sup>

When the distinguished author and Seal Harbor resident August Heckscher reported on his friend's induction to the French Academy, he wondered how she had been able to deal with the hoopla. "The answer, of course, is that Marguerite Yourcenar has lived for many years the solitary life of the mind," he wrote; "modern existence with its fuss and clutter had passed her by." Heckscher gave credit to Yourcenar's fellow Maine islanders: "Talk

of small things with her island neighbors, often with the least sophisticated of them, has been a spiritual food."<sup>18</sup>

When Walter Kaiser, one of Yourcenar's translators, delivered her eulogy at the Northeast Harbor Union Church on January 16, 1988, he chose a citation from her interview with Galey to conclude his tribute. Yourcenar had been told by a friend who had undergone a near-death experience that one's life did, indeed, flash before one's eyes. The writer didn't like this idea, believing parts of the flashback would be disagreeable. She would prefer to be selective in what she saw.

To the self-addressed question, "But what would *I* like to see again?" Yourcenar offered a litany of places she had visited

Petite Plaisance sign in the snow. *Photograph by the author*



and views she had taken in during her lifetime of travel. Among these views were several of her Maine island home, including "the huge icicles that form on the rocks here on Mount Desert Island, icicles which, come April, form channels for the melting snows that flow with a geyser's roar." Her final image was from among her more recent memories: "Easter's rising sun..., viewed this year from a rocky spur of Mount Desert, high above a half-frozen lake hatched with fissures by the approach of spring."<sup>19</sup>

At Yourcenar's death, Petite Plaisance became a permanent shrine to her life and to the life of Grace Frick. The house is maintained exactly as Yourcenar left it—the refrigerator hidden in a

kitchen closet, the manual typewriter on her desk, the many books arranged on shelves.<sup>20</sup>

At some point in the early 1990s, I arranged to visit Petite Plaisance, which was managed at the time by the writer's former secretary, Jean Lunt, a resident of Northeast Harbor. I was delighted to find on the walls a number of prints by the eighteenth-century artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778). I had discovered Piranesi's views of Rome while working for the prints and drawings dealer Lucien Goldschmidt in New York City in the early 1980s.<sup>21</sup>

According to a note in "Reflections on the Composition of the *Memoirs of Hadrian*," Yourcenar and Frick purchased four Piranesi prints at an artists' supply shop in New York City around 1941. They eventually owned ten prints. Hung in the parlor and the living room, these remarkable images were a constant presence in Yourcenar's daily life.<sup>22</sup>



Story Litchfield, The Living Room, color photo. Reproduced from Yvon Bernier, *Petite Plaisance: Marguerite Yourcenar 1903–1987*, trans. Daniel Sloate, Northeast Harbor, Maine: Petite Plaisance Trust, 2000. *Courtesy of Story Litchfield*

Yourcenar traced her interest in Piranesi and Emperor Hadrian to a visit to the latter's villa in Tibur, now Tivoli, Italy, early in her life. "What sparked the whole idea [for *Memoirs of Hadrian*] as far as I'm concerned was a visit I made when I was twenty to the villa Adriana," she recounted. "That visit also accounts for my interest in Piranesi, for among Piranesi's thousands of drawings of Rome are sixteen of the villa Adriana before it was pillaged by the archaeologists."<sup>23</sup>

Yourcenar was fascinated by this two-hundred-and-fifty-acre complex of pools, baths, fountains, and classical Greek architecture set in the central Italian countryside. The emperor had the villa built as a retreat from Rome; it later became his official residence. "What stood then was a palace in ruins," Yourcenar recalled, "encrusted with roots and brambles, rather like the castle of Sleeping Beauty, yet still fairly close to what it looked like in the

last days of the Roman Empire, when Romans had ceased to live there."<sup>24</sup>

Yourcenar admired how Piranesi's engravings exuded "a feeling of duration, of time's slow corrosion." The studies emphasized "the beauty of objects that have gradually been eroded by storm, encrusted by vegetation, buried in earth and mud, and yet have also been given, somehow, new shape and substance by these same forces of nature."<sup>25</sup>

