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 pervading 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 Yourcenarrian 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

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


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

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

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

Marguerite Yourcenar with her nurse, Barbe, in 1904. 

Introduction

Mes souvenirs me paraissaient toujours incomplets, me supplicaient davantage. Je me jetais sur eux pour les revivre. Je me désespérais qu’ils pâlissent. Je n’avais qu’eux pour me dédommager du présent, de l’avenir auxquels je renonçais. Il ne me restait pas, après m’être interdit tant de choses, le courage de m’interdire mon passé

My memories, which always seemed to me incomplete, tortured me even more. I embraced them in order to bring them to life again. I grew desperate when they paled. I had nothing but them to compensate me for the present, and for the future I had renounced. Having forbidden myself so many things, I no longer had the courage to forbid myself my past.2

Memory, with its paradoxical powers of pleasure and pain, is the authoritative catalyst in the œuvre of Marguerite Yourcenar, the remarkable French writer who, in 1981 was received as an immortelle — the first woman to be admitted to the three centuries old former male bastion of the Académie Française. Yet, despite this unique accolade, her name and the prolific body of writing which survives this author remain for the most part, with the exception perhaps of Mémoires d’Hadrien (Memoirs of Hadrian), known only in French circles and to a select group of francophone readers throughout the world.

To accept this excerpt, offered by Alexis in Yourcenar’s 1929 récit, Alexis ou le Traité du vain combat,3 as merely innocent, yet heartfelt, melancholy on the part of her character would be to deny the author’s literary proficiency even in this, her first major work. This fervent avowal is replete with authorial purpose. Her sensitive expression betrays an empathy with Alexis’ pain, suggestive of personal persecution and an insistent necessity to recall the past into the present, albeit precipitated by conflicting emotions: “J’avais confondu toute ma vie le désir et la crainte [All my life I have confused desire and fear].”4 Further examination of Yourcenar’s œuvre reveals illuminating repetitive inter-textual motifs — absence finds repeated juxtaposition with presence, birth and death proliferate in apposition, masking devices are commonly used to disguise both aspects of character and authorial intention, death and darkness are thematically and persistently interwoven, and women are habitually relegated to inferior or even nameless roles, whilst men

3 Hereafter, the title will be referenced as Alexis.
enjoy the function of protagonist.\textsuperscript{5} In order to verify the extent to which these dichotomies expressed in literary profusion reflect authorial torment, we must review their implications as they relate to the unique biography of Marguerite Yourcenar. With the recurrent persistence of these motifs throughout Yourcenar’s corpus, we are prompted to consider recent scholarship which questions the degree to which the premature death of the author’s mother, Fernande, from peritonitis and puerperal fever following Marguerite’s birth has empowered her writing. Such deliberation, however, must also include an assessment of the discernibly dominant role played by the author’s father, Michel, during her formative years — an influence which has been somewhat overlooked by scholars to allow for an emphasis on the impact of the circumstances of the author’s birth as they relate to maternal absence.

Much has been written on whether this separation of mother and daughter affected Yourcenar throughout her life, including a notable study by Pascale Doré: 	extit{Yourcenar ou le féminin insoutenable} (1999) which provides a detailed study of the undeniable maternal spectre which haunts Yourcenar’s corpus, and the more recent publication by Carole Allamand: 	extit{Marguerite Yourcenar, une écriture en mal de mère} (2004), the title of which employs a clever 	extit{jeu de mots} to conflate seasickness with an illness relating to the mother which insistently informs Yourcenar’s writing. The author emphatically denied such maternal influence, asserting in 	extit{Souvenirs pieux} that “les maîtresses ou les quasi-maîtresses de mon père, et plus tard la troisième femme de celui-ci, m’assurèrent amplement ma part des rapports de fille à mère [my father’s mistresses or quasi-mistresses, and later his third wife, provided me with an ample share of motherly and sisterly relationships].”\textsuperscript{6} During a television interview with Bernard Pivot in 1979 she insisted that the lack of maternal influence in her life “a été absolument nul [was absolutely nil],” adding that “il est impossible, à moins d’avoir un caractère extrêmement romanesque, de s’éprendre, de s’émouvoir d’une personne qu’on n’a jamais vue [it is impossible, unless you have an extremely romantic character, to be enamoured of, or moved by, a person you have never seen]”\textsuperscript{7}.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{5} This widely held premise, held also by Shurr at n. 25, has prompted counter views expressed below by Farrell and Farrell at n.24 and n. 27, and Gorman at n. 26.
\textsuperscript{6} Yourcenar, 	extit{Souvenirs pieux}, (1974), in Marguerite Yourcenar, 	extit{Essais et mémoires}, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1991)., p. 744; ———, 	extit{Dear Departed}, trans. Maria Louise Ascher (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991)., p. 52. It should be noted that the English translation is not faithful to the original French, adding a reference to female siblings and omitting the important emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship conveyed in the original text, an absence deemed by many to underlie Yourcenar’s apparent torment.
\end{flushright}
cavalier words for the author who had penned in *Alexis*, that “je reconnais que toutes mes expériences de la douleur tenaient déjà dans la première [I recognise that all my experiences of grief were already contained within the first one]” and “les fantômes sont invisibles, parce que nous les portons en nous-mêmes [ghosts are invisible because we carry them within us].”

Despite her assertions, death remains a repetitive focus for the author. No greater example of this can be demonstrated than her ‘assassination’ of her own identity as she takes her first tentative steps as a writer. Having been encouraged by her father, Michel — an intelligent man who had assumed sole responsibility for his daughter’s education after the death of his wife — to read a broad and eclectic selection of literature, albeit heavily accented by antiquity, Yourcenar turned in her teens to literary creativity of her own. Regardless of the increasing absences of the man she would describe as being “perpétuellement en rupture de ban [perpetually absent without leave]” whilst he subscribed to the attractions of a peripatetic existence, her respect for her father remained undiminished, an esteem reflected as she sought his counsel during her twenties on the advisability and choice of a pseudonym.

Born Marguerite Antoinette Jeanne Marie Ghislaine Cleenewerck de Crayencour on 8th June 1903, she began her literary career in 1921 when she had published with Michel’s financial assistance *Le Jardin des Chimères*, a poem about Icarus written when she was sixteen and which, she admits, was greatly influenced by Victor Hugo. *Les Dieux ne sont pas morts* — a slim volume of poetry written earlier than *Le Jardin* — was not published until 1922. In 2005, Achmy Halley published a detailed treatise, *Marguerite Yourcenar en poésie, Archéologie d’un silence*, in which he investigates the motifs of these early volumes of poetry, the unique influence of her father, Michel, on their content, and the important inclusion of Greek and African-American poetry in the later life and literary corpus of the author. Halley also notes the extensive inclusion of “l’île” (the

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p.30. She also notes that when Jacques Chancel alluded to the topic of nostalgia for a mother she had never known during his radio interviews “Radioscopie,” France-Inter, 11- 15 June 1979, Yourcenar replied “That sounds like a novel to me. It is possible, but why?”

12 Achmy Halley’s continued dedication to the legacy of Marguerite Yourcenar is evinced by his current directorship of the Villa Marguerite Yourcenar at Saint-Jans-Cappel, on the site of the former Dufresne family home of Mont-Noir. The home, built by Yourcenar’s great grand-father, Amable Dufresne, in 1824 was destroyed in 1918 during the bombardments of the First World War. The Villa provides a serene residential environment for chosen, published European writers to pursue their literary goals.
island) in her early poetry, its psychological inference of isolation, refuge and regression, persistently replicated throughout her corpus, notably and repeatedly in Mémoires d'Hadrien.

Perhaps it was a desire to dissociate herself from what she considered to be childish anthologies, “contourné, chantourné et boursoufflé [tortured, jigsawed and pompous],” and to forge a real name for herself in a literary world free of family tradition or memories, that prompted her to consider a pseudonym. Conversely, the spectre of death, so insistent throughout her texts, suggests the necessity to deny her existence by creating an alter ego, free from the psychological burdens of culpability for the death of her mother. Ultimately, the name of Marguerite Yourcenar was chosen, an almost perfect anagram of her patronymic Crayencour, thereby effectively expunging her previous identity in order to give birth to a new and independent being.

Linda Stillman, in a profoundly psychoanalytical approach: Marguerite Yourcenar and the Phallacy of Indifference, published in 1985, postulates that this decision by Marguerite Yourcenar was a reaction to her mother’s death and thereby became “the motor of Yourcenar’s fiction”:

The desire to avoid or eradicate motherhood in order to undo her mother’s death leads Yourcenar to the (literary) denial of her own existence and thereby her own responsibility for that death. The turning away from the woman expresses her anger against her mother for dying, against herself (and her subsequent guilt) for causing the awful death, and against the heterosexual experience that initiated the catastrophe.

Whilst the author’s motive for a pseudonym is not consciously wrought or self-explanatory, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that “the (woman’s) pseudonym began to function more prominently as a name of power, the mark of a private christening into a second self, a rebirth into linguistic primacy.” In 1996, Charlotte Hogsett considered the ramifications of Yourcenar’s decision to adopt a pseudonym in her publication Giving Birth to Marguerite Yourcenar. Whilst acknowledging Stillman’s emphatic opinions on the motifs and themes in the Yourcenarian corpus, Hogsett adopts a decidedly analytical approach to the content of

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13 See also Jane Southwood, "Le "complex système de reflets et d'échos": l'image de l'île dans Mémoires d'Hadrien de Marguerite Yourcenar," Essays in French Literature no. 41, November-December, 2004, pp. 125-143., at p.38f.
Yourcenar’s writing and its underlying influences, the majority of which are anchored in her genesis.\textsuperscript{17}

Pascale Doré appears to defend Stillman’s argument, claiming that denial is achieved by the absence of any mention of Fernande’s death in her daughter’s texts or conversation until the latter reached seventy-one years of age — potent indicators of a negation of the mother-daughter relationship, followed by its tardy, and perhaps reluctant, acceptance. Doré also notes that neither the author’s role nor that of the doctor in the death of Fernande are criticised, nor is maternal absence or abandon referenced, further observing that “[n]ous sommes loin d’un Jean-Jacques Rousseau, qui, face aux mêmes circonstances, s’écrie « je coûtai la vie à ma mère, et ma naissance fut le premier de mes malheurs» [we are far from a Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, faced with the same circumstances, cried “ I cost my mother her life, and my birth was the first of my misfortunes”].”\textsuperscript{18}

Such an assertion by Doré is misleading. Whilst such bare confessions as that of Rousseau are absent in Yourcenar’s texts, many researchers agree that the author undeniably laboured throughout her life from the pain of this, the “first of [her] misfortunes” and as such, patent authorial omissions are ambiguous. Her corpus is replete with paradoxical references to the ideal mother or examples of her antithesis, the most temporally linked appearing in Le Lait de la mort — the story of a young mother, whose imprisonment in a tower brings about her death but does not prevent her breast-feeding her baby son, post mortem, for a further two years, and whose narrative is juxtaposed with the beggar woman who blinds her son in order to augment her income. This maternal antithesis elicits the author’s brief but significant observation that “il y a mères et mères [there are mothers … and then there are mothers].”\textsuperscript{19}

Yet, Yourcenar persisted in speaking out “en faux contre l’assertion, souvent entendue, que la perte prémature d’une mère est toujours un désastre, ou qu’un enfant privé de la sienne éprouve toute sa vie le sentiment d’un manque et la nostalgie de l’absente [strongly against the often heard assertion that the premature loss of a mother is always a disaster or that a child so deprived feels throughout his life a sense of loss and nostalgia for the absentee].”\textsuperscript{20} She regularly


denied when questioned that she felt any emotion concerning the circumstances of her birth or the absence of a mother in her life. Doré, deferring to Freud, insists that such denial is a defence against a desire, thought or intolerable sentiment, which is expressed in the negative so as not to be referred to oneself. 21 Whilst simple denial may not result in our suspicion of the author’s motives, her repeated repudiation, both in interview and through her texts, is a challenge to reason and encourages us to read her differently.

