AGAINST THE CURRENT: A CONVERSATION WITH ANITA DESAI

Edited by Corinne Demas Bliss

Anita Desai was born in India in 1937, and grew up in Delhi. Her father was Bengali, her mother German. Her novels include Cry The Peacock, Bye Bye Blackbird, Clear Light of Day, Fire on the Mountain, In Custody, *and most recently,* Baumgartner's Bombay. *She has published a collection of short stories,* Games at Twilight *and several books for children, including* The Village by the Sea, *which has been adapted as a six-part series for BBC television. She's written the screenplay for* In Custody, *which will be shot as a film this winter. She is married and the mother of four grown children. In 1986 she was a Visiting Fellow at Girton College, Cambridge University, and is now an Honorary Fellow. Last year she lived in Amherst, Massachusetts and taught at Smith College. She is currently the Purington Professor in the Department of English at Mt. Holyoke College.*

I interviewed Anita Desai on the evening of June 14, 1988 in Amherst. I had just finished reading Baumgartner's Bombay. *She had loaned me her one advance copy of the British edition of her novel, which will be published by Knopf in the United States in March. We began by talking about the main character, Hugo Baumgartner, who escapes pre-World War II Berlin "to build a precarious life and lead a marginal existence" in Bombay.*

BLISS: Hugo Baumgartner seems a character as antithetical to you as I can possibly imagine, and yet to have created him you must have felt connected with him in some intimate way.

DESAI: I feel very close to Hugo, partly because I knew people like that in India in the 40s and 50s—there were very few Europeans in India so they made up quite an intimate circle. They were strangely eccentric, obviously outsiders, not belonging to the Indian society, and I always wondered what made them so eccentric. Was it because they were in India or had they left Europe because they didn't fit in there either? The element that I most sympathize with is the one of being an outsider. I suppose most writers, most artists,

confess to feeling outsiders to society to some degree or another. And Hugo just brings this to a higher degree.

BLISS: You wrote about Hugo, "Always somehow he had escaped the mainstream." Isn't that true of all of your characters? Do you have any characters who *are* "mainstream?"

DESAI: No, I don't think I could ever write about the mainstream. I would find that extremely boring—everyone who flows along with the current, along with all the others. It seems to lack originality. The ones who interest me really are the ones who go against the current.

BLISS: Is that true of the fiction you read as well as the fiction you write?

DESAI: Yes, I suppose it is. I remember the first time I read Camus' *The Stranger*, what a tremendous impression it made on me. There was a time when I read that book over and over again. I think everything one reads tends to linger on in one's writing, even after one's forgotten the book one's read. Dostoevski was the other writer I think who interested me so much when I was young. And again it was this other-worldliness of his characters.

BLISS: Is that why you made Hugo Baumgartner Jewish, to accentuate his feeling of being discriminated against, of being apart?

DESAI: Yes. I began with this character who wandered about on the streets of Bombay and started building up a story around him. The trouble with that story was that it was too localized, particular to a place and time which meant something to me, but I couldn't see that it would mean anything to the readers of this book. So I had to find a way to generalize his isolation and one way of doing it was to make him a Jew.

BLISS: Hugo's life seems to me utterly miserable. The only good luck he has is when he goes to the horse races and that is good fortune, which is mostly symbolic and certainly short-lived. Do you think of Hugo as a character who is extraordinary in his suffering or do you see his suffering as typical of the human condition?

DESAI: Very much I think of it as the human condition. I see his condition as not being one of extraordinary suffering, but of suffering which fits in with the general scheme of things. The subject of all my books has been what Ortega y Gasset called "the terrors of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence."

BLISS: When I said that Hugo seems antithetical to you, I meant in part that your life appears to be a life of great success, happiness and fruitfulness, and his seems so comparatively sterile and isolated.

DESAI: I think he's always comparing his life with what it might have been had he stayed in Germany, and comparing it with his mother's. After her death he seems to sorrow for his own good fortune. He feels a tremendous guilt and lives by finding small pleasures, as most of us do. I think the larger pleasures are elusive for most people.

BLISS: Is Hugo a victim because he brings some of his misfortunes upon himself, or he is totally innocent? Are there things about his character which are inherent, which he can't change, or is he simply someone who makes the wrong choices?

