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PAUL AUSTER IN CONVERSATION WITH CÉLINE CURIOL

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the director of public programs here at the New York Public Library, now known as "Live from the New York Public Library." As you may know, for a long time I used to say that my goal at the library was to make the lions roar. Well, we've changed our motto now. It is "Expect Wasabi." And we've had some wasabi already this year with Bernard-Henri Lévy with Slavoj Zizek—or should I say, against Slavoj Zizek. We've had James Wood, Daniel Mendelsohn with Pico Iyer, Robert Badinter. And on Friday I will have the pleasure of interviewing James McBride and Spike Lee.

So to find out more about our events, I highly recommend that you join our e-mail list; you'll find out all the other events we have. And many of them are not listed. For instance the season this year we will finish with an interview with Daniel Barenboim that I'll be conducting on the 10th of December. So do join our e-mail list tonight—I highly recommend it.

After the conversation which, as I always say, lasts about as long as a psychoanalytical session—maybe if the psychoanalyst isn't looking at his watch, it might be 72 minutes long—there'll be a Q&A period. We will ask you to actually write down your questions. I'll ask them to raise the light a little bit during the event. So you write down your questions as legibly as you can. Ask questions rather than make long comments and I'll come and read them here after the event.

192 Books is our bookseller and the books will be sold after the event, both *Man in the Dark,* the new book by Paul Auster, and *Voice Over,* the book by Céline Curiol.

It is my pleasure to welcome Céline Curiol and Paul Auster tonight. Céline Curiol's first novel, *Voix Sans Issue,* has been translated in more than a dozen languages and is just out now released in English translation as *Voice Over*. It is a pleasure also to welcome, or to welcome back, I should say, Paul Auster. He was here to interview Chico Buarque, to pay tribute to Don Quixote and on many other occasions, and in a sense, I'm not sure all of you know, Paul Auster is *always* here. By that, I mean to say the New York Public Library houses the archives of Paul Auster and I've often wondered if writers actually come to visit their archives. This may be a subject they could talk about, but I wonder what it must mean for a writer to come and see his papers.

Paul Auster is the author of numerous books of fiction and, as I said, most recently of *Man in the Dark*. But I would like to single out one work of his that I absolutely adore and for those of you who haven't read it I highly, highly recommend you do. It's a work of his that I think of all the time, particularly now that I have two pretty young children. It's called *The Invention of Solitude*, and if you haven't read it, please, please do – it's a beautiful, beautiful piece of writing.

Tonight's conversation will be free floating. It will be a conversation between two writers. I see it as highly digressive and focused at the same time. Digression is, after all, the sunshine of narrative. You may know that Paul Auster has introduced Céline Curiol in some sense to an American public by highly recommending the book and writing, as it were, a preface to it. And it is, I think, quite interesting to see two writers from different continents coming together. Paul Auster, in my mind, has always pontificated in the true literary etymological sense of the word—he's always been a *pontifex*, someone who builds bridges between continents. He has particularly, for some reason, been close to the French language. I am particularly interested in the conversation that will now take place between Paul Auster and Céline Curiol. Please join me in welcoming them. **[Applause]**

PAUL AUSTER: Good evening, everyone. Thank you all for coming. Céline and I didn't know that this was the format until a little while ago so we are going to be improvising a lot. In answer to Paul's question, I've never come to look at my archive. **[Laughter]** I think—since I've been around here a long time and most of you probably know who I am, and Céline has not been around here so long—I think I would like to begin by asking her a few questions, just about her

background, and you should know that for the past ten years or so, she's mainly been living in New York City with a few exceptions, a few interruptions. So, I want to ask her first of all, What brought you to New York?

CELINE CURIOL: Okay. I came to New York in '97, so almost eleven years, and I came because I fell in love with an American boy.

PAUL AUSTER: Good reason. **[Laughter]**

CELINE CURIOL: And also because I had for a long time, you know, the dream of living here and I had come once to New York and I really was completely fascinated by the city so when the occasion to move here happened, I was very happy to come. At first I thought I was going to stay for two months or so and then it just extended into 11 years.

PAUL AUSTER: Eleven years, doing all kinds of work, largely journalism for French radio, newspapers, you worked at the UN also. . .

CELINE CURIOL: Yeah.

PAUL AUSTER: UN radio, a lot of things here. Ummm, all right. I think people should know also how we got to know each other. How did this happen? I mean, why are we sitting here on this podium together tonight?

CELINE CURIOL: Okay. Well, I'll tell my end of the story. I read Paul's work when I was 14 years old, so that was a little while ago. And the first book I read was *The Country of Last Things.* And when I came to NY I was living in Brooklyn, and one day I saw Paul walking down the street and I was very impressed. And I thought, "Whoa!" you know, and then I thought I have to write him a letter or do something because at the time I had started writing, even though I wasn't very serious, maybe. And so I wrote a letter, but I think it got lost or something, I don't know—oh, no: and then your assistant wrote to me and said, "Well, you know he's very busy but if you ever walk by him in the street again, just talk to him." **[Laughter]** And of course, after that it never happened again so. And then, well, maybe you should say. . .

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I don't want to get the story wrong. But I think you wrote again and I think you might have sent me some of your earliest works, which I thought were very promising. And, I mean, you were very young then—in your early 20's—and there was an event that was taking place in New York at the French Consulate, right?

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, right. Right.

PAUL AUSTER: I was getting a medal from the French government. And I said, Well why don't you just come? Was that it?

CELINE CURIOL: No, no, no, no.

PAUL AUSTER: It wasn't that?

CELINE CURIOL: No. I came because I got invited because I was part of the French community, and I got invited and my friend was saying, "Ah, go talk to Paul Auster." Anyway.

PAUL AUSTER: So, that's where we met. I remembered that well and that was probably 8 or 9 or 10 years ago.

CELINE CURIOL: Yeah, ten years. It was ten years ago.

PAUL AUSTER: Ten years ago. All right. So then I should tell you too that Céline studied not literature, as one might imagine for a writer. She is now working and almost finished with her third novel, by the way; the first one published in English was published in French, I think, in '05, if I'm not mistaken. So there's another one out and another one on the way. But, Miss Curiol studied engineering in the top engineering school of France. And I just wonder how you made the shift form science into literature.

CELINE CURIOL: Okay, ummm, I think it happened gradually. You know in France it is very separated, if you are good in science in school you are not supposed to be good at literature or philosophy, or—it's very much separated. And so I was good in science and I was very bad in French, and so naturally I was pushed toward engineering. So that's what I studied and then, you know, I had always written, but it was for me. And then slowly, by living here, where the culture is much more open, like it wouldn't be perceived as something strange if you are an engineer and you want to do something else. In France, it's almost like, why would you want to do something

else because you could have a good job? And so by living here, I think I got a sense that I could, you know, be something else and I just kept writing little short stories and slowly gained the confidence to do it.