It has been suggested by a number of recent critics that Marguerite Yourcenar diminished the feminine discourse in her writing and portrayed heterosexual characters in somewhat unfavourable tones. Stillman claims that the “feminine discourse in Yourcenar’s texts becomes most conspicuous by its very unreadability and by the novelist’s failure to acknowledge it.” 22 Yourcenar, herself, confessed in her carnet de notes which accompanied Mémoires d’Hadrien: “[L’]impossibilité [...] de prendre pour figure central un personnage féminin, de donner, par exemple, pour axe à mon récit, au lieu d’Hadrien, Plotine. La vie des femmes est trop limitée, ou trop secrète 23 [the impossibility of taking a female character as the central figure, for giving, for example, the focus of my story to Plotina, instead of Hadrian. Women’s lives are too limited, or too secret].” In her somewhat sycophantic treatise on Yourcenar, Georgia Hooks Shurr would appear to agree with this ‘confession’ by the author, noting that “Women, like the naïve Wiwine, are too simple, too insipid, too weak to be of interest.” 24 She adds that

[t]he women characters, when they are present, are generally repressed, or forced to be silent, or they are quite mad. Finally, they are vague creatures abandoned by the stronger, more interesting masculine figures. They are self-

22 Stillman, p. 262.
24 Georgia Hooks Shurr, Marguerite Yourcenar: a Reader’s Guide. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), p. 101. But see C. Frederick Farrell and Edith R. Farrell, Marguerite Yourcenar in Counterpoint (Lanham, MD, USA: University Press of America, 1983), p. 98, who see Wiwine as “pious and hardworking, tending to the house and the church [and who] becomes an excellent housekeeper and cook.” Shurr’s feminist criticisms of Yourcenar’s depiction of women are countered by her unctuous panderings to the author. In her introduction at p. x, Shurr praises “the luminous qualities of the artist’s intelligence, that which attracts us to her like a magnet”, and at pp 106-107, she concludes that “the engaged artist continues to work and reflect. Her creative life and imagination remain as ever active and alert to beauty, to truth, to experience and to life itself.” That Yourcenar was impervious to all attempts at flattery was seemingly not detected by Shurr.
effacing, voiceless beings. Yourcenar seems somehow uninterested in attempting to account for women in the imaginary world of her fiction.\(^{25}\)

These rather particular reflections on Yourcenar’s writing are countered by Kay Gorman who insistently asserts that Yourcenar “provides no role models for men or women” and that “her writing is about the quest for wisdom, the passion of living and the ambiguity of life and life’s choices.”\(^{26}\) Shurr’s feminist views which indicate a demand for Yourcenar to create novels with female protagonists, together with her implied criticism that the author has written with the express intention to exclude women, are explored by Gorman who also notes that Shurr “omits all reference to *Feux* (*Fires*) which abounds in intensely portrayed female characters” and that Sophie (*Le Coup de grâce*) is a “very finely drawn character, gripped in acute psychological suffering.”\(^{27}\) Gorman’s views are reinforced by Farrell and Farrell who offer a considered balance of the characters’ perceived finer points, whilst acknowledging the criticisms of others. Their depiction of Mother Dida provides such an example:

Old Mother Dida represents the hard life of the peasant. Although limited in her understanding of both, Dida does her duty to God and country as she sees it ...

Some consider her a harsh and grasping woman, yet she is secure in herself, her life and her memories ... [having made] sensible provision for a future for which she can count on no-one but herself.\(^{28}\)

Yet despite repeatedly arguing her indifference to sexual difference, Yourcenar’s œuvre is replete with bisexual heroes and the apparent devaluation of feminine stereotypes. This may be attributed to the fact that the conceptions for many of her fictional works can be dated to her teens and twenties, at a time when she was so heavily influenced by her father and their shared passion for Greek mythology. Feminine identity is concealed throughout her corpus by the

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\(^{25}\) Ibid, p. 103. Shurr’s observations on the status of Yourcenar’s female characters are supported by M. Delcroix, “Soi comme un autre,” *SIEY: L’Ecriture du moi dans l’œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar* Actes du colloque international de Bogota (5-7 septembre 2001), pp. 221-231(2004), p.228, who notes “la femme … tend à s’effacer, réduite du moins à des rôles secondaires, qu’elle soit valorisée, comme Plotine, mais en dehors des chemins de l’amour, ou dégradée, comme Catherine, au rang de la sexualité brute [the woman (…) tends to be effaced, or reduced at least to secondary roles, whether she’s valued, like Plotine, but outside the paths of love, or degraded, like Catherine, to the level of raw sexuality].”


\(^{27}\) Ibid, p. 64f. In support of Gorman’s views, see Farrell and Farrell, p. 93f. “Her critics, though, have all too frequently become caught up in their analyses of her male protagonists — Hadrian, Zeno, Alexis, Eric — that they have ignored the rich and varied women characters who people her books and have conveyed the false impression that Madame Yourcenar has neglected women to write exclusively about men.”

\(^{28}\) Farrell and Farrell, p. 98.
addition of masks, veils, make-up and masonry in order to minimise impact and focus, creating a mediating device across the dichotomy between presence and absence. Yourcenar’s attempts to diminish her mother’s presence must be achieved by elevating the male or by re-aligning the female into a bisexual male orientation. In an example of life imitating art, her choice of artistic, predominantly homosexual men as her soul mates, suppressed feminine influence in her own life, with the exception of Grace Frick who became her life partner after the demise of the ill-fated relationship with her publisher, André Fraigneau. Death and its powerful effect on the living wove a constant thread through her work.

Adopting her new identity, Marguerite Yourcenar published *Alexis* — the story of the death of a heterosexual relationship. Both the theme — the exploration of the “différence [qui] existe entre les convenances extérieures et la morale intime [difference that exists between external conformity and inner morality]” — and the emphasis on the male protagonist, provide a circular and somewhat autobiographical framework for Marguerite Yourcenar, when we understand her struggles with personal sexuality at the time, confessed through Alexis: “Les combats intérieurs, qui s’étaient livrés en moi sans que je m’en aperçusse […] avaient épuisé mes forces [The interior struggles which had taken place within me (...) had exhausted my strength].”

Associations with death pepper the novel. References to premature deaths proliferate; firstly that of Alexis’s father: “Il mourut jeune, mon père. Je m’en souviens très peu [He died young, my father. I remember very little about him],” which is soon followed by allusion to the passing of his mother and sisters: “Ma mère est morte assez tôt […] la vie et la mort m’ont également pris mes sœurs; mais la plupart étaient si jeunes qu’elles pouvaient sembler belles [my mother died fairly early (...) life and death also took away my sisters; but most of them were so young that they seemed beautiful].” Further emphasis on the premature death of Alexis’ mother is suffused with authorial reference: “ma mère est morte trop vite; je n’ai pu m’acquitter tout à fait [my mother died too soon, and I was not able to discharge my debt altogether].” Whilst the printed words seem innocent, at the very least we should question their transparency and review this apparent intent by the author to confess both a debt to Fernande for the gift of life, and her

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30 The implication made by Shurr that Yourcenar’s fiction is disguised autobiography is refuted by Gorman, who notes, also at p. 63, Shurr’s confusion of narrator, author and character.
pain at occasioning her mother’s death. Alexis’ observation that “la douleur ne nous apprend rien
sur sa cause [grief teaches us nothing about its cause]” reveals the writer’s persistent yet unadmitted grief and her inability to come to terms with its genesis. The cyclic nature of life, where birth and death are frequently juxtaposed — a motif which is particularly evident in Denier du rêve — reverberates throughout Yourcenar’s corpus.

Alexis was reviewed variously by the critics on its publication, some hailing the sensitive portrayal by an author they were surprised to discover was female, whilst others rated the récit with muted praise, unconvinced that its author would ultimately produce more than this slim first volume. Yet, for Yourcenar, it was her father’s determination that the novel was ‘limpid’ which was paramount, his reception of her writing and his influence in her life providing an undeniable catalyst to her corpus. Similarly with Le Coup de grâce which followed, Alexis was based on a personal relationship with an unnamed contemporary, a relationship which the theme and content suggest was not destined for success in the traditional, French stylised conception of love — a conventional and no doubt heterosexual liaison, which appears to exclude any variation from “love à la française”, discussed by Yourcenar in her interview with Matthieu Galey. Evincing her personal search for the distinction between carnal pleasure and love, her writing begins to take on the soon-to-be familiar themes of cross-gender identification, male-to-male attraction and a fascination with figures of sexual ambivalence, who graced eras which permitted greater freedoms.

George Rousseau’s assertion in his biography of Marguerite Yourcenar that “Eros and ambition as hallmarks of the human condition combined to form two of [the] main themes” of her corpus, merits noting. Her novels portray encounters which insistently define an absence of conventional “love à la française” — witness Hadrian’s affection for Antinoüs, Anna and Miguel’s incestuous relationship and Sophie’s tortured and ultimately fatal infatuation for Eric, whose gaze remains solely focussed upon her brother, Conrad. Male passion and opportunism, often at the cost of feminine identity is, by contrast, repeatedly evident in the characters of Hadrian, Eric, Alexis and others. The persistent inclusion of these unconventional themes and personalities in the Yourcenarian corpus is investigated by Hogsett in a further publication entitled Reading

36 Delcroix’ allusion to Denier du rêve as a “roman à tiroirs (which might translate as a ‘novel of hidden depths’)”, p. 224, is particularly perceptive.
37 Youcenar, LYO, (1980), p.76; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 51f. Yourcenar discusses the clichéd French notion of love, which they feel they have stylised, based on centuries of romantic literature.
between the Books: Discontinuity in the Œuvre of Marguerite Yourcenar, published in 1994, in which she asserts powerful forces wrought by “troubled feelings related perhaps to early sexual encounters that bound the pleasurable sensuality they seemed to offer with the terror conferred by the unexpected, the unbidden and the uncontrolled.” As with much of Yourcenar’s writing, reading between the lines becomes imperative.

Ironically, it was the author’s own life experience which was to provide such sensitivity and a surprising insight into the male psyche which would confound those who had adduced that such works must surely have flowed from a male pen. However, Stillman argues that despite “donning two masks, that of detached masculine authority and that of a different name [...] the novelist fails to free herself from herself”.

Analysis of her corpus will reveal whether liberation or catharsis may have been the author’s intention as she sought a locus amœnus—a desirable refuge in her troubled world.

Years of being saturated by the works of classical writers such as Pindar, Virgil, Sophocles and Euripides, of reading history and developing a fascination with eastern writing and mythology, led her to the works of Racine, Hugo, Goethe and later to those of Gide, Rilke and Proust, amongst many. Almost without exception, her reading was male-penned with an

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40 Stillman, p. 263.
41 Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary., p.218, provides the following definition for ‘catharsis’: 1 an emotional release in drama or art. 2 Psychol. the process of freeing repressed emotion by association with the cause, and elimination by abreaction. [modern Latin from Greek katharsis, from kathairō ‘cleanse’].
42 Evidence for the Latin phrase locus amœnus (an agreeable or pleasant place) can be found inter alia in Cicero: Marcus Tullius Cicero, De Finibus 2.107.9 “aut legis, cum omnium factorum, cum regionum conquiris historiam, signum, tabula, locus amœnus, ludi, venatio, villa Luculli (I will suggest less serious matters, reading or writing a poem or a speech, the study of history or geography, statues, pictures, scenery, the games and wild beast shows, Lucullus’ country house).” Here, the translator has defined locus amœnus as ‘scenery’. Also Marcus Tullius Cicero, Epistulae ad Atticum 12.19.1.1 “Est hic quidem locus amœnus et in mari ipso, qui et Antio et Circeis aspicit possit (Certainly this is a pleasant spot right in the sea — it can be seen from both Antium and from Circeii).” PHI Latin texts (Packham Humanities Institute) http://latin.packhum.org. This antiquarian ideology is of a tree-filled, green and watery space, but the more modern concept of an ideal refuge or even an archaic dream is more applicable to this thesis. See Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). In his definitive study on the continuity of European literature from Homer to Goethe, Curtius alludes to a locus amœnus as a garden with regenerative powers of human sexuality marked by flowers, springtime and goddesses of love and fertility. This concept is particularly apposite for Yourcenar. Given the writer’s affinity with Latin and Greek, her awareness of the terms locus amœnus and anaraxia would seem irrefutable, however we can find no evidence of their use in her writing. That this is so is hardly surprising when denial of such concepts was a persistent motor of her persona.
emphasis on the world of men, into which women intruded only circumspectly.\textsuperscript{43} This is hardly surprising when we understand that her father, Michel, was the sole literary influence on the life of the young author and that her literary taste developed from his particular preferences. His deference towards classical authors and poets and his eschewing of the contemporary is reflected from the outset in the young Yourcenar’s penning during her teenage years of the verse discussed earlier, reminiscent of myth and nineteenth century poetry respectively.

That her works are predominantly set in varying degrees of historical context is not surprising given this influence of ancient life on her own. Never a beneficiary of a traditional upbringing, Yourcenar had been escorted to museums and galleries as a young girl by her father, who had also been instrumental in her instruction in Greek and Latin before the age of ten, an intellectual pursuit which would later see her fluent in several languages. Furthermore, the profoundly historical texts of \textit{Mémoires d’Hadrien} (Memoirs of Hadrian), published in 1951 and \textit{L’Œuvre au noir} (The Abyss), which appeared in 1968, based on events in the second and sixteenth centuries respectively, allowed Yourcenar to recall antiquity into the present day, and more importantly to immerse herself in the past, whilst existing perpetually in the inter-textual divide. \textit{Baroque Fictions: Revisioning the Classical in Marguerite Yourcenar}, published by Margaret Elizabeth Colvin in 2005, investigates these classical influences on the literary output of the author, with particular reference to selected texts. She asserts that, whilst “history provides the framework of Yourcenar’s […] liberating vision of a world without boundaries”, the author “uses the neoclassical domain of politics and history (especially ancient classical and Renaissance politics and history) to frame her fundamentally formalist aesthetic project.”\textsuperscript{44} Colvin, therefore, concludes that as Yourcenar revolted “against certain Western notions of humanism and classicism”,\textsuperscript{45} her corpus was shaped essentially by her baroque views of a history without boundaries, rather than the rigid formality of academic classicism. However, as a twentieth-century individual with a non-conformist background, yet one based squarely with its roots in antiquity, Yourcenar may adhere more closely to the neo-classical than the neo-baroque, her personal story adding profound dimension to the classical form of her characters and the

\textsuperscript{43} See also Carolyn G. Heilbrun, \textit{Writing a Woman’s Life} (London: The Women’s Press Limited, 1989), p. 99. Also Hogsett, “Giving Birth to Marguerite Yourcenar.” who notes at p.334 that “the feminist community rightly greeted the news of her election [to the Académie Française] as a confirmation of the Academy’s continuing male orientation rather than as a vindication of the talents of women writers.”