DESAI: This is a question which I'm sure I'm going to be asked quite often and I'm rather worried about it. I've already had some readers react angrily by saying I've simply fed the myth of the passive Jew who walked willingly into the internment camps, a willing victim of Hitlerism. In defense I can only say that Hugo is not a representative of the Jewish race to me but of the human race, of displaced and dispossessed people and tribes all over the world. His life has no pattern; the pattern has been blown to bits by history. In India this happened to Muslims, in Pakistan to Hindus, and it is still happening—people are being victimized because of their religion, or caste, because of war and history. In literature you can construct the gigantic movements of history stampeding through the world, or the frantic scurrying and fleeing of the people who are like ants in its way. They have no control over such things. All they can do is blunder through the wreckage and the chaos with their wretched belongings, hoping to escape the notice of history.

BLISS: In a different world, if he were living, let's say, in Massachusetts in 1980, would Hugo have been a success?

DESAI: I think of him as being perhaps extraordinarily inept and clumsy, somebody who simply blunders along. He's incapable of planning a life for himself; he simply picks up those pieces that come his way and holds on to them, and sometimes by mistake he blunders into good fortune. At other times he blunders into misfortune. He has no control over his life. In India, people don't—larger forces control them.

BLISS: I felt I've met this character in a milder form in the character Deven in your novel *In Custody*. That novel, though, has a comic touch because the tragedy is small scale. Deven's misadventures are, in part, amusing, but he does seem like a dry run for Hugo.

DESAI: I suppose so. It was a vision of the human being as helpless in the face of fate or life that made me write both those books.

BLISS: It occurs to me that the main two characters in your most recent novels are both men who are passive, while the characters in your two previous novels, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* and Nanda in *Fire on the Mountain*, are women who aren't passive at all. They have control over their lives; they aren't victimized. Do you feel that men are more likely to end up helpless, or have you just been trying to overturn the stereotypes?

DESAI: No, I don't think it's that. I think I'm saying that men are expected to be active, to forge a life for themselves and their families. They tend to run into trouble. There are those who can handle the situation and those who can't. And my stories are generally about those who can't, the kind that are trapped in situations over which they haven't control. I think women, perhaps mostly Indian women, have a life presented to them and they have to make the best of it. Women tend to accept the life that is given to them and to exercise whatever control they can within those parameters. Whereas a man is expected to move further beyond them—and there lies danger.

BLISS: Would you describe yourself as a feminist?

DESAI: No, because when I started writing I think that I wasn't even aware of such a concept as feminism. And I don't have much patience with the theory that it's women who suffer. As far as I can see, men suffer equally.

BLISS: Two of your female characters, Tara in *Clear Light of Day* and Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, are exceptions—they seem more like the men you write about.

DESAI: These two women could be said to personify the suffering of Indian women because to say that Indian society does not allow women to suffer is a travesty of truth. They suffer in many ways—emotionally, and physically. Women who triumph are exceptional—women like Bim. That there are such triumphs is another example of Indian paradox. In India you have nothing in moderation, everything in excess—and that includes paradox.

BLISS: You once told me you didn't want me to read your two early novels, *Cry the Peacock* and *Bye, Bye Blackbird*, that you didn't feel proud of them. Can you tell me what you don't like about them?

DESAI: I can't bear the sight of them and I certainly can't bear to read them, I think because they're pure emotion, pure, uncontrolled, rampant emotion. It seems to me now, looking back, so immature, so callow. I suppose as you grow older what you are more concerned with is control. And discipline. The discipline of art and of literature.

BLISS: Do you see a steady progress in your work away from emotion?

DESAI: I think there's now a greater distance between the characters and the emotion. I feel more in control.

BLISS: Is that part of the reason why you've written about men in your two most recent novels, because it provides you with an immediate distance?

DESAI: I hadn't thought about it, but yes, that's probably a very good reason. It certainly brings about greater objectivity.

BLISS: My favorite of your novels is still *Clear Light of Day*. How do you place it in the spectrum?

DESAI: It's certainly the most autobiographical of all my books because it's the house and the garden and the neighborhood that I grew up in.

BLISS: And you connect with whom in that novel?