PAUL AUSTER: I remember once you told me a very interesting story about your engineering school and the trip that you made abroad with the rest of your classmates which was probably, you said to me then, the last straw when you understood you didn't want to be an engineer. Can you tell that story?

CELINE CURIOL: Right, okay. Well, I try to make it short. I was part of a school in France that was paid by the defense ministry in France, and we were sent to South Africa for a trip that was supposed to be a visit to different companies and we ended up visiting arms factories. And everybody thought, you know, we were there and people were showing us different weapons. Because they thought we represented as future weapons engineers that would potentially buy weapons to South Africa ten years later. And I was among, I don't know, a hundred students and it seems perfectly normal for almost every one. And I just—for me it was very shocking because we were trying—tanks and all kinds of things.

PAUL AUSTER: You had to get into tanks and drive around in them?

CELINE CURIOL: You know, I had a sense that I was part of some kind of system that I did not want to be part of, and it was one of the reasons that I decided—not that every engineer is

like this—but I just thought I wanted something more independent where I could have my opinion without feeling like I have to conform to, you know, whatever is being said around me.

PAUL AUSTER: Right. So by the time you came to the US, engineering was behind you then. You decided you didn't want to do it.

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, yes. Yes.

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah. And I think I remember that your first job in New York was working in a restaurant. Is that so?

CELINE CURIOL: Yes.

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah. And then you built yourself up.

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, then I did more writing. But, I have my little questions, as well.

PAUL AUSTER: Okay. **[Laughter]**

CELINE CURIOL: Well, one of the common things, you know, we have is that we both lived in a foreign country in our twenties. I mean, you lived in France for four years, five years?

PAUL AUSTER: Three and a half, almost four years.

CELINE CURIOL: Okay. But still. And I was wondering how you think it influenced--? Did it influence you to become a writer in any way or did it influence the way you look at literature, you know, in the same way that for me being in the American culture was a liberating thing.

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I think my reasons for going were probably a little different from yours. When I went to Paris it was very early in 1971, January or February, so the war in Viet Nam was going on at full tilt. I had flunked the draft so I wasn't going to be drafted into the Army. And I realized that after an undergraduate career of politics, politics—you know, I went to Columbia University where everything was in upheaval for at least the last two years I was there—I felt the need to get away…from the noise of the United States at that time. Because I already was committed to becoming a writer, but I didn't really know if I had the stuff it took to become a writer. And I thought by leaving, I might get a different perspective on myself and on my country, and I think what happened to me in France was that during those three and a half years, I understood that I was going to be a writer, that this was the only thing I wanted to do and the only thing I could do.

CELINE CURIOL: How? Because of the people you met there?

PAUL AUSTER: No, just the fact that I was working so hard. Because—I was frankly quite distracted here as a young student, there was so much going on, and I never really spent the time on my work that I should have. I cared about it, I was committed to it, but too many other things were happening as well. What I took away from those years in France, particularly in Paris,

because I spent one year in the country, was the kindness of older poets toward younger poets in Paris in ways that I'd never quite experienced in the United States. And people like Jacques Dupin, Andre du Bouchet, and Anja Besse, they literally looked after me. And I think that's one of the reasons why, learning from their generosity, I feel it is an obligation of older writers to look after younger writers. And I think that's why I wanted to help your book. It's something that was taught to me, but particularly in France, not in the United States.

CELINE CURIOL: Well, it's interesting because for me coming to New York, you know, 20 years later, I had a sense that American writers were much kinder than the French intellectuals, you know. That I didn't feel —if you weren't part of a certain group you'd never be acknowledged as a writer. And it's true that when I met you, you were very welcoming and paying attention to other writers, young writers. But it's funny. I got the impression of that here, and you got that impression in Paris.

PAUL AUSTER: I know. But you see I think it could be that we're both right and we're both wrong. Because I understand what you mean about the severity and the clubbiness of the French intellectual elite, so to speak, and these writers' groups. I just happened to be lucky in the people that I got to know. They were really special. They were people of great solidarity and it's not true of the French necessarily. American writers, I think, run the gamut from the competitive to the generous.

CELINE CURIOL: Is there anything that those poets told you at the time that you remember as a kind of guidance or some advice they might have given you?

PAUL AUSTER: Um, it was all by example. There was nothing anyone ever said, but I can remember very well a moment when I was expecting a check. I had done some work, but the money hadn't come yet, and I was very strapped for cash. And I was with Jacques Dupin, a poet I translated as a very young person and he's 20 years older than I am, but we became very good friends. And he kind of knew about my difficulties and he just—I remember, we were having lunch one day and he just started paying the bill for the lunch. He had all this money in his wallet and he said, "You know, I just got some money. J'ai trouvé l'argent recenement." And he just started giving me money and I said, "Don't, I can't take it." And he said, "Just take it, don't worry about it. It's simply not important to me." And that's the way he was. And I realized later that he worked at the Gallerie Mode, the very famous gallery that showed all the famous painters and sculptors, I mean, Miro and Chagall and Calder and Giacometti and they were doing a series of books, monographs, on the artists in the gallery. And there was some vague possibility of a translation deal with some English publisher, so he started hiring me to translate these books into English, which I did. But, of course, they were never published in English, and I realized that Jacques was just making work for me so he could pay me and leave me my dignity. **[Laughter]** And without ever saying a word, because I thought it was an authentic contract. And this is the kind of generosity I'm talking about.

CELINE CURIOL: Right. That makes me think, I don't know if you will want to tell it, of the story you told me about your encounter with Beckett and the perpetual doubt of writers. I don't know if you want to tell that story.

PAUL AUSTER: I'd be happy to.

CELINE CURIOL: It's one of the stories that you told me that really stick with me and I thought, "Wow, this is maybe what it is to be a writer."