\textsuperscript{44} Margaret Margaret Elizabeth Colvin, \textit{Baroque Fictions; Revisioning the Classical in Marguerite Yourcenar} (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2005). p. 161.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 143.
aesthetics of her tale. That Yourcenar shunned all labels of both her literary and human persona has been well documented, yet it appears likely that she would have been comfortable with Colvin’s ultimate assessment that she sat in the entre-deux.

Whilst not specifically referencing Colvin’s study, Maria Rosa Chiapparo’s recent essay, *Denier du rêve de M. Yourcenar: lecture pirandellian d’une critique politique des années trente*, (2008), appears to support Colvin’s view that Yourcenar employs an historical domain in *Denier du rêve* to frame her aesthetic argument. The text, originally published in 1934 and later republished in 1959, recounts the circulation of a ten lire coin (le denier) amongst a small group of characters, whose lives are interwoven and their individual passions laid bare. The reader is immediately immersed into the miserable background of each character, burdened with current and/or past woes which define their lives. Adopting an essentially Pirandellian or cinematographic outline of rapidly flashing scenes, Yourcenar has chosen this political framework of Fascism to expose the aesthetics of the movement, reflected by the vulnerability and naivety of the populace. This tale of defined gender roles, the tragic irony of fate and interwoven relationships centres on the events of one day in 1933, and an anti-Fascist plot to assassinate Mussolini. Death and darkness pervade the novel, as do juxtaposed themes of birth and death, absence and presence, together with the soon-to-be-familiar Yourcenarian inter-textual motif of masking, obvious in Lina Chiari’s makeup to disguise the physiological effects of her cancer, and Marcella’s adoption of a shawl to conceal the gun she carries underneath — its placement next to her breast signifying the apposition of the life giving force with the potentially lethal weapon. Female characters are frequently silenced and subjugated by their fate; witness Miss Jones, the English sales assistant who loses her livelihood at the hands of her employer’s wife; Giulio Lovisi’s daughter, Giovanna — destined to lead a life weighed down by both the presence of a daughter with infantile paralysis, and the absence of her politically motivated husband, Carlo Stevo, who has been deported for disseminating subversive propaganda and will later die in exile; Mother Dida’s daughter, Attilia, burdened by her fertility and Lina Chiari, diagnosed with cancer, suppresses her own needs while treating her clients with the courtesy they demand.

The text is replete with oxymorons. Marcella’s mother adopted the occupation of midwife, yet was known to procure abortions — the two practices, seemingly the antithesis of each other, exemplifying the double binaries of birth/death and presence/absence. Don Ruggero
dreamt of “statues de chair [statues of flesh],” an allusion repeatedly featured throughout the text, which is reinforced by “les statues de marbre qu’admirent les tourist au musée du Vatican [the marble statues tourists go to see in the Vatican Museum].” Yourcenar’s application of these cynical phrases and the sombre tone of the 1959 revision of the 1934 novel not only undeniably reflect her partner, Grace Frick’s 1958 diagnosis with breast cancer, with which she would battle for twenty-one years, but also provide dramatic emphasis on the void created by the deaths of both Fernande and Michel. So too, their inclusion demonstrates Yourcenar’s habitual intertextual practice of recalling the past into the present, noted above — an undeniable echo of Michel’s fascination with antiquity. Yourcenar’s repeated denials of emotional regret concerning the absence of both Fernande and Michel should be questioned, particularly when one considers her frequent allusion to their spectres, albeit obliquely, and her restricted choice of life partners which patently denied her fecundity. Again, it would appear that, as in Alexis, writing would allow Yourcenar a means to allay her torments.

In 1930, Yourcenar met and became passionately enamoured of André Fraigneau, a writer and editor she had met at the publishing house of Grasset. Her customary penchant for seducing women was well known, yet her attraction to the homosexual André was overwhelming, though completely unrequited. Savigneau adduces that it was Yourcenar’s desire to be loved by a homosexual man, to be “choisie [chosen]” superlatively in this way, which was emblematic of her megalomaniacal tendencies. Yet the angst of this relationship, deemed “an impossible affair” by a Greek male friend, was to provide her with the impetus to write Feux, published originally in 1936, and Le Coup de grâce, published in 1939, the subject of which was “choisi parce qu’il m’offrait un conflit de passions et de volontés [chosen for its basic conflict between individual passions and wills].” The latter text is set in the aftermath of the Great War and of the Russian Revolution, and tells the story of Sophie’s unrequited love for Eric, whose passion centres uniquely on Sophie’s brother, Conrad. His ultimate realisation of her adoration is both flattering and repulsive to Eric and perfectly mirrors the doomed relationship which had simmered between

48 Savigneau, (1990), at p. 105; Savigneau, (1993), at p. 95, cites Edmond Jaloux: “A mesure que nous avançons dans l’œuvre, nous avons le sentiment de déranger des ombres [As we make our way through the work, we have the feeling we’re disturbing phantoms].” Edmond Jaloux, “L’Esprit des livres,” in Les Nouvelles Littéraires, 17 March 1934 (no page number cited).
Yourcenar and Fraigneau, an observation to which Fraigneau himself later attested. Yet, as it stands superficially, the novel is a powerful account of war and its tragic consequences. Having fled her distressing domestic scenario and in ultimate repudiation of Eric’s philosophies, Sophie joins the enemy forces, is captured, imprisoned and condemned to death. When faced with the firing squad, she demands that Eric fire the fatal bullet, allowing her the _coup de grâce_ which culminates ironically in Eric’s eternal remorse and an “inévitabilité du dénouement tragique auquel la passion tend toujours, mais qui prend d’ordinaire dans la vie quotidienne des formes plus insidieuses ou plus invisibles [inevitable tragic ending toward which passion always tends, but which ordinarily assumes, in daily life, more secret or insidious forms].”

Yourcenar deftly combines past and present as she conflates her parents’ relationship, and hers with Fraigneau, into an “inevitable tragic ending”.

The publication of _Le Coup de grâce_ received wide acclaim as “un des meilleurs romans brefs de ces dernières années [one of the best short novels of the last several years].” The conciseness of the novel, resembling “la pureté de forme d’une tragédie de Racine [the formal purity of a tragedy by Racine]” was noted by Henri Hell, who also observed evidence for the author’s personal misogyny which allowed her such empathy with the character of Eric. Evidence for this inter-textual motif will be offered in the ensuing chapters and forms a basis for our hypothesis on the extent of paternal influence on Yourcenar’s persona and literary corpus.

As in _Alexis_, images of premature death appear early in _Le Coup de grâce_, thereby providing a prompt emphasis on the prevalence of death and darkness in the text: the demise of Eric’s father at Verdun is echoed by that of Conrad’s father who had died of typhoid in a concentration camp near Dresden. The depiction of Aunt Prascovia’s bedroom as “puant la cire et la mort [reeking with candle-wax and the smell of death]” is redolent with the image of Fernande’s bedroom in the ten days between childbirth and death and clearly remains for the writer an interminable sensory persecution, which finds regular inter-textual emphasis. Such an example may be seen in _Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé_, published in the 1938 collection of short stories, _Nouvelles orientales_ — tales inspired by Yourcenar’s fascination with oriental, Greek, Balkan and Serbian myth — throughout which allusions to death and darkness proliferate.

54 So also Farrell, p. 3, “It was the constant presence of her father, however, and not the death of her mother, that had the greatest effect upon the girl and the young woman.”
Reference to the bedroom where Ling’s parents died, immediately followed by an account of the
death of Ling’s wife, and the sea as a birthplace for monsters — an unmistakable allusion to
amniotic fluid, and specifically to Yourcenar’s birth — reinforce both this pervading apposition of
birth and death, and our absence/presence hypothesis.

The antithesis of life and death and the prevalence of death and darkness have provided
the theme for the recent study by Kajsa Andersssson: *Le «don sombre»: Le thème de mort dans
quatre romans de Marguerite Yourcenar.* The death of love and marriage for the protagonist in
*Alexis,* and of Sophie’s affection for Eric, together with her physical passing in *Le Coup de grâce*
are examined in detail, as are the accounts of the lives of Hadrian and Zeno in *Mémoires
d’Hadrien* and *L’Œuvre au noir* respectively. Andersson’s focus on the multifaceted aspects of
death in four of Yourcenar’s major texts is enhanced by reference to the wider body of her
corpus. By contrast, Camiel van Woerkum concentrates his research on the three
‘autobiographical’ texts produced by Yourcenar and assembled under the title of *Le Labyrinthe du
monde.* His exceptional and revelatory analysis: *«Le brassage des choses»: autobiographie et
mélange des genres dans Le Labyrinthe du monde de Marguerite Yourcenar* reveals that, despite
Yourcenar’s intention to provide the reader with a sincere and authentic family history, her
emotional conflict and torment are revealed, specifically by her use of the present tense at times
of profound anguish, anger, jealousy, shame or humiliation. According to van Woerkum: “[e]lles
remontent à la surface dans tous les genres que nous avons étudiés, qu’il s’agisse de
l’autobiographie, de la chronique familiale ou de la biographie” [they resurface in all the genres
we have studied, whether it be autobiography, family chronicle or biography].” Evidence at times
of such anguish is noted in fragmentation of Yourcenar’s style and depersonalisation of her
characters. He concludes that by transposing her emotions to her characters, the author finds the
liberation she seeks, conquering her personal demons through the alter-egos she creates whilst
revealing herself in the process.

Since the formation of the Société Internationale d’Etudes Yourcenariennes (International Society for Yourcenarian Studies) in France in 1987, intense scholarship has focused
on the style, themes and reception of Marguerite Yourcenar’s corpus. Regular colloquia are

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56 Camiel van Woerkum, *Le brassage des choses: autobiographie et mélange des genres dans Le Labyrinthe
57 For a comprehensive bibliography of Yourcenarian research and colloquia, see Françoise Bonali-Fiquet,
*Réception de l’œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar: Essai de bibliographie chronologique (1922-1994)* (Tours:
Société Internationale d’Études Yourcenariennes, 1994). Also ———, *Réception de l’œuvre de Marguerite*
held, attracting international attendance and presentations on a diverse range of Yourcenarian topics. In 2007, a colloquium, attended by the writer of this thesis, was held in Clermont-Ferrand and, as it allowed for discussions with several of the above researchers, has proven to be invaluable to our research. Rémy Poignault, the president of the Society, is a distinguished and well published author on many aspects of the Yourcenarian œuvre. Of noteworthy example, his scholarship on the topic of antiquity as it applies to the author’s texts is both exemplary and widely revered.

Recently, Poignault contributed to a unique collection of essays entitled *Marguerite Yourcenar: Adriano, l’antichità immaginata*, published this year in Italy. Poignault’s essay, *Marguerite Yourcenar: una passione ragionata per l’Antichità*, expounds with scholarly detail Yourcenar’s passion for antiquity, which he opines was invigorated by her father and is replete through her corpus in myth, masks and ultimate self-revelation. The collection of essays serves to amplify the inextricable bond between Yourcenar and Hadrian, established from the very moment of her sighting his statue in the British Museum in 1914 in the company of her father, Michel, and intensified a decade later whilst visiting the Villa Adriana, again with Michel. There can be no doubt that the trio of Yourcenar, Michel and Hadrian became profoundly interwoven, allowing for an indelible identification for Yourcenar of the emperor with her father — a recognition which has provided a catalyst for our analysis in the following thesis.

Throughout the following chapters, we have referenced Josyane Savigneau’s definitive biography of Marguerite Yourcenar, undertaken following years of research into the life and character of the author. What began as a professional assignment developed into a respectful friendship, yet did not prevent Savigneau from portraying with honesty the complex, intriguing, demanding, passionate, often brusque, yet overwhelmingly erudite individual we recognise in Yourcenar. By accessing details of the author’s life through personal anecdotes from friends and business associates, letters and diaries, Savigneau has recreated a realistic portrait of this respected author which portrays her many facets, providing a not always complimentary image — a study criticized for its distortion and malevolence by Paola Ricciuli in her essay *Marguerite Yourcenar: l’“adorer di una Voce nel Tempo*, published in the collection *Marguerite Yourcenar: Adriano, antichità immaginata*. Yet, whilst Savigneau’s almost exhaustive tome offers the

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intimate details of her life and loves, it cannot possibly provide the reader with incisive scholarly analysis of her texts. With observations of recurrent and evident motifs apparent in the œuvre of Marguerite Yourcenar, it becomes imperative that we determine their genesis. As we have shown, this has been widely achieved during recent decades by academic research, yet it is the intent of this thesis to build on such previous analysis and to provide a differentiated investigation into the influence of paternal absence and presence on Yourcenar’s writing which has heretofore evaded consideration.