In her remarkable essay "The Dark Brain of Piranesi," written on Mount Desert Island in the years 1959–1961, Yourcenar expressed her admiration for this artist whom she refers to as "the interpreter and virtually the inventor of Rome's tragic beauty." She portrays an artist so obsessed with his subjects that he

ignores his own well-being while producing his "strange linear universe." Piranesi was a master of ruins, she says, of "temples and basilicas lying open and as though turned inside out by the depredations of time and of man, so that the interior has now become a kind of exterior, everywhere invaded by space like a ship by water."<sup>26</sup>

Several of the prints in the Petite Plaisance collection are, fittingly, views of Hadrian's Villa. One of them, showing the remains of the chapel of Canopus, had special appeal to Yourcenar. In her description of it, she noted its central "round structure, burst open like a skull, from which fallen trees and brush hang vaguely down, like strands of hair." The "genius of Piranesi," she observed, "truly caught the element of hallucination here: he has sensed the long-continued ritual of mourning, the tragic architecture of an inner world."<sup>27</sup>

One senses that Yourcenar saw in Piranesi a kindred soul, one who was connected by art to earlier eras, an archaeologist of sorts, immersed in the past. She might easily have been describing herself when she pointed out how fragments of antiquity were for him "what the dissection of cadavers is for a painter of the nude."<sup>28</sup>

"The Villa was the tomb of my travels," Yourcenar has the emperor say in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, "the last encampment of the nomad, the equivalent, though in marble, of the tents and pavilions of the princes of Asia." Was Petite Plaisance a kind of Hadrian's Villa for the author? Reading Savigneau's biography, with its recurring narrative of the famed

author returning home to Northeast Harbor from her travels to some of the great cities of the world, one senses that the two places—this home of Yourcenar's and the villa in Tibur—served a similar purpose, as retreats from the madding crowd.<sup>29</sup>

I like to think of the famous author, as she made her way from room to room, stopping in front of the Piranesi prints to explore anew these ancient haunted places recorded by the Italian artist's brilliant draftsmanship. They were portals, as it were, to another place and time, allowing her to escape, if but momentarily, the modern world with all its discontents. "When all the involved calculations prove false, and the philosophers themselves have nothing more to tell us," she wrote in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, "it is excusable to turn to the random twitter of birds, or toward the distant mechanisms of the stars"—or, she might have added, to those wondrous depictions of a ruined villa on the slopes of the Tiburine Hills.<sup>30</sup>

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*Born in New York City, Carl Little holds degrees from Dartmouth College, Columbia University and Middlebury College, where he received a master's degree in French. Little is the author of many art books, including monographs on John Singer Sargent, Winslow Homer, and Edward Hopper. His most recent title is Philip Barter: Forever Maine (Marshall Wilkes). He edited his brother David Little's Art of Katahdin and co-authored with him Art of Acadia, 2016, and Paintings of Portland, 2018 (all Down East Books). Little moved to Mount Desert Island in 1989. He is communications manager at the Maine Community Foundation.*

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Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Rovine d'una Galleria di Statue nella Villa Adriana a Tivoli* from *Vedute di Roma*, 1770, etching and engraving on paper, plate: 18 x 22 15/16 in; sheet: 21 7/16 x 31 1/8 in, Gift of David T. Mason in memory of James D. Abbott, life member of the Portland Art Association. *Public domain*, 64.11.10

