Marguerite Yourcenar: a Quest for Ataraxia;

a locus amœnus hindered by absence and presence.

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**Statement of Originality**

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed............................................................ Dated............................................................
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Prior to travelling to France, my husband, Ralph, financed and accompanied me in my quest to research Marguerite Yourcenar’s archives uniquely available at the Houghton Library at Harvard University in Cambridge, USA, and to visit Petite Plaisance — Marguerite Yourcenar’s home on Mount Desert Island in Maine which is now a museum to her life and literary outpourings. Joan E. Howard, the noted author and academic, was our educated and welcoming guide who afforded us a unique and informative insight into this remarkable writer throughout a late summer afternoon. I am eternally indebted to my husband for the extent of his selflessness, encouragement and love, without which the completion of this academic goal would have been
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Finally, I am particularly indebted to my dear friend, Joëlle Legoux who, aware of my combined interests in the classics and all things French, gave me Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Mémoires d’Hadrien* to read whilst I was recuperating from a broken ankle in 2004. I was immediately entranced both by the protagonist of the novel and Yourcenar’s remarkable style of writing, behind which I detected lay so much more. And the rest, as they say, is history...
Abstract

The birth in 1903 of Marguerite Yourcenar, the acclaimed French writer who was the first *immortelle* to be admitted to the centuries-old male bastion of the Académie française, was followed ten days later by the death of her mother, Fernande. Accordingly, she received an unconventional education almost uniquely at the hands of her father, Michel, whose erudition and passion for history underpinned his persona and heavily influenced the literary corpus of his daughter.

Yourcenar’s œuvre was initiated in her teens with two collections of poetry, the foundations of which lay in myth — a reflection of her father’s influence. Following subsequent collaboration with her father, the creation of a pseudonym to replace her birth name of Marguerite Cleenewerck de Crayencour allowed her rebirth as Marguerite Yourcenar, in which guise she would create an expansive corpus. Her final text was truncated by her death in 1987, providing testament to her tireless literary vitality and drive. Yourcenar’s novels are replete with an atmosphere of pervasive death and darkness, and suffused with the motifs of antithesis: birth and death, absence and presence, past and present.

Recent scholarship has concentrated on Yourcenar’s torment concerning the circumstances of her birth which suggest the aura of longing, guilt and loss, and maternal abandonment apparent in her texts. Women are portrayed as often mute and pale reflections of the male protagonist, whilst male homosexual liaisons and incest portray unconventional romantic themes, which distance the author’s writing from societal norms. Maternal absence has been suggested as the major catalyst for the spectres which underlie Yourcenar’s texts, whilst paternal absence and/or presence have been overlooked as a motivating force of her corpus. We contend that this is a significant omission in Yourcenarian scholarship which demands the investigation and analysis to be found in the following thesis. This will provide a valuable insight into paternal absence and presence in Yourcenar’s corpus which has until now remained neglected.

An investigation of the life of the author and its influence on her self-reflexive style of penmanship, evidence which insistently underlines her texts but which was vehemently denied by Yourcenar, will reveal her literary struggles for liberation from her memories. A study of memory will follow and reinforce the extent to which it acts as a prominent, yet often subconscious catalyst for literary endeavour, whilst an analysis of *Denier du rêve*, replete with evidence of the
author’s torment and resultant quest for ataraxia,¹ will demonstrate unrecognised paternal influence in Yourcenar’s œuvre, heretofore overshadowed by the maternal spectre, and provide the climax for this thesis manifesting the extent to which absence and presence afford powerful inspiration for the Yourcenarian corpus.

¹ Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 82, provides the following definition for ‘ataraxia’: “calmness or tranquility; imperturbability...[from Greek ataraxia ‘impassiveness’]. It is the intent of this thesis to demonstrate, inter alia, that Yourcenar sought this state of calmness and tranquillity through her writing; Yourcenar’s passionate affiliation with Greek culture, myth and language has rendered the choice of the original Greek as a sine qua non.
Abbreviations of Texts cited in Footnotes


Bibliography of Marguerite Yourcenar’s cited texts

1921

1922

1929

1932

1934

1936

1938

1939

1951

1958
*Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy*, Gallimard, Paris.

1962
1968

1971
*Théâtre 1, including Rendre à César, (written in 1961), La Petite sirène, (written in 1942), and Le Dialogue dans le marécage, (written in 1929-30), Gallimard, Paris.

1974

1977

1980

1981
*Anna, soror..., Gallimard, Paris.

1984
*Coup de grace, translated by Grace Frick, Black Swan, London.

1985

1980

1981

1984

1984

1984
*With Open Eyes: Conversations with Matthieu Galey, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Beacon Press, Boston.

1985
1986

1987 (published posthumously)
*La Voix des choses* (texts selected by Marguerite Yourcenar, with photos by Jerry Wilson), Gallimard, Paris.

1988 (published posthumously)

1989
*Two Lives and a Dream*, translated by Walter Kaiser, Black Swan, London.

1991 (published posthumously)

1993

1995

2000

Note: for the texts listed in translation, only the year of publication of the texts cited in the thesis has been given.
Photographs


Page 91  Petite Plaisance, Mount Desert Island, Maine.


Page 161  Portrait of Fernande Cleenewerck de Crayencour, mother of Marguerite Yourcenar, 1903, on her deathbed.

Page 166  Michel de Crayencour in 1890, at the age of thirty-seven.

Page 167  Mont Noir, Marguerite Yourcenar’s childhood home near Lille, northern France.

Page 178  Marguerite Yourcenar with her nurse, Barbe, in 1904.