While reference to the growing body of publication on the life and literary achievement of Marguerite Yourcenar must remain necessarily brief in this introduction, we have included examples which will highlight the differentiation of our research, intended to limn a new and enlightened approach to the Yourcenarian corpus. Previous scholarship has concentrated on the unique life of the author, her admission as the first immortelle of the Académie Française, on the motifs of masking, maternal influence, phantoms, alchemy, labyrinths and liberation in her texts, concluding that repeated themes in Yourcenar’s writing indicate an abiding sense of her abandonment by Fernande, subsequent maternal refusal, and an unadmitted culpability for her perceived role in her mother’s death. We will not only seek to expand on these perspectives which reflect her lifetime psychological imprisonment by the circumstances of her birth, but will determine the extent to which Michel’s intense influence over the author was exacerbated by his loss, and was therefore equally pervading, resulting in her insistence on references to antiquity, recalled into the present in order to enliven his existence. We will therefore test the overwhelming evidence for the dichotomies of absence and presence, birth and death — motifs which resonate through the Yourcenarian corpus as she sought ataraxia. In order to achieve these objectives, the thesis will include three major sections.

The first will examine the life of Marguerite Yourcenar, her personality and the influences on the author’s self-expression as each of her literary projects is undertaken. This will include her unconventional childhood, her choices of reading material, her sexuality, content inclusions and exclusions, insistent re-writing of many of her texts, and the circumstances of her relocation to the United States. The second chapter will offer a psychological perspective on life writing, memory, abandonment, retrospection and introspection, as they are reflected in Yourcenar’s œuvre. Of necessity therefore, this chapter will also include a detailed examination of autobiography as a literary genre and the impact of memory on this genre. Yourcenar’s insistent reliance on memory as an authoritative catalyst for her corpus will be studied to determine
whether her writing complies with an autobiographical classification, or indeed necessitates any literary codification. The question as to whether memory ensured Yourcenar her catharsis or rests merely as a faux ami will thus be determined. The third section will provide a detailed source analysis of Denier du rêve, chosen for its repetitive juxtaposition of the absence and presence, birth and death motifs and profoundly emblematic of the deep psychological loss she had recently sustained, yet which, unlike Mémoires d’Hadrien and L’Œuvre au noir, has not undergone considerable scholarly scrutiny. Written in the temporal proximity of Michel’s death and set in a geographic location which reinforces his influence on Yourcenar’s life, Denier du rêve uniquely manifests the extent to which memory authenticates her corpus.

These readings do not pretend to be exhaustive, but aim to pry between the lines of Yourcenar’s texts to determine a deeper understanding of her authorial purpose, to acknowledge existing scholarship concerning her apparent torments and to provide a new and valuable interpretation of her corpus which will incite further review.
“Death is one thing; an end to birth is something else...” These words, erroneously attributed to Charles Darwin, are however particularly germane in an examination of the life and writings of Marguerite Yourcenar. Her birth in Brussels in 1903 which was followed ten days later by the death of her mother, Fernande, from post-puerperal peritonitis would provide a vital continuum between the young Marguerite’s presence in the world, the absence from it of her mother, and the subsequent and undeniable impact of a father’s presence on the life of his daughter. For Fernande, the end of birth was death, an end she had apparently feared, motherhood having been a state she had entered with mixed emotions. For Marguerite, whose death would not come until 1987, the circumstances of her birth, and its aftermath, would saturate her writings in choice of language and theme. The nexus between birth and death, absence and presence, antiquity and modernity is persistently evident. Yet this perspective was vehemently denied by the author:

Je m’inscris en faux contre l’assertion, souvent entendue, que la perte premature d’une mère est toujours un désastre, ou qu’un enfant privé de la sienne éprouve toute sa vie le sentiment d’un manque et la nostalgie de l’absente. Dans mon cas, au moins, les choses tournèrent autrement

I take issue with the assertion, commonly heard, that the premature death of a mother is always a disaster or that a child deprived of its mother feels a lifelong

59 Given Charles Darwin’s research on evolution and the Origin of Species, this quote has been attributed to him. The correct attribution is to M.E. Soulé and B.A. Wilcox, eds. 1980, Conservation Biology: an Evolutionary-Ecological Perspective, Sinauer Association, Sunderland (MA), p. 8, in which the authors discuss the suspension or termination of the evolutionary process.

60 Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in Yourcenar, EM, (1991), p. 717; Yourcenar, DD, 1991, p. 15f. Fernande’s desire for motherhood, which had never been overwhelming, may have been the result of the expectations of the day: “La maternité était partie intégrante de la femme idéale telle que la dépeignaient les lieux communs courants autour d’elle: une femme mariée se devait de désirer être mère comme elle se devait d’aimer son mari et de pratiquer les arts d’agrément [Motherhood was an integral part of the ideal woman as depicted by the commonplaces she heard around her: a married woman was obligated to yearn for motherhood just as she was obligated to love her husband and to practice the arts of pleasing].” Yet, despite Fernande’s revelation of her pregnancy to her sister, Jeanne, to whom she was very close, her pleasure in her impending motherhood was not sufficient to disclose her condition to her other sisters, with whom she was also affectionate. Since both her own mother, who had died one year after Fernande’s birth “of a brief, cruel illness” perhaps caused by a fatal pregnancy (she had already endured ten) and her grandmother, aged twenty, had died in labour, Fernande must have experienced great apprehension regarding the circumstance about to unfold. Nor could she have been assured of Michel’s paternal steadfastness, given his demonstrated irresponsibility towards his first son and his finances.
sense of loss and a yearning for the deceased. In my case, at least, things turned out otherwise.61

If this is so, the resultant paradox between her repeated denials and the darkness and spectres which haunt the pages of her œuvre must be questioned.

**Abandonment and Absence; Presence and Acknowledgment**

Following her mother’s death in Brussels, Marguerite Yourcenar travelled to northern France with her father, Michel, whose pedagogical influence would provide her with the catalyst for a life-long fascination with classical literature which would, in turn, inform her writing. Achmy Halley notes the import of Michel’s self-indulgent influence which was destined to imbue Yourcenar’s opus with an abiding mastery:

Dans les premières années, Michel de Crayencour, seul, décide des lectures à faire. En éducateur dilettante, il semble d’ailleurs qu’il ne se soit jamais vraiment fixé de programme d’étude précis, en rapport avec ce que les petites filles apprennaient dans les institutions scolaires de l’époque. Il ne cherchait pas non plus à adapter ses «leçons» de littérature […] Il faisait découvrir à sa fille les livres qu’il avait aimés […] Il guide implicitement les premiers pas de la jeune fille dans sa rencontre avec les livres et les poètes qu’elle fréquentera toute sa vie. C’est justement dans les pas de son père qu’elle met les siens pour se construire, jour après jour, la bibliothèque idéale à partir de laquelle elle élaborera sa propre vision du monde et de laquelle naîtront la plupart de ses livres62

In the early years, Michel de Crayencour, alone, decides the readings to be made. As an amateur educator, it seems that he does not follow any really fixed programme of precise study, in relation to that which young girls follow in scholastic institutions of the time. Further he did not seek to adapt his “lessons” (…) He implicitly guides the first steps of the young girl in the discovery of books and poets to which she will turn through-out her life. It is precisely in the footsteps of her father that she places her own to create for herself, day after day,

61 Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in EM, (1991), p. 744; Yourcenar, DD, (1991), p. 52. So also Heilbrun, p. 120, who notes Virginia Woolf’s “powerful need for a love that we have come to call maternal, a love that few men are able to offer (outside of romance).”

the ideal library from which she will elaborate her own vision of the world and from which will be born the majority of her books.

Halley’s depiction of Michel’s educational practice provides an insight into his earlier years. As a young man, Michel did not display an aptitude for study, eschewing any suggestion of formalised education. Michèle Goslar records that:

Il ne manifeste qu’un intérêt mediocre pour les études (autre carcan insupportable pour cet adolescent, partout et toujours trop contraint) et arrivera au bac après diverses exclusions d’institutions scolaires qu’il juge trop mornes et trop austères, ou qui menacent de le licencier.

He only showed a mediocre interest for his studies (another unacceptable pillory for this adolescent, everywhere and always too constrained) and arrived at the bac after diverse exclusions from scholarly institutions which he judged too sombre and too austere, or which threatened to expel him.

At fifteen years of age, Michel took flight to seek the sunshine in Anvers, resulting in the necessity for his father to come to his aid when lack of funds prevented his return to Lille. Nor was he cured of this early wanderlust:

Les études de droit, qu’il poursuit à Louvain et à Lille, sont surtout l’occasion de joyeuses ripailles et de nuits passées dans les salles de jeux. Ces loisirs l’obligent régulièrement à appeler son père à la rescousse quand, acculé par une dette d’honneur, il doit quitter une ville en douce, y abandonnant son maigre bien.

His legal studies, which he pursues at Louvain and Lille, are also the occasion of joyful banquets and nights spent in gaming rooms. These leisure activities regularly oblige him to call his father to the rescue when, burdened by a debt of honour, he must with discretion leave a city, abandoning his meagre goods.

Life in the army held the attractions of carefree travel, the camaraderie of other officers and access to gaming. His first desertion was the result of a great debt which his family refused to pay. After a time in England and a romantic dalliance, he returned to the army, deserting once again to join his lover, an act which would preclude his return to France without an amnesty. With the aid of his father, Michel reached Belgium where he agreed to marry Berthe, with whom the family hoped he would settle to a responsible life. However, the lure of travel would see them both

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63 Michèle Goslar, Yourcenar Biographie "Qu’il eut été fade d’être heureux" (Lausanne: Editions L’Age d’Homme, 2014), p. 30
64 Ibid.
voyaging carelessly through Europe, wantonly depleting Michel’s inheritance, and leaving their new son, Michel-Joseph — born a year after their marriage — in the care of his grandmother, Noémi, whose abiding animosity towards Michel would destroy the relationship between father and son. Berthe’s death and Michel’s marriage to Fernande, just one year later, would ultimately bring about the birth of his daughter, Marguerite. However, Fernande’s untimely death would result in Michel’s bearing the unexpected responsibilities of sole parenthood and the education of his daughter which, as we have seen, would be heavily influenced by his own literary preference.

During Yourcenar’s teens, two concise publications, *Le Jardin des Chimères*, (1921) and *Les Dieux ne sont pas morts*, (1922), both influenced by a fascination with ancient myth, the reading of which had been encouraged by her father, were funded by Michel, and were followed during the next two decades by more mature examples of her penmanship, including *Alexis, ou la traité du vain combat*, (1929), *Feux*, (1936) and *Le Coup de grâce*, (1939). The decade following her father’s death in 1929 proved to be emotionally turbulent for the author as she struggled to determine her sexual orientation and a sense of direction. In 1939, a decision to escape an

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65 For further evidence of Noémi’s relationships with her family, see n. 116, and n. 158.
impossible passion for her homosexual publisher, André Fraigneau, coincided with the declaration of the war in Europe and saw her flee her homeland as she had in 1914, when she and her father took flight for England. Her destination in 1939 was the United States at the behest of Grace Frick, an American educator whom the author had met in Paris in 1937 and visited later that same year in New York.  

Abandoning her fatherland, and both maternal and paternal roots, she arrived almost penniless in the United States and, for some time, was forced to rely almost entirely on Grace Frick for her accommodation and livelihood. To reinforce this separation and dependency, Grace discouraged contact with European intellectuals from the author’s past who had also fled to New York, determining that such influence would certainly undermine her own. This enforced dependence and cultural hibernation, combined with the realisation that her idyllic Mediterranean past was being persistently eroded by the violence of war and the betrayal of her ideals by the collaborationist Pétain regime, engendered a growing depression and an hiatus in her writing, as evidenced by the omission in the Pléiade’s Chronologie of all but scant detail for the decade following her arrival in the United States. Her despair was recorded by her biographer, Josyane Savigneau: “les nouvelles qui suintent hors d’Europe sont si mauvaises (destruction, misère, amis morts) que j’ose à peine lire les lettres qui m’arrivent [the news that seeps out of Europe is so bad (destruction, destitution, dead friends) that I hardly dare read the letters that find their way to me].”  

Depression was accompanied by hypochondria, a condition from which

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66 Savigneau, p. 125ff; Savigneau, p. 115ff. The initial encounter between Grace Frick and Marguerite Yourcenar is variously described by the two women: Grace insisted that she had intervened to correct a literary point in a conversation between Marguerite and her editor in the bar of the Hôtel Wagram in Paris in 1937. This assertion was made almost contemporaneously to a fellow university student whose reputation suggests a reliable testimony. By comparison, Marguerite’s description of the encounter was not reported until the 1980s when she boasted of the circumstances of her introductory meeting with Grace Frick to Jerry Wilson, her companion following Grace’s death. The decidedly caricatured scenario outlines a conversation on travel between Marguerite and her companion, a subsequent suggestion made by Grace to Marguerite to travel to the United States, followed the next morning by an invitation: “on pouvait voir de très jolis oiseaux, sur le toit de l’hôtel, par la fenêtre de sa chambre et invitait Marguerite à monter la rejoindre pour profiter du spectacle [some lovely birds could be seen on a roof through her window, wouldn’t she come up to see].” This latter description of the encounter made to her companion of the time eschews the literary discussion favoured by Grace Frick and implies that Grace was the pursuer of Marguerite. Given the timing of the two reports and Grace’s apparent propensity to intervene in conversations without being solicited, hers seems the more credible, yet it should be noted that the Wagram was a known meeting place for lesbians and Grace may have had some intended liaison when she encountered Marguerite and her editor. Savigneau proffers that a blending of the two scenarios may be plausible. Whilst Marguerite’s account suggests a coquettish attempt on her part to exaggerate, not only Grace’s immediate and intense attraction to the author, it also implies her affirmation to Jerry, her new paramour, that she still had that flirtatious appeal. Ironically, Jerry too, was gay; Marguerite’s propensity for such relationships will be discussed later in the chapter.

she would suffer throughout her life, often prompted by nostalgia for the past, which George Rousseau in his biography, *Yourcenar*, suggests was “more acute than she could ever concede.”