PAUL AUSTER: I know. It stuck with me, too, I have to say. Well, among the people that I got to know in Paris was Joan Mitchell, the American painter, great painter, whose reputation now, after her death, just keeps growing. And Joan was a very feisty character but we became friends, and she knew Beckett very well. Joan, early in her life had been married to Barney Rosset, the publisher of Grove Press who published Beckett. And, I don't know, it was one day we were talking and suddenly I mentioned how much I admired his work and she said, "Do you want to meet him?" And I said, "Of course, I'd love to meet him." I was about 25 years old. And she said, "Just write him a letter and say I said so." So I wrote a little note, "Dear Mr. Beckett, Joan Mitchell suggested that I write to you, and would it be possible to meet?" and three days later he answered. He just said, "Meet me at the Clos de Lila such and such a day, such and such a time." So I went, more nervous probably than I had ever been in my life. If I had been going to meet Winston Churchill I wouldn't have been as nervous as I was that day. And so we sat down, we talked. He was very kind and very engaged and wanted to know about me, and so on. And at one point he mentioned that he had just translated his first French novel into English, a book called *Mercier et Camier*, which had been written in the mid-40's but a book he didn't publish in France until 1970. And after he won the Nobel prize, I think they were pushing him to pull things out of the drawer so they could publish more books of his. And so he published the book and then, he said, "I was translating the book and I realized that it wasn't very good at all." And he

said, “I cut out about 25 percent of the French for the English.” And in my naïveté and enthusiasm, I said, “Why would you do such a thing? I think it’s a great book.” And he said, “No, no, it’s really not very good. “ And then we went on to talk about other things, and about five or ten minutes later, he just looked up and he said, “You really think it’s good, huh?” **[Laughter]** And I said, “Yeah, I really think it’s good!” And suddenly I understood that writers don’t know what they do. They doubt everything, and you feel terrible about everything.

CELINE CURIOL: Yeah, right. But I think that’s the most reassuring thing that I’ve heard from you. **[Laughter]** About, you know, what it is to be in doubt. But there is another thing that, you know, sometimes people tell you one thing and you listen to it, you don’t really understand it, but it stays with you for a long time and after years you might understand what they’ve said to you in a better way. And, you know, years ago when I sent you those short stories, you said to me what’s important is the space between the sentences, and I was trying to picture what it meant at the time, you know, “the space between the sentences.” Okay maybe the blank? What is it? Then I understood, but I’d like you to explain what you meant.

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I think what I meant was how the most thrilling kind of writing is when the writer is leaping from one sentence to the other. That the next sentence is not something we’re expecting to read, that maybe something is left out, and that if it’s done correctly, the reader’s mind can make that leap. There’s a very exhilarating sense of narration going on, and I think when I recall your earliest works, they were very densely packed. And then, you see, they got better and better and more and more interesting, more and more assured. But then, you know, you were doing a lot of things, you were writing journalism and I think this probably helped with

your prose also, just the fact that you had to be precise and concise. And Céline also, I should say, before she ever published a novel, wrote a very interesting guide book to New York City for a French publisher. It was really quite a terrific book. So that was another stage of your apprenticeship, so to speak.

CELINE CURIOL: Yes. Because I discovered that I could write a book. **[Laughter]**

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah, right.

CELINE CURIOL: Meaning, like more than…you know, because there is this, I mean, I had this fear about length, like you write a short story it's 30 pages, 40 pages—but a book! It's very . . . And if you like books, you're very impressed by them, so that was a good experience in the sense that I discovered it.

PAUL AUSTER: So, there I am reading your work and then years have gone by, and suddenly you showed me passages from this. And I felt that an enormous leap had been made, that you had finally truly, totally come into your own, you knew exactly what you were doing and what you were trying to accomplish. And so, you know, I just wondered, how did you get to that point, and where did this novel come from? Do you have any idea? Can you articulate this? I know it's a very difficult question.

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, it's difficult to say . . . Well, I think it was maybe some kind of faith, you know, that the idea of that character was very. . . not the idea, but . . . I don't know how to

call it, but the character that I had in my head was very clear. I couldn't put it into words, but it was like I knew what I wanted to say. I think that was, compared to before, I knew much more what I wanted to convey, maybe not to say, but to convey, the emotion. I don't know. It was faith. The way I wrote the book was I would write a certain length, but I never looked at it. So I wrote the whole book never looking back because I was so afraid that maybe it's very bad and I have to stop, so I was just writing it and, I don't know, maybe confidence helped?

PAUL AUSTER: Mmm hmm. How long did it take you, do you remember? From first word to last?

CELINE CURIOL: I don't know, maybe two years? Yes, something like that.

PAUL AUSTER: I think it might be interesting at this moment since, of course, Céline is writing in French and what is for sale tonight is English. I think if we found one passage it might be interesting to hear in the French, and then I'll read from the English translation. Maybe we should give a little bit of the background: Our heroine here is at a train station, and she has missed the train. She was supposed to go off with a man, and the train has left, and so here we are.

CELINE CURIOL: Right, so she's missed the train and she's going to take another train.

> Après le douanier française, c' est une douanière brittanique, impassible et rigide, qui examine la photo de sa carte d'identité et la réplique vivante qui lui correspond. Il est passé là plutôt et l'officier l'a sans doute regardé de la même manière, avec cet aire

détaché et professionelle. Elle pourrait le lui décrire et obtenir l'assurance qu'il l'a précédée. Excusez-moi, je cherche quelqu'un, je me demandais si vous l'aviez vu passer, il a pris le train de 9 heures. La douanière remonte ses yeux jusqu'aux siens, sourcils froncés, visiblement étonnée que le sujet étudié ait la capacité de s'exprimer. Il est grand, en tout cas plus grand qu'elle, un peu plus grand, enfin elle n'est pas très grande c'est vrai mais dans la moyenne tout de même, il est brun aussi, pas très foncé mais pas trop clair non plus, il es brun comme le sont en général les bruns bruns, il a des yeux assortis à la coleur de ses cheveux, un peu plus verts, non pas qu'il ait du vert dans les cheveux mais les yeux ont quelque chose de plus lumineux qu'elle attribue au vert un peu noisette, en gros il est bel homme bien qu 'elle ne soit pas sûre qu'il le soit dans l'absolu, c'est plutôt qu'elle le trouve à son goût, il est difficile d'expliquer son gôut, il ne doit pas être trop moche tout de même, à cause d'Ange, elle n'aimerait pas un gars qui n'irait pas avec elle, il porte un costume souvent, mais aujourd'hui il n'en a sans doute pas vu qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un voyage d'affaires, enfin si, il est censé être en voyage d'affaires donc il aura sûrement mis un costume pour faire illusion ou peut-être l'a-t-il glissé dans sa valise pour être plus à l'aises, mais de cela elle ne peut pas être sûre.