DESAI: I suppose a little bit with each of the different characters. At the same time I look on it with disappointment because it wasn't the book I set out to write. It was an experiment. I wanted to write a book that began at the end and tunneled its way backwards towards the beginning. I thought how interesting it would be to write about people in their old age and then go further back in time to their youth and then further back to their infancy and possibly even further back to their ancestry, which is what made them. But at a certain stage I just lost momentum; I just didn't have the stamina to go further back, so that what I actually wrote was much weaker, much briefer, much less adventurous than I had meant to. I had meant to make a connection between these adults and their infancy, which I suppose I did. But I also wanted to make a connection between their birth and their families and ancestry, their heritage, and I don't think I did that.

BLISS: Now that you look back on *Clear Light of Day* with the wisdom of having written two more novels, do you think that although it was a failure according to your original conception, the book perhaps was wiser than you?

DESAI: Certainly there's a stage where the book takes over and it dictates its form to you. You may start off with an idea but while you're writing you find out that it just doesn't work.

BLISS: Is your favorite novel your most recent?

DESAI: No, I wouldn't say that. Again, I ended it with the sense of failure as I usually do. I always end with the feeling I haven't done what I set out to do, that I've gone wrong somewhere. Once again, I have missed. I suppose that is what leads one to the next book, the next attempt.

BLISS: What did you set out to do in *Baumgartner's Bombay* that you don't think you accomplished? How was the concept different from the realization?

DESAI: I'm not sure if in this book the objectivity didn't take over completely. I'm really not sure how successful a character Hugo is in subjective terms. There's too great a distance between Hugo and myself, Hugo and society, Hugo and all the historical events around him. I'm not sure that I haven't allowed him to drift too far apart, become disassociated.

BLISS: For me the most vivid scenes in the novel, ironically, are the most tranquil scenes—the scenes from Hugo's childhood, with his mother. Were those scenes where you felt most connected with him?

DESAI: I wouldn't say connected with him but connected with the German part of my background, certainly, because all the material for that chapter comes from the stories my mother would tell me of her childhood in Berlin. She was a marvelous storyteller. That chapter was really an attempt to bring to life her world which I had heard about in countless bedtime stories. It was an effort to reconstruct the world of her childhood in pre-World War II Germany.

BLISS: Would you have been able to write this novel while she was still alive?

DESAI: I often wish that I had. I would so much have liked to talk to her and question her more closely. While she was alive I took her history, her experiences all for granted. It was only while I was

writing I realized I shouldn't have done that. There was so much more that she could have explained to me.

BLISS: Do you think of yourself as Indian, or do you think of yourself as half-Indian, half-German?

DESAI: I don't think of myself as half-German at all because I have so little connection with Germany, apart from the language. I think of myself as totally Indian because I was born there and grew up there. And it's been my whole world.

BLISS: Was your mother totally assimilated by India or did she remain a foreigner living there?

DESAI: Assimilated in the sense that she had her Indian family and friends and there was a great deal in Indian life that she accepted. But I think there was a European core in her which protested against certain Indian things, which always maintained its independence and its separateness.

BLISS: Is that what gave you the ability to look upon India with a more cynical eye?

DESAI: I'm sure it has. I am able to look at a country I know so intimately with a certain detachment, and that certainly comes from my mother because I'm aware of how she would have reacted to people and to situations. I feel about India as an Indian, but I suppose I think about it as an outsider.

BLISS: In *Baumgartner's Bombay* you describe India as a country always filled with tricks. Do you feel you are betraying it at all?

DESAI: While writing the book, of course, my concern was to experience India through the character, Hugo Baumgartner. And it's Hugo who sees India as a country of tricks because for a great many Western people India is that: a place of mysteries and puzzles and uncertainties. They continually feel baffled or tricked. Naturally I don't—to me it is the most familiar place on earth.

BLISS: In both *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day* there is lots of imagery of the beauty of India—the sounds of birds, the scents of flowers. In *Clear Light of Day* there is a strong sense of lushness and tranquility and wealth. Whereas in both *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay* we're shown the dark side of India. We see the poverty and the suffering. In *Clear Light of Day* there is that scene when Baba steps beyond the property and witnesses a man beating a horse. He retreats home and we retreat with him,

back into the garden of the civilized, cultured people who seem insulated from the harshness of Delhi. In *In Custody* and in *Baumgartner's Bombay* you bring your reader right out into the bazaar, into the heat, and we have to fend off the beggars.