Despite, or perhaps because of, the adoration of Grace Frick and her efforts to find the employment for Yourcenar which might ground her in this new life, the writer felt out of control:

Cette femme qui avait traversé les années trente avec une hauteur que beaucoup lui enviaient, se trouvait soudain prise dans le plus redoutable des engrenages, celui qui, de douceurs acceptées en désertions consenties, conduit à la banalité.

Sur cet immense continent, cette terre de réelle liberté, elle a le sentiment du pire enfermement. Coupée de sa langue, de ses amis écrivains, de ses pairs, elle doute, comme jamais, de son avenir [...] elle glisse à un quasi-dégoût d’entreprendre un travail de grand ampleur. Elle se sent un écrivain en jachère et, dans les jours d’absolu pessimism, se demande même ce que c’est un écrivain sans éditeur ni lecteur: plus tout à fait un écrivain, sans doute.

This woman who had gone through her thirties with a kind of loftiness that many people envied suddenly found herself caught up in the most fearsome chain of events, one that, between kindnesses accepted and desertions agreed to, leads to banality. On that immense continent, in that land of real freedom, what she felt was confinement of the worst sort. Cut off from her language, her writer friends, her peers, she had doubts, as never before, about her future [...] she slipped into something like distaste for undertaking any major project. She felt like a writer lying fallow and, on the days of utter pessimism, she even asked herself what a writer was, exactly, without a publisher or readers: no longer quite a writer, no doubt.

This loss of independence and discouragement is powerfully reflected in *La Petite Sirène* [The Little Mermaid], a play inspired by Hans Christian Andersen’s short story and composed by

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68 Rousseau, p.52. So, also Savigneau (1990), p. 348; Savigneau, (1993), p. 332, who notes that the author’s hypochondria “est à son comble - et va devenir de plus en plus choquante au fur et à mesure que les douleurs de Grace Frick deviennent plus intolérables [was at its zenith and would become more and more shocking as Frick’s physical condition grew more intolerable].” Whether the hypochondria was suggested by her imminent sense of loss and a nostalgia for happier times together, or for a longing for a previously unencumbered existence, or perhaps characteristically from a desire to be the centre of attention, cannot be ascertained. See n. 222 for archival evidence in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, of letters detailing Yourcenar’s illnesses.


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Marguerite Yourcenar in 1943 during a particularly bleak period in her life, at the request of her friend Everett Austin who sought a play to be performed by his amateur theatre company. Her choice of this Danish tale betrays her affinity with the mermaid, so enamoured of her prince that she sacrifices her voice to live in his homeland where she will always remain mute, a victim of sensory imprisonment, alienated from her family, her values and the world of her past. Loss of independence, disconnection from the literary fraternity who had enlivened her creativity, and a void where the music of her native tongue had traditionally resonated had together conspired consciously or otherwise to recreate this Danish folktale, in which Yourcenar could express, albeit in the quasi-persona of a ghost-writer recreating an old tale in her own language of loss, the dichotomy of her presence in that world of estrangement and her absence from a milieu to which she was accustomed, a position recognised by Julia Kristeva as the “irrecuperable foreigner.”

Selection of a tale set in a past, albeit legendary, time became a means of reshaping the present into an intelligible concept for the writer, as Paul Allen Miller so cogently observed in his recent journal paper, by alluding to Yourcenar’s “reframing of the present by engaging with the specificity of the past.” Moreover, the observation by feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, that the failure to conform signals “the possibility of a variation” of “the rules that govern intelligible identity” is cited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who also note feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis’ definition of the unconscious as “a psychic domain of disidentification (‘Eccentric Subjects,’ 125-27), a repository of all the experiences and desires that have to be repressed in order for the subject to conform to socially enforced norms. As such, it lies at the intersection of the psychic and the social”. Such ‘disidentification’ must be read at the heart of Yourcenar’s

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70 See also Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal; Memoirs of a Parent’s Death* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996). At p. 70, the author cites Carolyn Steedman’s acknowledgement in *Landscape for a Good Woman: a Story of Two Lives*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987 that the exile of a young woman from her family bonds, as recorded in folk tales like “The Little Mermaid” and “The Snow Queen” was foundational to her own accounts of memorialisation of the past, with particular emphasis on alienation from maternal attention. In a somewhat ironic echo of Yourcenar, though in a more direct and insistent vein, Steedman places full responsibility on her mother for her own refusal of motherhood. For her interpretation on Yourcenar’s rupture from her past, see Pascale Doré, *Yourcenar ou le féminin insoutenable* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1999). p. 184, for her observation that the loss of both the Little Mermaid’s tail and voice serves as a double castration.

71 Julia Kristeva, *Interviews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). p.45. See also Halley, p. 314f, who notes the remarkable similarities between the desires of the *sirène* of this text written by Yourcenar in 1943 and that of Icarus in *Jardin des Chimères* written in her teens, both of whom seek liberation from their current milieu — a theme which underlines the author’s resilient motif. On this, see also n. 137 below.


73 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 2001). p.44.
choice of *La Petite Sirène* as the author struggles to repress her internalised social codes in order to conform to new ‘socially enforced norms’.

While Grace Frick’s professional career continued its upward spiral, that of Marguerite Yourcenar had been abruptly transformed by her decision to adopt this other-worldly existence. From financial necessity, she had begun teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, an expensive and progressive educational establishment located north of Manhattan which required a weekly commute. She would never acclimatise to this world of women, her discomfort only partially assuaged on the discovery of Mount Desert Island and the ultimate purchase there by Grace Frick in 1950 of a permanent home for the couple to share. Ironically, this remote north-eastern island located in Maine, discovered in 1604 by the French navigator and cartographer, Samuel de Champlain, would, according to Halley, reinforce the island theme — closed space, isolated from the world, actual or virtual — recurrent in Yourcenar’s œuvre, which began with the island of Crete, and its association with myth and symbolism. Halley intensifies the importance of the island theme with reference to a psychoanalytical approach:

> Figure qui occupe le centre de l’inconscient et anime le centre spirituel où naît toute la vie, l’île [...] représente «l’image mythique de la femme, de la vierge, de la Mère». Jung dont les analyses étaient appréciées par M. Yourcenar fait de l’île espace mentale de la «libido incestueuse»... Dans cette perspective, se réfugier dans une île comme l’a fait Yourcenar et plusieurs de ses personnages romanesques, c’est affectuer une sorte de «regressus ad uterum» et rechercher dans ses origines le principe primordial de sa propre vie  

The figure which occupies the centre of the unconscious and animates the spiritual centre where all life is born — the island, (...) represents “the mythical image of the woman, the virgin, the Mother.” Jung whose analyses were appreciated by M. Yourcenar makes of the island the mental space of the ‘incestuous libido’... In this perspective, to take refuge on an island as did

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74 Champlain had named the island “l’île des monts déserts” after scouring its rocky and forbidding terrain. Over three hundred years later, the topography and climate perpetuate this inhospitable aura. If altruistic, Grace’s decision to purchase there would provide her companion with serenity for her writing, but it cannot be denied that the island’s remote location and bitter winter climate made it unwelcoming for visitors, ensuring her incarceration of Yourcenar. Savigneau, (1990), p. 298; Savigneau, (1993), p. 283, alludes to the author’s feeling “s’y [être] recluse [cloistered there]” and “voué[e] aux hivers «presque sans fin» [doomed to ‘almost endless winters’],” adding “Grace [aime] la neige, mais je la hais [Grace (loves) the snow, but I hate it].”

75 Halley, p.308, n.117.
Yourcenar and many of her novels’ characters, is to effectuate a sort of “regressus ad uterum” and to seek in these origins the primordial principle of one’s own life.

Although it seems unlikely that Yourcenar might have concurred with Jung’s analysis in this instance, she would perhaps reluctantly admit that the island retreat — at once a locus of liberation and imprisonment — did provide her with the serenity necessary for her literary creation. The motif of the island and its significance in Yourcenar’s corpus has also been reviewed by Jane Southwood, who concludes that:

[Illes îles jouissent d’une position privilégiée dans la vie réelle et littéraire d’un auteur qui passe [...] ses quarante dernières années, sur l’île des Mont-Déserts [...] l’île dont le nom évoque par surcroît “la solitude et l’isolement nécessaires à l’édification d’une grande œuvre”

Islands play a privileged position in the actual and literary lives of an author who spent [...] her last forty years, on Mount Desert Island, the name of which evokes in addition “the solitude and isolation necessary for the creation of a great work.”

To reinforce her assertions, Southwood cites Yourcenar’s early inclusion of a poem entitled “L’île des bienheureux (The Island of the Fortunate)” in Les dieux ne sont pas morts, together with her essay “L’Île des Morts de Böcklin (The island of the Dead of Böcklin)”, written in 1928, and subsequently reworked and republished in 1989 in the collection En Pèlerin et en Étranger, and the islands which feature in the life and death of the tubercular Nathanaël in Un homme obscur (1981). Most important, however, is her inclusion of that island steeped in myth and symbolism, evoking both Achilles’ paramour Patroclus, and Hadrian’s own Antinoüs — the “île d’Achille” — which features in Arrian’s letter to Hadrian in the closing pages of Mémoires d’Hadrien. Arrian’s gentle references which recall the past into the present enable the emperor to attain a “maîtrise de soi” — the island, according to Southwood, representing the figurative interlude between life and death. Ultimately, Hadrian will reach his place of ataraxia — the desirable locus towards which he has been tentatively advancing since the beginning of the récit.78

76 Southwood, p. 127.
Islands both real and literary symbolise the pleasure and pain inherent in this locus of both liberty and imprisonment evoked by the maritime environment so beloved of *La Petite Sirène*. Yourcenar’s notes in the 1970 preface to the play are revealing:

I now understand, somewhat belatedly, what that creature abruptly transported to another world, finding herself bereft of both identity and voice, must have meant to me...It was during that time...that, little by little, the ascendancy of landscapes bearing traces of the human past, once loved so intensely, came to be replaced for me by that of places, even more rare, that are still marked by the ghastly human adventure...This shift from archaeology to geology...was and still is from time to time a process that affects me in a painful way.

Given this confession of her perpetual pain and an absence of identity, it is remarkable that, late in 1947, Yourcenar renounced her French citizenship and her birth name forever, in favour of a formal American identity and self-imposed exile in a ‘foreign’ land. Yet, this decision further strengthens the association between the author and *La Petite Sirène* — a renouncing for both of a past life and a permanent thrusting into an alien environment where each communicated with difficulty. Whilst her language of choice would remain that of her mother-tongue in order to maintain an umbilical link to her roots, Yourcenar’s decision not to return to Europe following cessation of hostilities in 1945 and her subsequent adoption of United States citizenship signalled her acquiescence to her relationship with Grace Frick and her ultimate adoption of this foreign world.

If this personal revelation of her affinity with *La Petite Sirène* was confessed by the author, albeit decades after her apparently innocent choice of character, an examination of her œuvre as it relates to her life might reveal further rapprochement with, and imprisonment in, her characters and the world in which she placed them, and an enlightenment of the psychology which became the motor for her writing.

**Abiding Absence and Denial**

Throughout her life, she insisted that her writing was not influenced by her life’s experiences and attendant anguishs. In a series of interviews with the French journalist, Matthieu Galey, the author condemned the assumption of self-based expression, prevalent in the society of the time:
Cette obsession française du «culte de la personnalité» (la sienne) chez la personne qui écrit ou qui parle me stupéfie toujours [...] Le public qui cherche des confidences personnelles dans le livre d’un écrivain est un public qui ne sait pas lire

This French obsession with the “cult of personality” (one’s own) surrounding anyone who writes or speaks is something that has always stupefied me (...) Readers who look for personal confessions in a writer’s work are readers who don’t know how to read.79

Yet, in the same series of interviews, the impact of abandonment is evident when she suggests that she may have been “née pour l’inquiétude. Pour la douleur, plutôt, pour l’infinie douleur de la perte, de la séparation des êtres aimés [born not for anxiety but for pain, for the infinite pain of loss, of separation from loved ones].”80 It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the theme of abandonment, so evident in her own life as we shall evince, is persistent in her œuvre: In Alexis, the protagonist forsakes Monique and their son; Eric deserts Sophie in Le Coup de grâce; in Mémoirs d’Hadrien, Hadrian distances Antinoû and in L’Œuvre au noir, Alberico de’ Numi abandons Hilzonda who, in turn, neglects her son, Zeno. Throughout her corpus, the author repeatedly strives to direct her readers’ thoughts and to prevent them from seeking unintended motive through her préfaces and postfaces, whilst continually seeking reparation in her writing for this abiding sense of desertion.

