The Paris Review at Forty

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The Paris Review celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 1993 in Paris, Mississippi. A founding editor, the managing editor, and the editor-at-large discuss the magazine's birth and growth, editorial policies, authors, and interview subjects.

GEORGE PLIMPTON: The Paris Review was started in 1953. Peter Matthiessen, who of course has gone on to be an extremely distinguished American writer—author of At Play in the Fields of the Lord, The Snow Leopard, and most recently Killing Mr. Watson—was in Paris with his young wife and met a rather curious character called Harold L. Humes, who was trying to start a magazine called the Paris News Post. The two of them got together, and the first contributions they received were so good that they thought they would scrap the idea of the Paris News Post and start a new literary magazine, but they had no name for it.

I was studying at Cambridge at the time, at Kings College. Peter Matthiessen is probably the oldest friend I have. We went to school together when we were eight and nine years old. He knew that I was at Kings and that I had run the Harvard Lampoon, and he thought that having had that experience I might be just the person to run the Paris Review. He has said since, or I have said to him, that if he hadn't called me over from Kings College, Cambridge, in literary matters I might have become a contender. As it is I have been stuck with this magazine for forty years.

We had ideas about how to make a magazine rather different from the literary magazines of the time. All the literary magazines of the time tended to look a little bit like law school journals. They had no illustrations. They were staid publications, full of critical work. And the emphasis that we had from the very beginning was really a terribly simple one: we would put the critical work in the back of the book, if in the book at all, and would concentrate on publishing creative work—short stories, chunks of novels, poetry. We also decided that we would try to make the magazine attractive. We got an art editor, William Pène du Bois, who was a young man then, a very distinguished...
children's book illustrator and writer. Then we got someone to write our aims in a preface. It turned out to be William Styron, who was coming through town having just published his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*. He was sort of the great young genius of American letters, and a great friend of Peter's, so he wrote the preface. I'll quote chunks of it because it set forth the aims better than I can. He wrote a rather stiff preface, and it went to one of the editors, who began to object to some of its contents, which Bill didn't like at all. So he sent back the preface as a letter to an editor:

The preface which you all wanted me to write, and which I wanted to write, and finally wrote, came back to me from Paris today so marvelously changed and re-worded that it seemed hardly mine. Actually, you know, it shouldn't be mine. Prefaces are usually communal enterprises and they have a stern dull quality of group effort about them—of Manifesto, Proclamation of Aims, of "Where We Stand"—of editors huddled together in the smoke-laden, red-eye hours of early morning, pruning and balancing syntax, juggling terms and, because each editor is an individual with different ideas, often compromising away all those careless personal words that make an individualistic statement exciting, or at least interesting. Prefaces, I'll admit, are a bore and consequently, more often than not, go unread. The one I sent you, so balanced and well-mannered and so dull—I could hardly read it myself when I finished it—when it came back to me with your emendations and corrections I couldn't read it at all. This, I realize, is the fault of neither or none of us; it's inevitable that what Truth I mumble to you at Lipps over a beer, or that Ideal that we are perfectly agreed upon at the casual hour of 2 A.M. becomes powerfully open to criticism as soon as it's cast in the printed form, which like a piece of sculpture, allows us to walk all around that Truth or Ideal and examine it front, side and behind, and for minutes on end. Everyone starts hacking off an arm, a leg, an ear—and you end up with a lump. At any rate, I'd like to go over briefly a few of the things you questioned; we'll still no doubt disagree, but that's probably for the better. There are magazines, you know, where a questioning word amounts to dishonesty, and disagreement means defection.

First, I said, "Literally speaking, we live in what has been described as the Age of Criticism. Full of articles on Kafka and James, on Melville, or whatever writer is in momentary ascendancy; laden with terms like 'architectonic,' 'Zeitgeist,' and 'dichotomous,' the literary magazines seem today on the verge of doing away with literature, not with any philistine bludgeon but by smothering it under the weight of learned chatter." (Perfect beginning for a preface, you may note; regard the arch rhythms, the way it fairly looks down the nose at the reader.)

All right, then I said, "there is little wonder" (always a nice oblique phrase to use in a preface) "that faced with Oedipus and Myth and Charlotte Brontë, with meter in Pope and darkness in Dante, we put aside our current quarterly with its two short poems, its one intellectualized short