DESAI: In my early books I was writing out of the experiences of childhood, which is always for everyone something of an idyll—perhaps memory makes it so. Those earlier books chiefly have to do with the world I knew as a child. And that filters through memory to become perhaps rather more beautiful and kind than it would seem to one as an adult. It's also got to do with that slow pace, the slow unfolding of life one experiences as a child. I have to say that by the time I wrote *Clear Light of Day* I began to feel I had walked over that ground again and again. I felt a certain staleness. I began to feel this world is suffocatingly small and protected by high walls and hedges. I was increasingly aware of this world outside which I'd avoided writing about all along.

BLISS: In *Baumgartner's Bombay* have you played up the sordid side? Have you dramatized things to shock your reader or is that the way things really are in India and you had just softened them in your earlier work?

DESAI: I think the latter. Life is extremely brutal in India as it is in most countries. But most countries are very much better at obscuring the brutality, at veiling it so that one is only intermittently aware of the horrors. I think what's so overpowering about India is that all the human experiences—which we surely share wherever we live, all over the world—are all on the surface. Nothing screens them from your view. You feel exhausted and battered by all that India throws at you. At the same time it's extremely honest, it's extremely open, and it's extremely basic. If brutality and harshness are so obvious in India, so are affection and family ties and friendships. They're heightened, too, in India. They're also very much more open and vivid. And I suppose they're what makes life wonderfully liveable there—the warmth and the color and the exuberance one misses elsewhere.

BLISS: The one novel which seems out of synch with the rest of your work is your children's novel *The Village by the Sea*. The suffering described in that novel is severe, but there is a remarkably happy ending. Everything works out very nicely for your heroine, Lila. Is that artificial? Did you think the suffering would be unbearable for a young reader?

DESAI: Oh yes, certainly. The story is based on a real family and certainly their lives didn't end as happily as I made out in the book.

BLISS: So is this a fairy tale?

DESAI: It is. Yes. I wrote it that way for children. I felt immensely dissatisfied with it and admitted to myself that I would have written it quite differently if I hadn't been writing it for children.

BLISS: In *Clear Light of Day* I wasn't aware of the structure while I was reading the book, but when I went over the book to teach it I discovered there was a very clear four-part structure, almost like a Classical play. When I read *Baumgartner's Bombay* I didn't think about the structure at all, then afterwards realized it had been divided into seven parts—the seven days of Creation? I guess I have two questions here. First, are you aware of the structure as you write, or is structure something you impose on your novel afterwards? Second, do you want your reader to be conscious of structure or do you want that to be a discovery after the reading experience is over?

DESAI: I don't think I ever planned the structure of a book. I think the material imposes the structure upon it. To begin with I just have this chaotic, formless mass of material that is somehow going to form a novel. And in order to assume the shape of a novel it seems to take on a certain structure and each book has called for a different structure really.

BLISS: In both *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Clear Light of Day* we find out about the characters very much the way we get to know people in real life. We meet them first and then slowly uncover information about their past that bears on the present, that brings the present to life. The material is constantly overlapping itself.

DESAI: It would have bored me tremendously to start at the beginning and end at the ending. I couldn't really have followed Hugo's life step by step. It would have been the most obvious and the most crude way to write that story. And I had wanted to have about it a certain mystery, a puzzle at the heart of it because these European characters who were adrift in India were of course puzzles to Indians who had no idea of their background, of their history, and would have probably come upon the truth in this fashion following clues and finally arriving at the answer—as I did with the man I had seen in the streets of Bombay.

BLISS: Is the unraveling of the mystery, then, a form of plot for you, what moves your reader through the material?

DESAI: Well, in *Baumgartner's Bombay* I had all this discordant material. How on earth was I going to fit a German background into an Indian present? I suppose what pulled it all together could be called plot.

BLISS: Do you want your structure to remain invisible, or do you want your reader to be aware of it in the end?

DESAI: I think of structure as pattern really. I think books fall into patterns and I think that pattern has to become slowly visible. Looking back I want that pattern to be visible. That's very much a part of the novel for me. You know what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the inscape. I think that has to be traced.

BLISS: The epigraph for *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a quote from T. S. Eliot, "In my beginning is my end. . . . " You used a quote from Eliot also as an epigraph for *Clear Light of Day*.