In 1974, Souvenirs pieux, the first book of Marguerite Yourcenar’s autobiographical trilogy, was published. In this, six years before the collection of interviews with Matthieu Galey, the author confessed:

Aujourd’hui, toutefois, mon présent effort pour ressaisir et raconter son histoire m’emplit à son égard d’une sympathie que jusqu’ici je n’avais pas. Il en est d’elle comme des personnages imaginaires ou réels que j’alimente de ma substance

80 Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 34; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 18. See also Goslar, p. 97, who notes the frequent absences borne by Yourcenar as the result of Michel’s “nombreuses fréquentations féminines […] rarement plus sérieuses que des flirts, mes pour lesquelles il délaisse sa fille, forgeant en elle, sans y prendre garde, une mediocre image du couple, qui explique largement son pessimism à l’égard de l’amour [numerous female frequentations (…) rarely more serious than flirtations, but for which he left his daughter, forging in her, without realising the consequences, a mediocre image of the couple, which largely explains her pessimism with regard to love].” In such moments, Goslar doubts that Yourcenar could really have felt loved by her father.
pour tenter de les faire vivre ou revivre. Le passage du temps invertit d’ailleurs nos rapports

Today however, my current effort to recapture and recount her history fills me with a sympathy for her that I have not felt heretofore. She is much like those characters, imaginary or real, that I nourish with my own substance to try to make them live, or live once again. The passage of time has, moreover, inverted our relationship.\textsuperscript{81}

Having always refuted with urgency and consistency any attachment to her mother or melancholy about her death, here the author confesses to her desire to breathe life into Fernande, in effect to give birth to her, and to sustain her by her writing, thereby reversing their roles. Such an admission profoundly contradicts her otherwise cavalier assertions, such as those made in a later interview with Bernard Pivot for his television programme, “Apostrophes,” in 1979 when Yourcenar insisted, in response to a question posed by the journalist, that:

\begin{quote}
le manque [d’une mère] a été absolument nul [...] Car, enfin, il est impossible à moins d’avoir un caractère extrêmement romanesque, de s’éprendre, de s’émouvoir d’une personne qu’on n’a jamais vue
\end{quote}

the lack (of a mother) was absolutely nil. For, after all, it is impossible, unless you have an extremely romantic character, to be enamoured of, or moved by, a person you have never seen.\textsuperscript{82}

Yet, despite the absence in her writing of overt melancholy for this individual’s memory, the author enriches her pages with a sense of bleakness, emphasised by persistent reference to death, darkness and spectres, creating an ironic and perverse existence from her mother’s haunting absence.

The following excerpt describing the death of Valentina, Anna’s mother, from the 1981 publication of \textit{Anna, soror...} further attests to the protracted angst the author harboured throughout her life, illustrated not only by the striking similarity to the portrait of Fernande on her death bed, but also by her reference to the permanence of her own pain. In this novel, clearly inspired by the author’s passion for long-absent authors, such as Virgil, Fernande’s absence is potently called forth by the image of the dying Valentina:

\begin{quote}
<Rien ne finit.>
\end{quote}

La vie en elle baissait à vue d’œil. Dans le grand lit à baldaquin son corps mince s’allongeait, moulé par le drap, comme celui d’une gisante sur la literie de pierre

“Nothing ends.”

Life visibly drained out of her. Under the baldachin of the great bed, her thin body lay stretched out, moulded by the sheets like some recumbent tomb sculpture on its catafalque of stone.\(^\text{83}\)

Not only is Fernande’s presence clearly signified in this passage, but the resilience of her memorialisation is reinforced by her “literie de pierre” [stone bed-linen], translated differently, yet equally evocatively as “catafalque of stone”. The failing health of the author’s father, Michel, and her fears of his impending absence are betrayed by the phrase “rien ne finit [nothing ends]” which suggests both her anguish at yet another absence in her life and the inevitability of her prolonged sense of abandonment. Such identification is further accentuated with the novel’s account of the subsequent death of Anna’s brother, whose name, Miguel (Michel), is significant.

From its outset, Marguerite’s life, like that of Michel, would be haunted by absences. In a cruel twist of fate, following the premature death only four years earlier of his first wife, Berthe, as the consequence of an apparent abortion,\(^\text{84}\) Michel had been widowed for the second time as a result of deaths linked to procreation.\(^\text{85}\) Ironically, Baroness Marie-Athénaïs, Berthe’s mother, had

\(^{83}\) Yourcenar, _Anna soror…_ in OR, (1982), p. 865; Marguerite Yourcenar, _Two Lives and a Dream_, trans. Walter Kaiser (London: Black Swan Books, 1989). p.144. The title _Anna, soror…_ mirrors _Aeneid_ 4, Virgil, _The Aeneid_, trans. W.F.Jackson Knight (London: Penguin Group, 1958). p. 97, where Virgil depicts the complicity of the Carthaginian sisters, Dido and Anna, with the former’s entreaty for the latter’s opinion “Anna, Sister Anna… What do you think of this new guest who has joined us in our home?” The illicit love which develops between Dido and Aeneas is echoed by the incestuous love depicted between Anna and her brother Miguel in _Anna, soror…_. Furthermore, Yourcenar confessed borrowing “the name of the principal character, and hence the title” of _Alexis_ from Virgil’s Second Eclogue, “from which, and for the same reasons, Gide took the Corydon of his controversial essay,” Yourcenar, M. (1993) _Alexis_. London, Harvill, p. 13. Thus, not only is illusion to Fernande undeniable in this context, but the impact of Michel’s influence is also clearly registered.

\(^{84}\) Both Berthe and her sister Gabrielle died apparently in the aftermath of a “minor surgical procedure” at the hands of a Dr Hirsch. Their closeness in life was simulated by their deaths, only four days apart, in adjacent rooms of Michel and Berthe’s Ostend apartment. (Goslar, p. 32, gives the dates as 22\(^\text{nd}\) and 24\(^\text{th}\) October, only two days separating their deaths.) Whilst there is no evidence of the real nature of Michel’s relationship with Gabrielle, it would be ironic if her death too was the result of an abortion, the necessity for which he might have been responsible. Yourcenar, _Archives du nord_, (1977), in EM, (1991), p. 1168; Marguerite Yourcenar, _How Many Years_, trans. Maria Louise Ascher (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), p.334ff. For an instance of Michel’s past being recalled to the present, see Yourcenar, AN, (1977), in EM, (1991), p. 1175f; Yourcenar, HMY, (1995), 345f, for an account of Michel’s two chance confrontations many years later in Monte Carlo with Mme Hirsch, the widow of the doctor who attended Berthe and Gabrielle.

\(^{85}\) Michel would eventually take a third wife, Christine Brown-Hovelt, whom he married in Monte Carlo in October, 1926, following a friendship spanning more than a decade. Christine died in Pau in 1950, twenty-one years after Michel’s death in 1929. Goslar’s claim, p. 111f, that they are buried together, at Christine’s behest, in the cemetery at Laeken, Brussels, can be visually verified by the writer, despite the thick growth of
introduced Fernande to Michel, to ease his grief, a meeting which led to their marriage one year later. The union appears to have lacked the passion evident in Michel’s first marriage, the couple sharing few common interests except a love of reading and history. Yourcenar attests to her father’s feeling imprisoned by his marriage—an entrapment emphasised by her use of the phrase “pris au piège [trapped]” five times in this paragraph—a reflection, it could be argued, of her own domestic situation at the time of penning *Souvenirs pieux* in 1974, when her partner’s decline in health would require the author’s continued presence and ministrations and engender in her the echoed sensation of confinement.

In fact, Michel’s sense of entrapment is demonstrated early in his life by his desire to escape from schools which threatened to restrict his perception of freedom, an action he reinforced by twice absconding from the army. His desire for a carefree life in which he systematically depleted his inheritance reflects the imperative to flee the family bonds in which there can be no doubt that he felt imprisoned and indebted to the mother he loathed who continually reminded the family that their well-being was as a result of the wealth she had blessed on them all. Michel’s desire to flee perceived bonds became a life-long determination, his daughter eventually providing the only boundaries within which he felt happy to remain, not withstanding his frequent absences from even this grave responsibility. Regular assertion of his freedom had become his driving force; the impending birth of another child must have tested his resolve.

The gap of nearly twenty years in their ages (Michel was forty-seven when they married, and Fernande twenty-eight) and Michel’s first experience with fatherhood not having been a resounding success, must have combined to cool Michel’s ardour for paternity. Despite this

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86 Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in EM, (1991), p. 716; Yourcenar, DD, (1991), p. 14: “A quarante-neuf ans, il se retrouvait pris au piège au côté d’une femme pour laquelle il avait des sentiments affectueux, avec une pointe d’irritation [At the age of forty-nine, he found himself trapped again in the company of a woman for whom he had tender feelings, tinged by a bit of irritation].” Michel’s life was a series of such entrapments. To avoid the destiny of following in his father’s footsteps, as his mother had hoped, he joined the army, a career he then left suddenly, following an unpaid gambling debt, and fled to England where he formed an amorous relationship. This scenario was repeated once more, but when his father became incurably ill, he left England to return to France where he allowed himself to become trapped into a socially acceptable marriage with Berthe. For further evidence of entrapment and a lust for freedom, see n. 298 below.
disinclination, he acquiesced to Fernande’s desire for pregnancy which, as we have stated earlier, had initially been faint. After three years of marriage, the presence of a child would be a discernible symbol of her success as a wife, an important social factor for the thirty-one year old Fernande who had married relatively late. Ironically, however, Fernande’s abiding maternal reluctance based on her family history of deaths in child-birth, is borne out by her delivery of Marguerite and subsequent rapid mortal decline. This tragic and feared outcome which perpetuated the symmetry of death and birth on both sides of the author’s family would cast a relentless shadow on her life and the content of her writing.

In the Footsteps of Death – Life with Michel

Father and daughter — now adrift without Fernande or other siblings — returned to France from Brussels. Yet, Marguerite was not Michel’s only child; his first wife, Berthe, had borne a son in 1886, Marguerite’s seventeen year old half-brother, also named Michel as family tradition decreed, who had long lived apart from his parents. Given the itinerant existence throughout Europe led by Berthe and Michel during their marriage, including a period when they had alienated themselves from family and quotidian existence by joining a circus and performing equestrian feats, the up-bringing of the young Michel was left to others, an abandonment with the obvious consequence of certain estrangement between father and son. The younger Michel condemned the life of extravagance and adventure led by his father, often “reprochant violemment à (Michel) d’avoir dilapidé la fortune terrienne de la famille [often violently reproaching Michel for having squandered the family’s ancestral fortune].” In turn thought him “renfermé [et] silencieusement hostile, et l’avait toujours ressenti comme un ennemi [withdrawn (and) silently hostile, and had always felt as if he were an enemy].” Their mutual disengagement often led, not only to stormy arguments, but to actual physical combat. The relationship between the young Marguerite and her father is also variously attested. Despite the

87 Michel “avait pour principe qu’une femme qui veut un enfant a le droit d’en avoir un, et, sauf erreur, pas plus d’un[held to the principle that a woman who wanted a child was entitled to have one and, barring mistakes, not more than one].” Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in EM, (1991), p. 715; Yourcenar, DD, (1991), p.13. This assertion reinforces the assumption that Berthe had undergone an abortion, suggested or insisted upon by Michel, which tragically proved fatal.
88 Cited above at n. 60.
89 Goslar, p.55.
assertion that Michel was “the grown-up around whom revolved the mechanism of life”, the
author confesses in Quoi? L’Eternité: “Je ne sais si j’aimais ou non ce monsieur de haute taille”
[“I don’t know whether I loved that tall gentleman or not”]. The description of the widower’s
journey with his young baby along the road to Mont Noir, Michel’s ancestral home, may thus be
read with significant foreboding, exaggerated as it is by the spectre of deaths to come:
Cette route campagnard [...] sera dans onze ans flanquée sur toute sa longueur, de
Bailleul à Cassel, d’une double range de chevaux morts ou agonisants, éventrés
par les obus de 1914, qu’on a traînés dans le fossé
This country road (...) will in eleven years be lined along its entire length, from
Bailleul to Cassel, with a double row of dead or dying horses that have been
eviscerated by the shells of 1914 and dragged into the ditch.
The image of death and darkness is reinforced with reference to impending tragedy:
On gravit déjà la colline sur laquelle s’étend l’ombre noire des sapins qui donnent
leur nom à la propriété. Dans douze ans, livrés en holocauste aux dieux de la
guerre, ils seront fumée, et fumée en haut [...] le château lui-même
Already the carriage is climbing the hill under the black shadow of the pine trees
that gave their name to the estate. In twelve years they will go up in smoke as a
burnt offering to the gods of war (...) the château itself, farther on, will go up in
smoke as well.92
The image of a parent left alone with a new baby was portrayed by Yourcenar in Alexis
ou le traité du vain combat, the novel to which she refers as her first rea
work. Published in 1929, immediately following Michel’s death, the manuscript had been read by him and generated the
following written comment: “Je n’ai rien lu d’aussi limpide qu’Alexis” [“I’ve never read anything
as limpid as Alexis”].93 Whilst the author was clearly elated by this encouragement, we cannot be

any of the domiciles associated with the life of Marguerite Yourcenar, they having perished as a result of war
or the progress of time. Her home on Mount Desert Island in Maine, U.S.A. remains the exception.
93 Savigneau, (1990), p. 84; Savigneau, (1993), p. 73. Despite her assertions that she often read passages
from her writing to Michel, the author claims that her father had not discussed the manuscript with her and
that the comment was found between the pages of the last book he was reading prior to his death. This
silence is improbable, given that mention is also made by our author of an unpublished manuscript penned by
Michel in 1904, memory of which was enlivened by his reading of Alexis. The discussion which ensued
between father and daughter concerning its possible publication resulted from Michel’s observation of the
similarity between the marriage described by Michel in his writing and Marguerite’s description of Alexis’
mariage to Monique. This connection, however, seems to be tenuous, there being no reference in Michel’s
writing to either abandonment or sexual ambivalence, and might therefore be construed as the author’s desire
sure to which aspect of the work her father was referring: Alexis’ feelings of suffocation and entrapment by his marriage (a theme Yourcenar would later reprise with Giulio Lovisi in *Denier du rêve*) may have struck a chord with Michel, or a realisation that the homosexual overtones of the story bore a confession by his daughter of her own developing sexual preferences, for which he bore her no criticism, freedom of speech and action being important tenets in his life. His death, or his reticence toward intimate discussions with his daughter, prevented any clarification of his comment.