PAUL AUSTER: It's so wonderful in French. And here's the English:

After the French customs officer, there's a British customs officer, a stiff and expressionless woman who compares her identity card photo against the living duplicate it represents. He came through this gate earlier and the official probably looked at him in the same way, with that air of professional detachment. She could describe him to her and be assured that he was here before. Excuse me, I'm looking for someone. I was

wondering if you saw him pass through. He took the nine o'clock train. The customs woman slowly lifts her eyes to meet hers and frowns, visibly surprised that the subject under examination possesses the power of speech. He's tall (or at least taller than she is) a bit taller, well, that's not to say that she's very tall, she's average. He's got brown hair, too, not very dark but not very light either, the kind of brown that people with brownish brown hair have. His eyes match his hair, a little greener, not that he has any green in his hair, but there's something luminous about his eyes which she associates with a hazelnut brownish sort of green. A good looking guy, basically, though perhaps not in the strictest sense of the word, it's more that he's to her liking. It's hard to explain what she likes but anyway, he can't be too bad looking on account of Ange, who wouldn't like a man whose looks didn't go well with hers. He often wears a suit, but probably not today, since he's not on a business trip, although, yes, he's meant to be on a business trip so he's bound to be wearing one to look the part. Or perhaps he slipped it into his bag to feel more comfortable. But on that point she can't say for certain. [p. 226] **[Laughter]**

CELINE CURIOL: Okay, that brings us to maybe the question of translation.

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah, yeah. And, well, my question to you is: Now that you've lived in America for so long and have mastered English so well, could you ever write in English, do you think?

CELINE CURIOL: I don't think . . . I'm sure, I mean. I've never really tried, but I don't think I would be able to write fiction in English. I mean, I was thinking about it, when you mentioned

Beckett translating his own work and, for me, I reread the translation of *Voice Over* and also corrected it and it was very difficult to do, just to, you know, resist the temptation of changing what I was rereading. So that's difficult but also writing in English, for me I can write non-fiction, but fiction, there is something about the—I was going to say, the feeling you have of the language, the sense that you can't even explain but you know what sounds a certain way, you know, and it's not even knowledge, it's more like you feel. I mean, I'm sure, maybe you can talk about it, but that you have a sense of what is a good sentence. In English I can say what is a good sentence grammatically, I can say this is, but I wouldn't know exactly what is a good sentence.

PAUL AUSTER: I'm the same way. My French is good. I don't think my French is as good as your English, but I couldn't possibly write in French.

CELINE CURIOL: Why?

PAUL AUSTER: I'm just not immersed in the language deeply enough, there are just so many things I don't know about it, so many little twists, I'm not in the interstices of the language. Again, I can appreciate it passively, I can read a French book in French and know that it's well written or not well written.

CELINE CURIOL: So, you'd know that.

PAUL AUSTER: I'd know that, but it's a passive response. I can't actively produce it.

CELINE CURIOL: Right, for me it's the same thing.

PAUL AUSTER: I mean, there are remarkable writers in the history of literature who have written in other languages, ones they were not born into, but it's really, in the end, quite rare.

CELINE CURIOL: Right. Yes, it's difficult. And, about translation, I mean we were talking earlier and we said it's impossible to translate a book, but yet, you know, translations happen and you've done translations, as well, so what is it?

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I think we live off of translation, we have to have translation, otherwise we'd be confined to our own language and imagine if you lived in, I don't know, Denmark and there are 5 million people there, and you couldn't read anything else.

CELINE CURIOL: But when you were translating, French into English, what were you looking for? Did you have . . . What was important in translating?

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I did two kinds of translation--this is all when I was quite young--translation for love, which was mostly poetry, and then translation to make money which was all prose, mostly non-fiction prose, some very bad books. And I would just crank it out, try to make the best sentences I could, and then that was about the extent of it. With the poetry, I worked very, very hard and, I think, really trying to create English poems out of the French poems. And I think this kind of exercise for a young writer is very valuable because it teaches you how to manipulate your own language, but all the pressure's off. You know, you don't have to create

something, you just have to reinvent something and it's a very big difference. And I think it's something that every young writer should do, if possible.

CELINE CURIOL: Well, yes, but you need two languages,

PAUL AUSTER: You need two languages, yes.

CELINE CURIOL: Right, right. O.K. So it's possible, but it's difficult. Because for me, like reading your books in French and compared to English, it's something else.

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah.

CELINE CURIOL: It's very hard for me to… You know, you write in English and that's it. I can appreciate the books in French, but it's very different.

PAUL AUSTER: When I look at my books in French or Spanish I don't recognize my work at all. It just doesn't feel, I know the words are literally accurate but there's something about the rhythms and the sounds that just are very different. But I do think there is a tiny little moment in your book which I find very amusing, which is clearly, it seems to me, affected by your knowledge of English and your having lived in America, but it's only the kind of thing that someone who's not a native English speaker would be able to make a joke about. And I want to find this, I hope I can find it quickly enough.

CELINE CURIOL: I'll find it.

PAUL AUSTER: You know where it is?

CELINE CURIOL: Yes. . . . "Well, don't mind me. . ." Okay, that's it.

PAUL AUSTER: Okay, so ummm, so the character has gone to a film, and this passage ends with, "The film was called 'Monster's Ball,' and not 'Monster Balls,' as she'd called it when buying the tickets. 'Balls,' the ticket clerk had pointed out, means 'testicles' in English. She had felt ridiculous." **[Laughter]**

CELINE CURIOL: Okay. **[Laughter]** Sometimes we really don't know what we're doing, right?

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah, yeah.

CELINE CURIOL: Okay, you wrote in, I think it's poetry, your collected poems, these two sentences that I kept in mind also for a long time. It was "The world is in my head; my body is in the world." And your new book, if I may borrow it, I'm going to read just one . . . It starts with: "I am alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I struggle through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness." So, this thing about turning the world in your head, having the world in your head, is an image that comes back. What is it?

PAUL AUSTER: Well, for me, um, we all live inside our thoughts, our perceptions of the world. I mean, the world literally is in us, otherwise we wouldn't be able to function in the world. I mean, we carry everything within. At the same time, our bodies are within the world, and it seems to me that this paradox is what defines us as human beings. I mean, all our thoughts, all our feelings, all our perceptions are in here, and yet we are physical matter as well.

CELINE CURIOL: Right.

PAUL AUSTER: And, you know, we get sick, we get old, we die, all these things happen to our bodies, so it just seems to me a statement of human existence.

CELINE CURIOL: Could it be also a statement about reality, and what is reality and the fact that we create. . .

PAUL AUSTER: That, too.

CELINE CURIOL: . . . a new relationship? You know, you said once before that you felt like sometimes the world, that world outside, not the one inside, wasn't real.

PAUL AUSTER: I think, I don't know … I'm sure I'm not the only person who's felt at times disconnected from what's going on around me, as if it's not real. Sometimes I've had the feeling that *I* don't even exist. And so, sometimes also when you're working really hard on a book and you're deep into it, the outside world somehow kind of falls away, and you're in your

imagination so much. I think that's why it's good that we can't write 24 hours a day, we have to eat and sleep and finally reconnect with the people and things around us. Otherwise, I think we'd just drown inside our interiority.

CELINE CURIOL: But would you say that writers might have a different sense of reality, or that this perception of reality, this moment when you feel you are not real, might be what creates the impulse to write fiction?