DESAI: Eliot's concept of time interests me so much. I think the circular concept of time is very, very Indian—the conviction that life doesn't come to an end, merely one episode does and then there are other episodes to follow.

BLISS: And yet for Baumgartner the end is very much an end.

DESAI: Baumgartner will not rise again from the ashes, but the struggle of good and evil will always manifest itself again and again.

BLISS: With evil having the upper hand?

DESAI: Yes, I suppose it does always.

BLISS: That brings me to something I find puzzling about both *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Fire on the Mountain*—the incredible, vivid violence. In *Fire on the Mountain* the violence happens at the end, shattering the tranquility that you have built up so painstakingly through the whole novel. In *Baumgartner's Bombay* your reader walks right into a scene of the aftermath of terrible violence and that image hovers over us for the entire novel while we read through the events that led up to it. What is the purpose of the violence in these two novels? You, yourself, are one of the most non-violent persons I've ever met. Why does the violence have to be there?

DESAI: Because of the inevitable destruction. You talk of the tranquility that's carefully built up or the beautiful surroundings in which the characters live. But there's always a sense of their frailty, and the inevitable end is so often a violent one.

BLISS: In your own experience?

DESAI: Yes, perhaps I would say in the Indian experience. All forms of ending and destruction are surely violent. Some can be made to seem not so, but they are inherently violent. Life or happiness being cut short or coming to an end—these are forms of violence, violence done to living things. In the Holocaust, it was the scale that was unprecedented and appalling—the violence was neither new nor unique.

BLISS: In both these novels violence is done to someone innocent by someone vicious. Are these vicious characters functioning symbolically for a larger, different kind of violence?

DESAI: Yes, I think they are symbols for evil in the world. They make one aware of the presence of evil everywhere and for the purposes of fiction they take the form of characters.

BLISS: You have so much affection for your character Hugo Baumgartner, didn't you want to spare him from the violence of Kurt—who seems an embodiment of Nazism? You had the power to rescue Hugo from this evil, and yet you chose not to.

DESAI: Oh, I don't think I feel that in control of my books, really. I think they tend to lead me on. I lose control over them. In *Baumgartner's Bombay* there was so much evil at large and Hugo just hadn't escaped it by coming to India. It had to catch up with him.

BLISS: It's a bleak picture. Do you think humans are essentially impatient, pugnacious and cruel?

DESAI: I'm very aware of what human nature is capable of. I am writing about India, but I'm perfectly sure it can happen anywhere in the world, depending upon the history of the time.

BLISS: Can writers have any impact on that? By writing about it do you feel you can arouse our awareness and change us at all?

DESAI: Absolutely not. I don't think even religion or philosophy has had that affect. How can literature, which isn't even read?

BLISS: So you see your books as a lament rather than as a call to action?

DESAI: A lament, a protest, a statement. Those have to be made. I suppose that is what we write for. The human animal certainly has a need to make his statement, to retrieve something from the wreck of time.

BLISS: Do you get pleasure out of your writing, or simply catharsis?

DESAI: I write out of compulsion. I've always written out of a compulsion. And it's occasionally pleasurable. The pleasure lies in working out the situation, working out a character. I think what it is really is the sense of the world being a great mass of chaos and when one is at a desk and when one is writing and one line follows the other, one seems to be putting it in order. One is writing out of the illusion of order. One is discovering the sense it makes, whether it makes any sense at all. And for a little while one is fooled into thinking that there is a pattern and the pattern makes sense. And that has order.

BLISS: You once described the progress of your novels as a progress in experimentation with language, moving from English to the more natural Indian idiom in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, where you actually employ three languages. Where will you go from here?

DESAI: Now that I've moved to America I am being faced with yet another language. I have to find a way of either expanding my world or of restricting it.

BLISS: You've told me that you always wrote in English, from the very beginning. What was the language that you thought in?

DESAI: I grew up with three languages—we spoke German to our parents, Hindi to our friends and neighbors and, once we went to school, learned to read and write in English. So we patched together a family language and simply seized whatever word or phrase seemed appropriate to the moment. In my earlier writing I tried to achieve a purity of language—the English language since that was what I was writing—but increasingly I find myself concerned with amalgamating the languages of my childhood and the languages of India in my prose: not to dissolve them all into one bland tongue but to differentiate between them and use their different qualities, rhythms, tones. Of course each is loaded with its own cultural references and that makes writing denser, to my mind richer.