However, sexuality aside, so many threads of this œuvre suggest Michel as the impetus for its writing: as noted earlier, the choice of the Virgilian name for the protagonist identifies Michel’s passion for the classics; the sense of imprisonment in marriage sustained by both Alexis and Michel; and a child left in the care of one parent following the alienation or absence of the other typifies not only Monique’s predicament but also that of Michel. The author confessed to Matthieu Galey that “Alexis était quelqu’un que je connaissais et aimais [Alexis was someone I knew and loved].” Yet by setting the récit twenty years earlier and providing Alexis with an emotional and personal confession, the author introduces a contentious topic which provides a clever mask for Michel’s identity. A timely completion of her writing to allow for her father’s approbation before his death was paramount for the author who, throughout her life, eschewed any rewriting of the work as “Alexis [lui] semblait se suffire à soi-même [Alexis seemed to [her] to

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94 See n. 83 above.
95 Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 65; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 43. According to Suetonius in the Life of Virgil, Alexis was the pseudonym Virgil employed for his lover, Alexander, when he included him in the Second Eclogue.
be sufficient unto itself]. Michel’s assessment of limpidity must therefore be seen as one of self-recognition.

The récit is written in the form of a letter from Alexis to his young wife, Monique, who has just given birth to their son. He attempts to explain why he can no longer stay with them, his need to explore “quelle différence existe entre les convenances extérieures et la morale intime [the difference that exists between external conformity and inner morality]” overwhelming and alienating him. Again, we see the impact of the double binary: the continuum between presence and absence, the birth of his child becoming the ultimate catalyst for the death of his marriage and Alexis’ abandonment of his family. Notions of hope, innocence and the intensifying of marital union traditionally connoted by the arrival of a child are juxtaposed by the disjunction of Alexis’ decision to alienate himself from society’s mainstream.

According to the author, Alexis is:

[l’] histoire d’un jeune musicien d’une famille aristocratique et pauvre, luttant contre des penchants supposés anormaux et condamnables, et finissant par quitter sa jeune femme, qu’il aime pourtant, et dont il vient d’avoir un fils, pour reprendre une liberté sans laquelle il ne peut plus vivre. The story of a young musician from an aristocratic, poor family, fighting against tendencies assumed to be abnormal and reprehensible, who ends up leaving his wife, whom he nonetheless loves and with whom he has just had a son, to reclaim a kind of freedom he cannot live without.

Much of this outline echoes aspects of the author’s life. Her ancestry had been aristocratic and privileged, however, Michel’s inclination towards a life of adventure and gambling

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97 The dedication of the book to “him”, together with the publication date so proximate to the death of Yourcenar’s father, combines to reinforce the hypothesis that the author has identified Michel in the protagonist. See n. 83 and n. 95 above.
99 See also Carol J. Murphy, Alienation and Absence in the Novels of Marguerite Duras, ed. R.C. La Charite and V.A. La Charite, French Forum Monographs (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum, Publishers, 1982). At p.75, Murphy alludes to John Kneller’s analysis of Duras’ “antithetical” choice of title for her novel Moderato Cantabile as an apposition of “restrained, orderly and rational forces” as implied by moderato, with “unconventionality, disorder and desire” symbolised by cantabile. These oppositional forces sound an undeniable echo of Alexis’ predicament and define the overwhelming psychological torment culminating in his ultimate decision for estrangement. Duras’ musical allusion provides further rapprochement to Alexis, for whom music offered a sense of reason and continuum.
had somewhat dissipated his family’s fortunes, as noted above. Though homosexuality was the “abnormal and reprehensible” tendency referred to above by the author, there can be no doubt that, in certain milieux, Michel’s proclivities may have been viewed as considerably reckless and irresponsible, if not “abnormal and reprehensible”. Like Alexis, he valued freedom over the responsibilities of paternity and we have seen that, in this, he was a serial offender, having earlier also relinquished his son to the care of others.

**Abandonment and Spectres**

In order that his freedom would not be severely restricted, Michel appointed Barbara Aerts, already an indispensable member of the household, as nurse/governess for Marguerite, who would not only fill the void of his absences, but would replace Fernande in the eyes of the little girl: “Barbara ne fit pas remplacer pour moi la mère jusqu’à l’âge de sept ans; elle fut la mère […] mon premier déchirement ne fut pas la mort de Fernande, mais le départ de ma bonne [Not only did Barbara take the place of my mother until I was seven; she was my mother (...) my first wrenching separation was caused not by the death of Fernande but by the departure of my nurse].”

Barbara, or Barbe, as she was also known, formed the habit of accompanying Marguerite to a movie theatre, where she would leave her charge in order to frequent hotels to “entertain clients”. Realising the irresponsibility of her actions, the governess subsequently adopted the custom of taking Marguerite with her during her trysts, an action which was later reported to Michel who quickly dispensed with Barbara’s services after a decision made by the “«conseil de famille» [family council]”. Michèle Goslar offers an alternative and not improbable reason for this sudden rupture: “Barbe était enceinte et, très probablement, de (Michel) [Barbe was pregnant and, quite probably, to Michel].” Barbe’s whereabouts for the next eighteen months are unknown — a detail which lends plausibility to this reason for the rupture. Notwithstanding this possibility, the abiding impact of this separation on Marguerite was such that the setting of a movie theatre was later re-visited in *Denier du rêve*, (1934) where the darkness of this world and its accompanying and resilient memory is personified and imparted to the psyche of Angiola.

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102 Goslar, p. 60.
Published originally in 1934, following a turbulent decade for the author, during which she spent time in Mussolini’s Fascist Italy, *Denier du rêve* recounts the story of a ten lire coin, the *denier*, which passes through the hands of nine characters, whose lives are interwoven and dramatically outlined during this stormy period of Italian history. One such character is Angiola, the Italian movie actress with a troubled family past, riddled by tormented relationships and absences which enabled her flight from scenes of anguish. During a visit to Rome, she sets out to find a theatre showing her latest film in order to “jouir davantage de l’intimité de ce fantôme [better enjoy the feeling of intimacy with this ghost],” her personal identity becoming subsumed by the presence of the character she plays on screen.

For Yourcenar, the feeling of abandonment by Barbe was sufficiently palpable to enliven her writing with this account, to feel again the warmth of this spectre and to pique a potent image of childhood desertion. This sought-after intimacy is doubly suggestive; not only a yearning for the absent Barbe, who had served *in loco parentis*, but an underlying and more profound desire for propinquity and communion with her mother: “Des gouttes de pluie coulèrent sur la nuque d’Angiola, chaudes comme des larmes d’une enfant qui ne serait pas consolée [Raindrops ran down Angiola’s neck, drops as warm as the tears of a child not yet consoled].” Angiola searches the streets for vestiges of her past life, but alienated by poverty and rejection, she makes her way to the theatre, the “caverne pleine de spectres; [cave full of spectres]” where she knows her ghost(s) will await her. The author’s powerful imagery conveys the dark void of this world of abandonment, that of Barbe and those to follow permitting emphasis of the earlier loss of her mother. Such revelations serve to demonstrate to the reader that, although she sought to convince herself and others of her emotional freedom, it is apparent that throughout her life the author continues to seek that which was lost: “[U]n pitre venait de tomber, sans atteindre l’objet qu’il croyait saisir, ne faisant en somme que ce qu’on fait toute la vie [A clown had just stumbled, trying to reach the object he thought he had at arm’s length; after all he was only doing what one does all one’s life].”

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The scene in the theatre is heavily suffused with a vocabulary of death, darkness and phantoms:

d’elle avait devant elle un vampire: ce pale monster avait bu tout le sang d’Angiola sans pourtant réussir à s’envelopper de chair. Elle avait tout sacrifié à ce fantôme doué d’ubiquité, gratifié par l’appareil de prise de vues d’une immortalité factice qui n’excluait pas la mort.

she was facing a vampire: this pale monster had drunk Angiola’s blood yet not succeeded in becoming flesh. She had sacrificed everything to this ubiquitous ghost whom the camera granted a factitious immortality, not immune, however, from death.\textsuperscript{107}

In the text which follows, the account in the theatre provides a further thirty-one references to aspects of death, darkness and spectres, such is the extent to which the author identifies this venue with abandonment and absence. Whilst the apparent association must be to the severance of her life with Barbe, the allusions to death and spectres chosen by the author suggest a deeper, if unconfessed loss, for which she holds herself responsible. At the very least, the reader must infer Fernande’s abandonment of her daughter in these allusions and her constant haunting presence in the subconscious of the latter. The author purposefully places Angiola in the darkened void of a theatre, not only for literary tension, but in order to heighten this very personal torment from her youth, redolent with combined abandonment, anger and guilt.

There can be no doubt that it is for this reason, or her family history of pregnancy resulting in the death of either mother and/or child, that Yourcenar developed a fear of death – a nexus she made with birth — and an anathema towards the notion of pregnancy and motherhood.\textsuperscript{108} The loss for which she held herself responsible, she determined not to replicate.

A pertinent psychological analysis of maternal refusal is suggested by Steedman and worthy of consideration:


\textsuperscript{108} In an anecdote cited by Savigneau, Marguerite chatted affably over a dinner in Rome in 1952 with Dianne de Margerie, daughter of a long-standing friend of the author. The latter’s previous warmth evaporated, however, when Diane’s pregnancy was revealed, resulting in a termination of the conversation and a palpable coldness in the author’s demeanour. Savigneau, (1990), p. 262; Savigneau, (1993), p. 248. See also Miller (2012), p.86, who suggests that it is “the mirroring of maternal approval that leads the daughter to want to reproduce”. Such assertion assumes at the very least the existence of a relationship between mother and daughter and, at best, one which engenders mutual affection and respect.
[a] little girl’s body, its neat containment, seems much more like that of a man, especially if she does not really know what lies between his legs... [my father’s body] was in some way mine, and I was removed from my own as well as his.

Distanced from the bodies of both her parents, Steedman becomes exiled from a corporeal identity. She continues: “Part of the desire to reproduce oneself as a body, as an entity in the real world, lies in conscious memory of someone approving that body.” Similarly, Yourcenar, separated from her mother by the latter’s untimely death, lacks the maternal example of her mother’s persona and body, referred to by Miller as “a map of possibility [...] A biological continuum”, her approval and guidance inextricably removed. So too, her father’s frequent absences, combined with a nineteenth century upbringing which did not encourage paternal emotional propinquity, also prevented either her identification with him or his approval and encouragement of her developing gender identity, his influence extending merely to her literary stimulation. Corporeal identity for Yourcenar will become an issue with which, according to many detractors during her lifetime, she will remain synonymous.

Fraigneau’s suggestion that Yourcenar desired to be “«la maîtresse d’hommes qui aiment les hommes» [“the mistress of men who love men”]” is entirely reasonable, yet it seems obvious that her asserted motive:

un désir de s'approprier, par transfert, une virilité fantasmé [...] une manière de se rêver absolument femme, reconnue comme telle et pourtant aimée comme individu, comme personne, hors des ritualisations et des convenances obligées

a desire to appropriate a fantasized virility by way of transference...a way of imagining herself an absolute woman, recognised as such and yet loved as an individual, as a person, beyond the obligatory ritualizations and properties

is over-analytical and denies not only the author’s enduring sense of guilt and loss, but her subconscious anxieties. At the very least, we should question Savigneau’s inference of the author’s supposed desire to be a man, a desire she refuted in an interview with Matthieu Galey;[112]

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[110] Ibid., p. 69.
[111] Savigneau, (1990), p. 113; Savigneau (1993), p. 102f. The biographer also suggests her obvious “tendances à la mégalomanie [megalomaniacl tendencies]” which can be guessed with rather less confidence.
it would be more accurate to suggest her overwhelming obsession with not being a stereotypical woman! In the following comment, it is instructive to note her distaste of the soprano voice, an undeniable attribute and signifier of gender, an association rejected without exception by the author: “«En dépit de l’excellence du disque, mon unsupportable antipathie physique pour les voix de sopranos demeure entière» [“Despite the excellence of the record, my unbearable physical antipathy for soprano voices remains total”].”