PAUL AUSTER: It's possible, it's possible. Maybe writers emphasize this more, maybe it's something they draw upon more. But my sense is that most people go through these experiences, too. It's again part of being who we are.

CELINE CURIOL: So in *Man in the Dark*, there is, your main character is an older man who, so what I read, he's in bed at night, he can't sleep. And he starts telling himself stories to go to sleep. And that's, you know, how the book starts, and I was, this idea of telling yourself stories to keep the real world at large…can you talk a little bit about how you came up , , , ?

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I thought…maybe I'll read from the beginning of the book. . . .

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, okay.

PAUL AUSTER: . . . just so people have a sense of what we're talking about.
So this is how the book begins, this is the first four paragraphs of the book:

I am alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I struggle through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness. Upstairs my daughter and granddaughter are asleep in their bedrooms, each one alone as well. The 47 year old Miriam, my only child, who has slept alone for the past five years, and the 23 year old Katia, Miriam's only child, who used to sleep with a young man named Titus Small, but Titus is dead now, and Katia sleeps alone with her broken heart. Bright light, then darkness. Sun pouring down from all corners of the sky, followed by the black of night, the silent stars, the wind stirring in the branches. Such is the routine.

I've been living in this house for more than a year now, ever since they released me from the hospital. Miriam insisted that I come here, and at first it was just the two of us, along with a day nurse who looked after me when Miriam was off at work. Then, three months later, the roof fell in on Katia, she dropped out of film school in New York and came home to live with her mother in Vermont.

His parents named him after Rembrandt's son, the little boy of the paintings, the golden haired child in the red hat, the daydreaming pupil puzzling over his lessons, the little boy who turned into a young man ravaged by illness and who died in his 20's, just as Katia's Titus did. It's a doomed name, a name that should be banned from circulation forever. I think about Titus' death often, the horrifying story of that death, the images of that death, the pulverizing consequences of that death on my grieving granddaughter, but I don't want to go there now. I can't go there now. I have to push it as far away from me as

possible. The night is still young, and as I lie here in bed looking up into the darkness, a darkness so black that the ceiling is invisible, I begin to remember the story I started last night. That's what I do when sleep refuses to come. I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget. Concentration can be a problem, however, and more often than not my mind eventually drifts away from the story I'm trying to tell to the things I don't want to think about. There's nothing to be done. I fail again and again. Fail more often than I succeed, but that doesn't mean I don't give it my best effort.

I put him in a hole. That felt like a good start, a promising way to get things going. I put a sleeping man in a hole and then see what happens when he wakes up and tries to crawl out. I'm talking about a deep hole in the ground nine or ten feet deep, dug in such a way as to form a perfect circle with sheer inner walls of dense, tightly packed earth so hard that the surfaces have the texture of baked clay, perhaps even glass. In other words, the man in the hole will be unable to extricate himself from the hole once he opens his eyes, unless he is equipped with a set of mountaineering tools, a hammer and metal spikes, for example. Or a rope to lasso a neighboring tree. But this man has no tools and once he regains consciousness, he will quickly understand the nature of his predicament.

So that's how this story begins.

CELINE CURIOL: Right. So in the book, to me, when I read it, I thought there as much present, the characters that are alive than the characters that are dead in the story. I mean this young man. . .

PAUL AUSTER: Yes.

CELINE CURIOL: . . . also the wife of the main character. And we talked earlier about what brings us to write. I've asked myself often that question: Why do you want to write? How did it start? Why is it such a strong urge? And I came to a temporary conclusion that it might be absence. It might be, you know, absence of certain people in our life that disappear because of death or other reasons that bring us to write to try to keep something. And you know, Paul mentioned earlier, *The Invention of Solitude*, which was your first prose book and that you wrote after your father died. Do you think. . . could you talk about that relationship?

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I think you're on to something here. I think it's true I had never written a prose book before, I was 31 years old and I had just been writing poems, doing translations, writing essays, hoping to become a novelist someday but not really feeling very good about it. And then my father died very suddenly, unexpectedly, and this impulse to write about him came over me with tremendous force. And I sat down, it was just two weeks after he had died, and sort of blindly started writing, and this writing eventually turned into that book.

And it was this desperate sense of trying to hold onto something before it completely disappeared. And, of course, it's not a novel, but I think maybe the impulse to write novels

comes from something similar, some kind of imaginary absences, or absences that are real and then somehow become metaphorically transformed into fictional absences.

CELINE CURIOL: Right, into something, and in your book also you, I mean, the main character, think a lot about his regrets, things he should have done differently, things he might have done differently. I mean, I don't want to reveal maybe the end of the story but, you know, telling himself stories also helps him.

PAUL AUSTER: Yes. Of course, it's complicated because I think the story that he tells is somehow an image--again, a metaphorical image of his own state of mind, and so, in a way, the story is a kind of psychological exploration of what's going on inside him. So it's functioning on several levels at once.

CELINE CURIOL: Right. Right, right. And the other thing that's interesting, I mean people never really talk about it, but it's also a way of talking about absent people. Dedication in novels, you know, I mean, most novelists, most writers, dedicate their book to someone. What is it? Why? In this case, if you could talk about the dedication of this book.

PAUL AUSTER: Well, yes, this book, it says on the first page "For David Grossman and his wife Michal, his son Jonathan, his daughter Ruti and in memory of Uri." David Grossman, you probably know who he is, he's an Israeli novelist and writer, he's a very close friend, someone I think is a great writer and a very great man, and his son, Uri, at the age of 20 two years ago was killed in the Israel-Lebanon War, and it really hit me hard. It was a terrible, terrible business, this

little boy I had met in Israel some years before, at 20 being killed. And I think this contributed greatly to the feeling of the novel that I wrote, so it had to be for them.

CELINE CURIOL: And you thought about them while you were writing the book?

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah, I did. I mean, I had been thinking about the book, and then when this thing happened, the whole book fell into place for me, and I knew what it was going to be. It's a terrible, terrible equation, but that's true.

CELINE CURIOL: And you think it might be true for other novels, that you were. . . that there was someone that in a way was in your mind?

PAUL AUSTER: Well, yeah, there have been times when I have dedicated books to people who are dead, several times, you know, "For so-and-so in memory," and always thinking about that person very much while I was writing the book. And almost trying to write the book for that person, even though that person was no longer around. It's a kind of gift to the dead. Very strange. Well, enough about me.

CELINE CURIOL: No, no.

PAUL AUSTER: Let's talk about you a little bit. Céline's novel really is, I think, a remarkable piece of work and it is a very unusual French novel in that it tells a story **[Laughter]**, in that it has humor, as you've already witnessed . . .

CELINE CURIOL: Very good humor.