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1. Master realist and fellow Northeast Harbor resident Richard Estes painted her official portrait for the academy.
  2. Carl Little, ed., *Betwixt the Hills: Newsletter of the Somesville Library and The Mount Desert Island Historical Society*, no. 6, Winter 1989.
  3. *Ibid.*, 3.
  4. Carl Little, "There's great pleasure in Petite Plaisance," *Maine Times*, September 16, 1994.
  5. Josyane Savigneau, *Marguerite Yourcenar: Inventing a Life*, trans. Joan E. Howard, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 141. Yourcenar became a U.S. citizen in 1947.
  6. "... A stream and lots of ducks, little wooden bridges, and a bit farther away, the cemetery-garden whose silence was hardly broken by the footsteps of people coming to visit 'their' dead." *Ibid.*, 147. In a video from the archives of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel dated January 1, 1972, Yourcenar is shown walking past the mill pond in Somesville on her way to the "little cabin pleasantly located near a stream."
  7. Arthur Goldhammer, trans. 1984, *Marguerite Yourcenar: With Open Eyes. Conversations with Matthieu Galey*, (Boston: Beacon Press), xi.
  8. *Ibid.*, 106.
  9. *Ibid.*, 111.
  10. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian and Reflections on the Composition of Memoirs of Hadrian*, trans. Grace Frick, in collaboration with the author, (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 342.
  11. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Dreams and Destinies*, trans. Donald Flanell Friedman, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 111.
  12. For a sustained and convincing argument for how living in Maine influenced Yourcenar's life and art, see Bérengère Deprez, *Marguerite Yourcenar and the USA: From Prophecy to Protest* (Brussels, Belgium: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2009). *Deprez ties episodes from Yourcenar's American travels, including a 1959 trip to Mount Katahdin, to images in some of her books.*
  13. Goldhammer, *Marguerite Yourcenar: With Open Eyes*, 191-192. In a September 1979 letter, she described the townspeople who were helping her as Grace was dying: "... a number of ladies from the village, the old fisherman, Dick, the gardeners, Harry and Elliot—who come by with things for us: one might bring a dinner dish she's made or some sweets, another some vegetables from his garden, and someone else an offer to run errands in her car... . Such are the blessings, in the darkest times, of living in a small town." Savigneau, 374.
  14. *Marguerite Yourcenar: With Open Eyes*, 236.
  15. *Ibid.*, 105.
  16. Flexner's "Poems for Sutton Island" were first published as part of a bilingual edition of her selected verse, *Présentation critique d'Hortense Flexner suivi de Choix de poèmes*, translated by Yourcenar, published by Gallimard in 1969. The Sutton Island verses were later published in a limited edition by August Heckscher, accompanied by photographs by Claude Huston. Heckscher also published Yourcenar's *Suite D'Estampes pour Kou-Kou-Hai* featuring color woodcuts by Seal Harbor artist Nancy McCormick. In 1993, Port in a Storm Bookstore printed a limited edition of "Poems for Sutton Island" with an afterword by Carl Little and woodcut illustrations by Somesville printmaker Polly Cote.
  17. Savigneau, 357.
  18. August Heckscher, "The lady from Maine," *Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 27, 1981. It was reported that Yourcenar's election to the academy upstaged the plight of the hostages in Iran on French television news.
  19. Savigneau, 457-458.
  20. "In her will, Yourcenar entrusted [Petite Plaisance] to a foundation—what Americans call 'a board of trustees.' If at all possible, the house must remain the way it was at her death and be open to the public during the summer months. If this arrangement were no longer viable, the will goes on to provide, the furnishings and objects found in the house should be sold in France, and the cottage itself would pass to an association for environmental and natural protection." Savigneau, 204.
  21. I worked for Mr. Goldschmidt from fall 1980 to May of 1985. Among his Piranesi-passionate customers was the writer Susan Sontag.

22. "I can tell you (because this information is included in my forthcoming book, *'We Met in Paris': Grace Frick and Her Life with Marguerite Yourcenar*) that the *Hartford Times* reported on September 16, 1940, that Grace Frick was decorating the walls of Hartford Junior College, which she administered, with 'a series of prints and photographs taken from various masterpieces of art, including some original engravings from Piranesi.' So it would seem MY & GF had purchased at least some of their Piranesi prints even before 1941." Joan E. Howard, email to author, September 23, 2017. "Altogether we have ten Piranesis. Only *View of the Forum* is not displayed." Joan E. Howard, email to author, October 13, 2017.
23. *Marguerite Yourcenar: With Open Eyes*, 117. Yourcenar would return to the villa with Grace Frick later in her life. In a description of that visit, she imagines "the thousands of lives" that have "followed in succession here between Hadrian's time and ours," including "the gypsies of Piranesi's day." Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, 345.
24. *Marguerite Yourcenar: With Open Eyes*, 117. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the ruins of Hadrian's Villa are maintained by the Polo Museale del Lazio.
25. Ibid.
26. Marguerite Yourcenar, *The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 88, 97.
27. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, 324. Yourcenar bemoaned the transformation of the villa into a tourist site. "This new décor gives to the once melancholy Canopus something of the air of a studio set, ready for a film version of 'life in Imperial Rome.'" Ibid., 346.
28. Marguerite Yourcenar, *The Dark Brain of Piranesi*, 99.
29. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, 128.
30. Ibid. 26.