BLISS: Does each language have its unique domain?

DESAI: Yes, I find that is so. For instance, German is to me certainly

the language of infancy and affection. I find myself using it when talking to small children or animals. Hindi we seem to use now here in America among ourselves chiefly for exclamations made under stress and for jokes—because I think humor is largely untranslatable. English is the language for thought and logic for me. And it is the most flexible, the most elastic, the most capable of taking on foreign tones and accents, the most rich in nuances and subtleties. It satisfies my purposes as no other language.

BLISS: Your novel *In Custody* is about to be translated into a movie. The novel itself is so much about the nuances of language—and it is both a comedy and a tragedy. How are your characters going to be portrayed?

DESAI: It will depend so much on the actors. Somehow they have to behave badly and stupidly and yet convey greatness and dignity.

BLISS: How do you feel about having something as singularly powerful in its own genre translated to another medium?

DESAI: I'm quite sure it's going to be a painful experience, but there is the excitement and challenge of translating the literary into the visual medium—powerful in another way. Then, I've written the script myself, and the director and producer, James Ivory, and the producer, Ismail Merchant, are old friends of mine; I know they know the world I have written about well and understand it.

BLISS: In your novels I have a very strong sense of place. Do you feel that your characters were created by their physical situations? Is Hugo Baumgartner a product of Berlin and Bombay? Are the characters in *Clear Light of Day* products of Delhi? Or are these characters who would exist anywhere?

DESAI: I am sure they could exist anywhere. Of course place is important to all of them and this has been pointed out as unrealistic because Indians are notoriously indifferent to their surroundings. Several critics have pointed out that this sense of place is uncommon in Indian writing, but for every writer there is a starting point, and for me it very often is place. I tend to go somewhere, see a certain place, and the characters enter it and then the story takes place in it.

BLISS: How did *Baumgartner's Bombay* come about?

DESAI: I'd always been searching for a way to use my German background, and I never could find it because it seemed so bizarre in the Indian setting. I just couldn't find the right character or the

right story so I was always searching for a key which would help me unlock my German childhood and my German language. Then when I lived in Bombay I saw an elderly, shapeless man—he was an Austrian Jew, actually—who used to putter around in the slums collecting scraps and feed cats. I knew someone who knew him and told me he wasn't as poor as he looked, he was actually well-off and in fact owned race horses. And this of course excited my curiosity. When this man died my friend had to clear out his apartment. He brought me a pack of letters in German and asked me if I could look at them and tell him whether they were worth keeping or forwarding to someone. I looked through them and they had nothing in them. They were simply statements of affection and they gave away no information whatsoever so I simply handed them back. And it was only later, when I was reading about the Holocaust, I remembered that every envelope was stamped with the same number, and although I've never been able to verify this I was told that this had to do with the concentration camp from which these letters had come. And so the Holocaust became a part of my story of Hugo.

BLISS: This novel took you three years. Wasn't it emotionally exhausting for you to be living with Hugo, in his sad life, all that time? Some writers escape into their fiction, you must have wanted to escape out of it, you must have wanted to get away from Hugo.

DESAI: No. It was a sort of release to be able to write about him because he provided me with the key I had been looking for so that I was able to unlock the German part of my background and with it the German language. I found that satisfying after having had to silence it for so long.

BLISS: Are you finished dealing with your own past in your work? Do you feel closure?

DESAI: I would like to think so. Certainly. When I wrote *In Custody* it was a very deliberate effort to step out of my own life and my own past and everything that was familiar to me, and to write about something totally unfamiliar. And that's what I'd hoped to do. But I don't know if writers ever really escape from themselves—or if escapism is the point. The point, surely, is investigation, quest and discovery.

BLISS: You've used a first person narrative only in *Cry the Peacock*, and there you had to employ a third person narrator at the end.

Have you consciously avoided using the first person in your work or has it just not appealed to you?

DESAI: When I was writing that book I realized that it can be a very dangerous tool for a writer. It's most difficult to control. It tends to run away with one.

BLISS: Do you tell your students this?