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah. And I should just say something about the title, I guess, first of all because the French title, *Voix Sans Issue*, is a kind of play on words. *Voix* in this case is v-o-i-x, which means 'voice,' but there is an expression in French, *voie sans issue*, which means "dead end," which means you can't get through. And so it's impossible to translate it literally and I remember when we talked about it, and finally we came up with *Voice Over*, which is different but at least it means something in English.

CELINE CURIOL: Yeah, it conveys some of the . . . yes. That was good.

PAUL AUSTER: So in any case, there are several aspects of this book that really fascinate me, and one of them is the psychology of the central character. The protagonist is a young woman, never named, and we don't know exactly how old she is, we assume, I don't know, in her mid-to-late twenties, thirty at the very outside. And she works as a loudspeaker, public address announcer at the Gare du Nord, the train station in Paris. And Céline follows this rather enigmatic young woman through a series of quite bizarre adventures, some of them sexual, some of them not, in a Paris that is completely today's Paris, it's the new Paris, it's a Paris of…

CELINE CURIOL: That's, at least, how I perceive it.

PAUL AUSTER: Well, it's the multiracial Paris, the Paris of the Twenty-First Century. And I was very impressed by the interaction between her, well, the world in her head and then her body in that world and how they interact. And I just wonder how you stumbled upon her. I mean, was she just growing up inside you as an independent force or was there some thing that happened that made her come alive for you?

CELINE CURIOL: Hmm. Well, I had this . . . I was trying to, I had two ideas, I was very much at the time, I was thinking a lot about encounters, what it means to meet somebody you don't know, what happens in that moment. And even if you never see that person again, you know, what you get from that moment when, you know, you meet somebody unknown, which to me was a reflection of the Paris I knew when I was a student and which had seemed to disappear over the years because people had less time, they were on their cell phones, they were on their computers, of whatever. . . meetings. . . tense encounters where it seemed to me a less common thing. So I was thinking of a character that would go through a place where she would meet different people, but the meaning had to always be short, you know, but still something important would happen in that moment. And, um, also it was the idea of the character who says, "Yes," when most people would say, "No." You know, you start, something happens, and it's the beginning of the story and you'd say, No I don't want to go there because it's not in your habits, because it's not what you're used to, but with that character I wanted to see what would happen to someone. O.K. You know, it's like your man in the hole, what if, what if you'd said yes to several things? And also there was this idea about love, and obsessive love, and having a character who was completely obsessed by a man to the point where everything she was doing

was just a way to forget about that obsession, but this obsession would keep coming back to her. So that was basically, I think now, what I was trying to do in the book.

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I think it's a remarkably compelling book and now that you've written another book, *Permission*, a completely different kind of story, that takes place inside an organization a little like the UN. . .

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, a little like.

PAUL AUSTER: . . . which you're quite familiar with. And I remember that Céline told me an amazing story, I think it was during the blackout of a few years ago, maybe you can tell it, what happened to you in the UN. I think this is pretty interesting.

CELINE CURIOL: Okay, well, talking about where the idea of a book comes from. I was working at the UN. It was 2004? The blackout, I think? And I was there when it happened, and I ended up being stuck in the building in the dark by myself which was quite a strange experience and with only a few security guards walking around, and the atmosphere of the place, you know, was very, very strange, and I think the idea of the second novel just came from that night in that strange building. You know, it's usually a building with hundreds of people.

PAUL AUSTER: Right, right. And so now, as you're coming to the end of your third novel, I mean, what changes have you discovered in yourself now, over the course of these three books?

As a writer, I suppose. I mean, are you feeling more confident or expanding, contracting? I mean, where are you right now?

CELINE CURIOL: Well, it's ... you know, I remember, I thought after you write a first book, a first novel, it's probably easier to write the second one, and you might want to talk about that. But I don't know if. . . maybe I just feel more in control of certain things and maybe faster. I might go a little faster than I used to, you know, in terms of how you get more skilled at certain things, but, I mean, you have more experience, but about the fact that it feels every time like when you start a new book, it feels like you don't know anything, coming back to Mr. Beckett.

PAUL AUSTER: Well, I do feel that I don't know anything. Every time I start a new book, I've never written that book before, and I have to teach myself how to write it as I'm writing it. And so having written books in the past doesn't really help. I think the one thing that's happened over the years is that, in the past, when I was younger and I'd get to a passage in the book and I would get stuck, as it often happens when you're writing a novel, you just get lost, then I would panic. I'd think, I don't know what to do, I don't know how to think my way around this problem, the whole book is falling to pieces. And I would really believe that. But now, when I get stuck, I feel less panicked, I'm calmer about it, I feel that if the book is meant to be written, I'm going to find a way to figure out this problem. Yeah, that's . . . that's it.

CELINE CURIOL: But I've heard you say, Oh, I don't know what I'm doing, and then the book is finished! **(Laughter.)**

PAUL AUSTER: Well, it does seem that a moment comes where in the beginning, as I'm stumbling around and then. . . I *don't* know what I'm doing, and then a moment comes when I *do* know what I'm doing. And then it seems to come tumbling out, tumbling out, yeah, rushing forth. It's all very mysterious to me. Some books take a long time, some books can be done in a shorter time, and it doesn't have anything to do with the quality of the work. I mean, when you think that Kafka wrote "The Trial" in six weeks and Robert Musil spent 18 years writing *A Man Without Qualities*, and never finished, of course it's much bigger, but still there are no rules about time.

CELINE CURIOL: Right, maybe it's about when you believe you're done, when you get the feeling that the book is over.

PAUL AUSTER: Right. Right, right.

CELINE CURIOL: So…is this session. . . ?

PAUL AUSTER: I don't know, what time is it? **[Laughter.]** Oh, yes, we've gone way past, so I guess we should take questions from the audience now.

CELINE CURIOL: Sorry, that was an abrupt ending.

PAUL AUSTER: But it's true. It's much later than I thought.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's done, I think. I don't know if the patients are cured but the session is done. **[Pause, then reading a question submitted by a member of the audience:]** "What sort of tools do you use--pens, pads, desk, typewriter?" It's a question for either of you or both of you, since both of you probably use tools.

PAUL AUSTER: Uh, Céline first? What are your tools?

CELINE CURIOL: Uh, hammer… **[Laughter.]** No, I have a computer and I have notebooks. I take notes and then I write with the computer.

PAUL AUSTER: As for me, I always write by hand in notebooks, either with a fountain pen or a mechanical pencil, depending on how confident I feel that day. And then I type up what I do on a nine-year-old typewriter. I know it's a very old-fashioned way to work, but I'm comfortable with it and I don't particularly like working on computers. But now that you're required to give publishers a disc, I have someone type up the book for me on a computer at the end. **[Laughter.]**

CELINE CURIOL: It makes me think, when you bought the computer and you put it in your office and you said, "The typewriter is not feeling well." **[Laughter.]**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: [Reading question from audience:] "How do you construct the story from beginning to end? Do you have a stock of life experiences that you go to, to fill in bits and pieces?"

