

We Met in Paris: Grace Frick and her life with Marguerite Yourcenar, Joan E. Howard

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With *We Met in Paris*, Joan E. Howard offers the field of Yourcenar studies with a fresh outlook. The volume, the first to be dedicated to the life and career of Grace Frick, lifetime companion of the Académicienne, proves fascinating, both in the descriptions of Frick herself and in the portrayal of her relationship with Yourcenar, too often heretofore relegated to an altogether negative aspect of the illustrious author's life.

The early chapters, dedicated to the formative years of Frick, give a strikingly modern tone to the reading of Grace. The descriptions of Wellesley College, where Grace was educated, and Stephens College, the women's college where she taught, paint a vivid and attractive picture of an independent, scholarly woman. These pages confirm the intuition created by the choice of cover picture: though the subtitle of the book links Grace Frick to her illustrious partner, the point of focus in the book is Grace herself. It is at once refreshing and at times unsettling to be offered a portrait of one who is so often thought of as marginal. Here she is given pride of place.

Documented with great rigour, comparing and counterbalancing testimonies, *We Met in Paris* impresses by the sources it encompasses, often never before found in depictions of Frick. The richness of the testimonies brought to light effectively counteract many public perceptions surrounding Grace Frick, partly created by Yourcenar herself. The index which closes the volume is extremely detailed, mapping literary achievements as well as biographical events, friendships and working relations of both women. The Americanness of the volume is another of its great successes, from the setting of many of

its pages, to the identity of its central character. Here again, a great gap in Yourcenar studies has been filled, and will hopefully encourage further work to be undertaken in that realm. Enriching Yourcenar studies is one thing, entering the intimate through a public meeting with Joan Howard would be another: it would no doubt be judicious to invite the author of *We Met in Paris* back on Marguerite's natal soil for an informal chat in the French Flanders.

Undeniably, the research interest around Frick's life and work stems from the reputation of Marguerite Yourcenar. However, Howard's volume, while acknowledging this from the onset (Yourcenar's name appears, after all, on the cover page, in the subtitle of the book), presents Grace Frick as a scholar, cheerful and witty, an interesting woman in her own right. As such, it is a precious novelty in the understanding of Yourcenar's work, as it stresses and rehabilitates the importance of her partner and translator. The facts of Frick's life are presented as interesting in themselves, not only in relation to Yourcenar's own path, is the greatest force of this biography. The preface acts as a very effective mission statement: far from the often negative, or at least disparaging, depictions of Frick, this biography actively seeks to restore her image.

The descriptions of Frick's illness are so many traces of the love shared in the couple, transpiring through the pages, though expressing itself in ways which are not the standard, straightforward tokens one might expect. From the subtle hints by which the author of *Memoirs of Hadrian* expressed to Frick her desire for journalists to leave her, to the ill humour shown to Yourcenar by Grace in the final stages of her illness ("People who are very, very ill turn on a beloved one because they know that beloved won't lash back at them," quotes Howard), the couple at the heart of the volume is understood as a thoroughly

loving one. The transcription of Yourcernar's 1979 interview with Jacques Chancel pays a vibrant tribute to that love, when the usually secretive author calls Grace “the essence of my life as a woman.” (347)

Mathilde-Éléonore Duhot

La traduction française sera disponible la semaine prochaine.