DESAI: No. In fact one of the exercises one always sets them to is to write in the first person. Not necessarily their own. But one does not want to impose one's own style or concerns on one's students, one wants to help them discover their own.

BLISS: How has the experience of teaching changed you as a writer?

DESAI: One becomes much more self-conscious about craft. I seem to be acquiring the kind of self-consciousness that I never had when I was writing. I'm not sure that's a good thing. It has its dangers. Writing becomes increasingly difficult as one becomes more conscious of the problems. I think to be so conscious of craft is inhibiting.

BLISS: Maybe writers shouldn't teach.

DESAI: How can one halt the movement of one's life? One can't protect oneself from life. Writing has to be a part of life, a reflection of it.

BLISS: Is creative writing something that can be taught?

DESAI: I think it's important for students to be in touch with writers, to hear their opinions and get some recognition and encouragement from them. Perhaps one can teach some basic elements of craft—not teach, but help them to practice the craft. But one cannot pour the material into their writing. That has to come from themselves. And that has to do with the qualities of their minds, their lives.

BLISS: You've said you began writing when you were a little girl. Did anyone encourage you?

DESAI: No one, really. When I was a child I was left entirely to myself to write or not to write. No one ever read what I wrote. I was very secretive. But everyone knew that I spent a lot of time scribbling and they referred to me as the writer of the family, which gave me, I suppose, a sense of vocation. The first writer I came to know was Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. That was when I was a college student

and she lived down the road. It was awfully important to me to see her and to realize that she was a writer. And I began to think that maybe I could live the way she lives too and maybe I would publish what I wrote some day. If I hadn't met her I don't know when and if I would have come to this belief.

BLISS: If you weren't a writer, what would you be?

DESAI: I don't know. It's worried me that I've gone through life without acquiring any other skills at all—which is part of the reason why I'm experimenting with teaching.

BLISS: Imagine that you could have any skills magically acquired, what would you want to be?

DESAI: Writing is such a dull and lonely and boring profession. Really, one envies those artists who are more in contact with their medium. I always think it must be the most glorious pleasure to compose music and then to hear it played. I would wish for the gift of music. I am not at all musical—I am tone deaf—and yet music means much to me. I find that when I can't think my way through problems to do with writing, the answer very often comes to me when I'm listening to music. I've often gone to concerts and suddenly heard the solution in a piece of music.

BLISS: If we picture you in your writer's studio, what would the portrait look like?

DESAI: I've usually had a desk in the corner of the bedroom. I don't think I've ever had a study. I tend to wait until everyone leaves the house and then I go to my desk and spend the morning writing. I write longhand. I like large blank sheets of paper and I cover every centimeter with a handwriting no one else can read and even I have trouble deciphering. I have done all my writing that way and I can't change.

BLISS: You're an Indian and yet two years ago you lived in England, and last year and this coming year you're living in America. How do you feel about becoming an expatriate? How has the expatriate experience influenced your writing?

DESAI: I don't know quite why I've done it except for this urge a writer has as soon as he's finished one book to write the next book. I felt an urge at a certain stage to move out of the country, to live elsewhere for a while. Partly it was curiosity, to see if it would change my view of India, of my subject.

BLISS: Has it? Did the harshness of the life in India as portrayed in *Baumgartner's Bombay* and the awareness of the harshness come from looking at India from the eyes of an expatriate, of even a foreigner?

DESAI: I suppose *Baumgartner's Bombay* was the beginning of my move away from India. Of course I spent a great deal of time thinking and rethinking about India, changing a great many ideas and opinions I had because I'd come away. Now I have things to compare it with which I didn't earlier. At the same time, the experience of being abroad is such an overwhelming one and it's so vivid that it obscures my feelings about India to some degree, too, and that is deeply worrying for me.

BLISS: What goal have you set for your next novel?

DESAI: I've had this overwhelming experience in the last two or three years of living on different continents and having insights into them. I wish I knew a way to mesh them together, to make a pattern of them. But I haven't found a satisfactory way yet.

BLISS: You still haven't written about an Indian woman who's a writer, have you?

DESAI: How can one write that story? Writing isn't, on the surface at least, an interesting or exciting profession. Whatever movement there is is entirely in the interior—this drawing of a landscape which is also an inscape.