PAUL AUSTER: [Silence.] Hm.

CELINE CURIOL: Well, for me I think it's the writing itself, it's the sentences, it's one sentence leading to the next one and, you know, the way the writing sounds. I mean, I have an idea of where I want to go, but it's really one sentence after the other and the sentences build the story and push the story toward a certain direction.

PAUL AUSTER: I completely agree with you. I feel the same way. You know, it's hard for me to begin a book without a sense of the trajectory of the story, but many details are lacking and then I often get to a point where I'm about to use one of the ideas I had in my head, and I realize it wasn't very good and then I have to just stop and rethink things. But I agree with Céline, it's the act of writing that creates the writing, and you can't know what's going to happen until you do it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's part of the excitement, I imagine.

PAUL AUSTER: Yeah, it's not mathematics. It's really plunging into the unknown.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For you, Paul: **[Reading question from audience:]** "Could you talk about your exchanges with the artist, the French artist, Sophie Calle, that became a character of *Leviathan*?"

PAUL AUSTER: Well, Sophie Calle's not a character in *Leviathan*. Some of her art works are produced by one of the characters in *Leviathan,* so it should be made clear that Maria Turner and Sophie Calle are not at all the same person. Sophie I met, it was many years ago now, and I was interested in her work and was asked by somebody, a film director named Michael Radford, a British film director, some of you might know his work. He directed *Il Postino* (*The Postman*), that was his biggest success, and a lot of other films, and he wanted to make a film based on one of Sophie's projects and he asked me to write the screenplay. I had never heard of her before this. And so he and I cooked up an idea together, and I was quite interested in doing it at the time – this was about 20 years ago. And we never got anywhere with the project, but I got interested in this story I had made up, and so I used a bit of it in the novel *Leviathan*. And with Sophie's permission, I used some of her work. Then, she was fascinated by the works that Maria Turner does that she herself, Sophie, had not done and so she went out and did those. **[Laughter.]** And then she said to me, "Now that you've used me, I want you to write a story for me, and I'll do anything you want. I'll give you up to a year of my life, to play out any instructions you give me." Well, I didn't want to do this at all, and I felt afraid, to tell you the truth, of the responsibility. Because Sophie's a great and unique person, but she's also a bit crazy **[Laughter.]** and if I told her to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge she would have done it. And so I resisted. For two and a half years I resisted, and every week she would call me from Paris: "Where's my story? Where's my story?" and so I said, "Well, I don't know if I can do it."

And finally it got on my nerves to such a degree, I just wanted to get her off my back and I sat down one afternoon and in about an hour or two hours, I wrote down these simple little instructions about how to improve life in New York City. It's called *Gotham Handbook* and,

wouldn't you know, one of the things I suggested was "Take a spot in the city and take care of it." So, she decided to take care of a telephone booth, a pay phone and she put flowers in it, she put notepads, cigarettes, food, she anchored a chair to the legs of the thing, and, of course, it's a federal offense to tamper with a phone, **[Laughter.]** and the FBI was looking for her just as the project was ending. So even this benign little idea almost landed her in jail. So, we're still friends, Sophie and I, but I don't want to work with her any more. **[Laughter.]**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Another question for you, Paul. "The thing I most like about your books is that the characters are not lovable. I wanted to know what you think about your characters' downsides, which in my opinion is their best side?" I guess the question here is about failure.

PAUL AUSTER: Boy, I don't know. I find a lot of my characters very lovable and I do love them all, I have to say. And I carry them around with me. I don't carry my books around with me so much, but I carry the characters around, and it's as if they're people I know. And, yeah, sometimes they're failures, most the time, I suppose, they're failures of one sort or another but everyone's a failure in the deepest sense of the word. And I simply, I feel a kind of tenderness towards most of them, that is as deep as the tenderness I feel for my own family.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: [to Celine] Do you share that tenderness?

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, I think that the characters—but I… yes, I'd say that the characters are close to me but I wouldn't maybe think exactly like you do, they're not so clearly, I don't know if I have feelings for them. **[Laughter.]** I don't know, I have to think a minute.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: If you don't have feelings, what do you have for them?

CELINE CURIOL: Well, interest. Well, maybe that's a feeling, okay, so.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're curious about them.

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, I'm curious about them, but I don't know if I love them or if I hate them, I don't really think about it in those terms. And they're kind of stuck in a book, so it's so annoying.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Two questions came, wondering if or how religious you are?

PAUL AUSTER: Um, for both of us?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You can each take one of those questions: "How religious are you?"

PAUL AUSTER: I don't practice any religion. I was raised a Jew, I went to Hebrew school and I had a Bar Mitzvah. I'm attached to the fact that I am a Jew but not in a religious sense. It

doesn't mean that I don't believe in spiritual questions very deeply because I certainly know that men didn't create the universe, so—but this sense of adhering to the doctrines of any particular faith don't interest me at all, and so I guess I'm not a religious person.

CELINE CURIOL: Yes, well, my grandparents were Catholics but then my parents thought, they didn't raise me with a specific religion, although I think that French culture is rooted in Catholic, you know. We have it, it's there even though we don't acknowledge it. But then I don't have a religion in terms of a main religion, but I certainly have a form of faith in certain things, but they are very private and not dictate by any kind of religion.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: "Do you suffer from insomnia?" Paul?

PAUL AUSTER: Hm, sometimes, not habitually. Sometimes I find it very hard to go to bed, but I don't consider that insomnia. For me, insomnia is when you get into bed and you can't fall asleep, so sometimes I stay up too late reading or watching a film, but generally when I get into bed, I am able to fall asleep fairly quickly. But there have been long, dark nights, I must say, when I haven't been able to sleep, and those are difficult times, and usually one's thoughts turn to the darker elements of one's life, the darker elements of the universe. And this is what happens to my poor August Brill in this book.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: "Your poor. . ."

PAUL AUSTER: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Beautiful definition of insomnia in the French writer, Maurice Blanchot. He said that an insomniac is someone who keeps the night company.

PAUL AUSTER: That's good.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you?

CELINE CURIOL: No, I sleep very well. Because I have no problems. **[Laughter.]**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's totally apparent.

CELINE CURIOL: No, well, I'm okay with sleep. Luckily.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For you, Céline: "What are the three novels that have most impressed you in the last year?"

CELINE CURIOL: Oh, the last year?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Two years …

CELINE CURIOL: Ten?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Three years. . . A decade. . .

CELINE CURIOL: Well, I read a book by a French novelist who is called Jean Echenoz and it is called *Ravel* and it's a novel about Maurice Ravel that I really thought was very good. Oh, that's a hard one. . .um, what else? Help me!

PAUL AUSTER: I don't know what you've been reading.

CELINE CURIOL: I don't know either.

PAUL AUSTER: Céline's been away. She spent six months in Japan recently and then you've been to France a lot. I haven't talked to you much about your reading.

CELINE CURIOL: What have I read? I'm trying to be honest here, and not make anything up. Well, I'm going to think about it and maybe we get the next question.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Absolutely. If you suffered from insomnia you'd have an answer immediately. Paul, do you still translate or was that just a useful occupation that you did in your younger years?

PAUL AUSTER: I don't translate now, although in the book I'm working on now, there is a translation of a poem, which I enjoyed doing a great deal. So I'm keeping my hand in, so to speak, but it's part of the story and it's a Provençal poet, and I don't know Provençal, but I got a

literal French translation of it and picked my way through it. It's a poem by Bertran de Born from around 1185 and it's quite a remarkable piece of work. But that's the only thing I've done in many years as a translator.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Now that you are well known and successful, what is your take on *Hand-to-Mouth*?

PAUL AUSTER: On *Hand-to-Mouth*. Well, I guess I think of it as a how-not-to book. Everyone's writing how-to books, and when I look back on how I went about my life as a young man, wanting to be a writer, I think I did everything wrong. I was absolutely stupid, and the stubbornness that was in me, is something that I find almost appalling right now. And yet, I'm lucky I got out of it. I'm lucky somehow those days ended at last. So—they were difficult times, I have to say, and I don't forget them. They're very close to me still.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Céline, are you worried by the state of French culture today, the fact that there used to be the *reellement de la France*, France used to have this very strong cultural impact in a way, not unlike America believed that they could civilize the world. But France today maybe doesn't have that standing any more?

CELINE CURIOL: Well, what do you mean by "France"? You mean French artists?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: French culture, French artists, France for export, the France you read about. "Today in the paper there was about Guy Savoy who wants the culinary arts in

France to become something that belongs to our national heritage, or to the French national heritage. Is that the same case with the French literature? Do we really know many French literary writers today the way we used to be able to invoke so many?"

CELINE CURIOL: Well, as you say, it's cultural exports. I don't really like the ...I mean, if you think about it in this way, that it's just commercial, export, you take certain things that are supposed to represent the culture, and you export them to another country. And it's supposed to be a French novel, a French musician, but it's really a label. It's really the people who do the expert, who will use the nationality of the person when it's convenient to. . . I think the way culture travels is much more diverse and cannot be stopped. It happens with every person who travels to New York, every French person, and has a conversation, that can be considered as a cultural exchange. So I—you know, maybe the French government or French people are worried that their influence is decreasing but. . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you worried about it?

CELINE CURIOL: No, because I don't really think about myself as a necessarily a French artist. I mean I'm not in favor of labeling writer with their country of origin, maybe with their language in the sense that this person writes in French, English, but not as a product of a country. I don't know if that answers the question.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I hope it answers the question. Paul, you once said that we live our lives in the company of ghosts. Do those ghosts—father, mother, friends—ever disappear or do they, on the contrary, materialize?

PAUL AUSTER: They don't disappear, but they don't materialize, either. That's the thing about ghosts, they stay ghosts, but they never leave you and I think—I guess I was trying to say that as you get older, and more and more people that you've cared about in your life die, and once this happens again and again, the losses accumulate and then you're walking around with these people inside you. Because, after all, how many people do you love in the course of a lifetime? Not that many, really. And when you lose a great number of them, they are still with you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Does that have to do with the paucity of the number of people you are able to love or your ability to love many people?

PAUL AUSTER: No. It's just a fact. I mean, I guess Mickey Rooney was married eight times, and I suppose he was in love with all those women at one time or another but I don't think I've been in love with eight women in my life, fewer than that. And then there's the immediate family and then some very close friends, and those are the people in the center of your life. There are people I liked very much and care about, but I don't love them in the way that I love the most important people.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In what way would you each say that your work is autobiographical?

CELINE CURIOL: Well—it's not autobiographical because—I would say in what way it's not, first, because it's not written in a way with the idea that it will be an autobiography, that's not the point at all. So if there are things, I mean, there have to be things that come from my perception, maybe not from my life, maybe not from the facts of my life, but from the perception of certain experience or the emotions of a certain experience. So, you know certain situations that have marked me in an emotional way might somehow enter the story, but I'm not trying to write about my life, so I don't...although some of the things I might use are close to me, but it's not autobiographical.

PAUL AUSTER: In my case, I have written autobiographical works, non-fiction works, in which I have talked about myself directly. In my novels, they're not autobiographical, and yet I have borrowed things that have happened to me. I think all novelists do this. Certain episodes in novels come from my own experience, always transformed in some way, but not repeatedly and certainly not in every book. But occasionally I'll draw on something. An example would be, in *The Locked Room*, which is the third book of *The New York Trilogy*, the narrator in 1970 goes through an experience working for the census in Harlem. Well, I did that. And so I based that passage on my own experiences. In the current book, *Man in the Dark*, there's a passage about the Newark riots of 1967, and I happened to be there and see them. And as things are described is pretty much what I experienced, even though all the characters are different, everything is transformed, but the essential things I witnessed are accurate. But that's it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Paul, what is your favorite word in the English language?

PAUL AUSTER: My favorite word in the English language?! I used to have one. I'm not sure it still is, and it used to be "murmur" because I like the m-u-r-m-u-r, *murmur, murmur*, very beautiful word.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Has any word supplanted "murmur"?

PAUL AUSTER: No, "murmur" remains number one.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: "Murmur" is very good.

PAUL AUSTER: Because also, now that we're talking to a French person, it also means "wall wall," in French, doesn't it? **[Laughter]**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: True. *Mur, mur*. Do you have one?

CELINE CURIOL: No.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I must say my favorite word in the English language is a word that one uses in French and very few people know its meaning in English. And I use it with relish. It's the word "pusillanimous." It's fantastic. When you use it in French, people in French know that "pusillanime" means lacking in courage, but you say this in America and people are very much dumbfounded--another word I very much like. **[Laughter]**

Now, I've given you a lot of time, Céline. What are the two other books?

CELINE CURIOL: Ah, I forgot! Okay . . . **[long pause]** Well, I thought about one and it's Paul's wife's book, Siri Hustvedt. . . The last novel which I wrote, er, I didn't write but I read in the last year and I thought it was very good. And now, you give me another 20 minutes and I can think about the third one.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, come back in twenty minutes from now. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]