By choosing gay partners of either gender, pregnancy and the risk of an attendant early death would cease to be a consideration or a fear for Yourcenar. Moreover, the absence of fecundity in her life would find its presence in her writing, her characters manifesting a richness and sensitivity borne by the life she breathed into them. Without exception, her male protagonists, specifically Alexis, Eric, Hadrian and Zeno, display a depth of character and a complexity which she perfected, together with a sexual orientation which eliminated any issue. By choosing gay partners of either gender, pregnancy and the risk of an attendant early death would cease to be a consideration or a fear for Yourcenar. Moreover, the absence of fecundity in her life would find its presence in her writing, her characters manifesting a richness and sensitivity borne by the life she breathed into them. Without exception, her male protagonists, specifically Alexis, Eric, Hadrian and Zeno, display a depth of character and a complexity which she perfected, together with a sexual orientation which eliminated any issue.114

Monique, Lina, Sabina and Hilzonda, are representative of the majority of her female characters who existed merely as mute reflections of the male, and functioned in stereotypical, subordinate roles. It was as if she feared “rounding them out” in every sense of the expression, feared enlarging their feminine personae to create an image of the person who most challenged her: the maternal female. Evidence for this theory may be found in the characters of Monique and Hilzonda, for whom maternity was an ultimately negative experience.

This alienation towards procreation she would conveniently counter as a response to the dilemma of the world’s over-population, a view, according to Savigneau which was apparently common to homosexuals of her generation. As this was the milieu in which she circulated, and about which she wrote (Alexis, (1993), and Mémoires d’Hadrien, (1951), for example) this conviction was being regularly reinforced. However, Savigneau also asserts that, whilst this reasoning may have played a role in Yourcenar’s decision, her anathema towards all aspects of maternity had its genesis in the person of her grand-mother, Noémi, for whom she felt only

114 Hadrian, who was bi-sexual, is somewhat of an exception to this group, but owing to his noxious relationship with his wife, Sabine, remained childless, an aspect which will be discussed below.
115 For an analysis of the role of the female in Yourcenar’s corpus, see Shurr p. 89 ff. So also Doré who discerns at p. 217: “cette écriture dont l’idéal énonciatif se construit sur un féminin déniée […] l’écriture [qui] construit une quête identitaire avec le masculin pour modèle [this writing, the declared ideal of which is constructed on a denial of the feminine (…) writing (which) constructs a quest for identity with the masculine as a model].” These views are countered by Farrell and Farrell, p. 94: “the author has had to rely on male characters to portray a great sweep of events. But the women’s importance is not to be measured in direct ratio to the space they occupy, but rather by their influence and example.”
hostility. Furthermore, abortions feature in her writing suggesting the recurrent tension for the author between new life and death. These references draw on her own life, as we have already seen: Berthe’s apparent abortion, which resulted not only in the termination of her baby’s life but also of her own, ultimately allowed for Yourcenar’s existence, an acknowledgement of this fortunate bond offered by the author:

la mort inopinée de Berthe [a rendu] possible, un an plus tard, le remariage de Michel avec Fernande, et moins de quatre ans après, ma naissance. C’est ce désastre, quel qu’il fût, qui m’a permis d’exister. Une sorte de lien s’établit entre Berthe et moi.

Berthe’s untimely death (...) made possible, one year later, Michel’s marriage to Fernande and, less than four years after that, my own birth. Whatever the true nature of that disaster, it allowed me to exist. A sort of bond has thus formed between Berthe and me.

Maternal Ambiguity

As we have seen, Yourcenar distanced herself from stereotypical literary norms of the ideal mother who sacrificed all for husband and family, exemplified by Mrs Ramsay in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, and equally eschewed either the empty-headed character of Jane Austen’s Mrs Penelope’s mother. In Denier du rêve, (1934), allusions to Marcella’s mother are tinged with irony and ambiguity; though a

116 Savigneau, (1990), p. 262; Savigneau, (1993), p. 248. See also Yourcenar, AN, (1977), in EM, (1991), p. 1057ff; Yourcenar, HMY, (1995), p. 164ff, for the author’s cynical views of Noémi’s personality: “Et penchons-nous maintenant sur cet abîme mesquin : Noémi [And now let’s peer into that abyss of pettiness, Noémi];” also “elle me brimait [toward me she was a tireless nag];” and “Elle est vertueuse, au sens ignoblement étroit qu’on donne à ce mot, à l’époque, quand on l’emploie au feminin, comme si la vertu pour la femme ne concernait qu’une fente du corps [She is virtuous, in the ignobly narrow sense that is given to the word in her day when it is used in the feminine form, as if virtue, for a woman, concerned nothing but an aperture in the body].” So Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 18; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 5: “méchante comme sa maîtresse [Noémie] [as nasty as her mistress, (Noémi)].” See also Delcroix, p. 226, who cites a riposte by the author to a remark by Matthieu Galey that she had maintained “une petite dent [a certain resentment] against Noémi, Yourcenar replied “Une petite dent…une molaire, plutôt, oui! [A certain resentment! That’s quite an understatement].” Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 16; Yourcenar, WOE. (1984), p. 3. For Noémi’s attitude towards her son and his daughter, together with further reference to Yourcenar’s hostility towards her paternal grand-mother, see n. 158 below.


midwife, she is condemned for procuring abortions, each of these roles forming the antithesis of the other. The positive images of fecundity, abundance and hope conjured by the midwife are dashed by the finality, nihilism and resultant void suggested by the abortionist. In the same novel, Mother Dida’s character is painted with cynicism. Despite the emphasis on her fertility, her maternal tenderness is repeatedly denied. The death of her mother after numerous pregnancies, a not uncommon occurrence during that era, echoes that of Yourcenar’s maternal grand-mother, mentioned above. This theme is amplified by Dida’s fertility, and personified in her husband, Fruttuoso, whose fruitfulness was determined from his birth and underlined by choice of name:

Fruttuoso s’y connaissait mieux que personne en semis, en repiquage, en taille, en boutures. Il était venu des enfants, peut-être huit, ou neuf peut-être, y compris ceux qui n’étaient pas nés à terme et ceux qui n’avaient vécu que quelques jours, mais ceux-là, c’étaient de petits anges.

When it came to sowing, bedding plants, pruning, clipping, Fruttuoso knew more about it than anyone else. Children had come, maybe eight, maybe nine, counting those who were premature, and those who lived only a few days, but those, they were little angels.¹¹⁹

who were present always in Dida’s memory, though absent from life. These absent offspring become: “[s]es enfants morts [qui] pourrissaient au cimetière comme des feuilles de novembre” [(h)er dead children (who) rotted in the cemetery like autumn leaves].”¹²⁰ The author’s bitter tone suggests that fruitfulness does not equate to perfection in motherhood, an allusion to Fernande’s rejection of her daughter immediately following the birth: “La mère, trop exténuée pour supporter une fatigue de plus détourna la tête quand on lui présenta l’enfant [The mother, too exhausted to bear yet another strain, turned her head away when the baby was shown to her].”¹²¹

Whilst her actions infer a response to the exigencies of the birth, Fernande’s alienation of her newborn child manifested by her decision not to breast-feed her baby appears to have been made earlier and to have been based on vanity. We cannot ascertain the veracity of this claim, yet this decision further reinforces Fernande’s rejection of her child by refusing to fulfil her primal responsibility to nurture her baby with her own substance:

Le mari de Fernande n’a pas voulu qu’on engageât de nourrice, trouvant odieux.

qu’une mère abandonne son enfant pour allaiter contre un salaire celui d’étrangers […] Il n’est pas question que Fernande se déforme les seins; l’enfant sera donc nourrie au biberon

Fernande’s husband had not wanted her to hire a wet nurse, finding it repugnant that a mother should abandon her own child to nurse strangers’ children for a fee

(...)But it is out of the question that Fernande should let her breasts become misshapen; the baby will therefore be bottle-fed.¹²²

The author’s sense of maternal dereliction leads to her cynically creating the latter’s ultimate denial of the life-giving breast to her child, thereby heightening her abandonment. This rejection nourishes the less-than-maternal character of Mother Dida, who, ironically “[p]our des générations de créatures végétales […] avait été la Bonne Mère et l’impitoyable Parque [to generations of plant creatures […] had been the Good Mother and ruthless Fate],”¹²³ is uniquely responsible for both the nurturing and termination of life, reinforcing this persistent contiguity. In this reference, we note evidence of the author’s fascination with classical literature,¹²⁴ a passion

¹²² Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in EM, (1991), p. 724; Yourcenar, DD, (1991), p. 25. See also Electra or the Fall of the Masks in Marguerite Yourcenar, Plays, trans. Dori Katz (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984). p. 94 where Yourcenar’s perception of her mother’s rejection of her newborn daughter informs Electra’s bitter retort: “Nor do I remember the time she nursed me before turning me over to a wetnurse because it was easier.” Employment of wet nurses had been common in certain social milieux for centuries, a reflection of the practice adopted by Royal households desirous of continued fertility and perpetuation of their lineage, and convinced that breast-feeding hindered conception. The role of the wetnurse was both an acceptable and lucrative occupation for the poorer classes, who saw this as a means for advancement and permanent employment in the homes of the wealthy. So, Valerie Fildes, Wetnursing, A History from Antiquity to the Present (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). p. 146ff. In the late eighteenth century, direct suckling from a goat was adopted in France to counter the widespread and high mortality rate amongst foundlings during the years of the revolution when foundling numbers were high and the government was unable to provide the resources to “cover the care, carriage and nursing of these infants.” Wet nurses accounted for the largest single expenditure for hospitals and were a logical and first cost to cut. More usually however, in the absence of a wet nurse or alternative pap-like (cereal and water mix) formulas, cow’s milk was the alternative nourishment. Here, Yourcenar seizes the opportunity to perpetuate the nexus between the cow’s substance and the ultimate “almost always agonizing” death of this life-giving beast which, as a result, ironically continues to provide its sustenance to man. This analogy of life-giving sustenance post mortem was recounted in her earlier opus, Le Lait de la mort, discussed below. Michel’s oppositional views on wet nursing echo earlier anecdotal evidence deriving from Britain: the 1840’s diary of a wealthy, middle-class Hampstead gentleman notes the death of the infant child of his family’s wet nurse: “It is a very melancholy reflection that our own infant should be sustained, as it were, at the expense of the life of another infant … [the mother forced] into service to support herself and two young children” following the tragic death of her husband. This had not been an isolated occurrence as the same fate had befallen the child of a wet nurse to his older daughter. The diarist had noted these two tragic events in order that his daughters would “know the cost of their wet nurses […] and never be sufficiently thankful to a kind providence.” Fildes, p.192f.


¹²⁴ M.P.O. Morford and R.J. Lenardon, Classical Mythology, Sixth ed. (New York: Addison-Wesley Longman, 1999). p. 84. The Three Fates, daughters of Zeus and Themis, were originally birth spirits, but
which was nurtured by Michel, who presented her with examples of absent authors perhaps to
distract her from the pain of the present. This fascination with the past, which became one of the
driving forces of her writing, held a double genesis: Yourcenar might have been describing herself
when she noted of her mother:

> elle s’était fait à elle-même une sorte d’éducation libérale; elle comprenait un
peu les langues classiques; elle avait lu ou lisait [...] quelques beaux livres que la
mode n’atteint pas. Comme [Michel], elle aimait l’histoire

(s)he had, on her own, provided herself with something like a liberal education:
She possessed a passing knowledge of classical languages; she had read or was
reading (...) books that are beyond mere fashion. Like (Michel), she loved
history. 125

However this love of reading and antiquity proved to be an escape from domesticity for Fernande,
who cared little for the fashion of the day and lacked any interest in the finer points of running a
household and, as we have seen, in impending motherhood. Marguerite would emulate her
mother in her anathema towards such typically feminine pursuits.

In stark contrast, the ideal mother is portrayed by the author in *Le Lait de la mort*,
“[l]’histoire la plus belle et la moins vraie possible [the most beautiful and least credible story]”
requested by one friend of another in Ragusa, a town in Herzegovina. The story is found in
*Nouvelles orientales*, a collection of Asian and European short stories originally published in 1938,
some of which had already emerged in French revues of the period. *Le Lait de la mort* recounts
the fabled story of a young woman in the Balkans, the wife of the youngest of three brothers who
are constructing a tower to repulse the pillaging Turks. When she is immured in the tower to
assuage local superstition concerning its completion, 126 she begs for neither her breasts nor her

126 Such tales of immurement are not uncommon in legend and folklore. South-
eastern European folklore
refers to the immurement of a victim sacrificed in order to guarantee the completion of a construction project.
Many Bulgarian and Romanian folk songs describe a bride offered in this way, and her subsequent pleas to
the builders to leave her hands and breasts free, that she might still nurse her child. Other variations include
the Hungarian folk ballad “Kőmíves Kelemen (Kelemen the Stonemason) which tells the story of twelve
unfortunate stonemasons tasked with building the fort of Déva. To remedy its recurring collapses, it is
agreed that one of the builders must sacrifice his bride, the unfortunate victim chosen when she is the first to
eyes to be walled up in order that she might continue providing her young son with her life force, and watch him grow. The legend follows that despite the young mother wasting away, her breasts continued to nourish the infant with their miraculous milk for a further two years, the lactation process ensuring the mother’s presence for the child whose existence is merely secondary to the devotion of the mother. After recounting his story, the Frenchman dismisses the appeals of a gypsy and her son, cruelly blinded by his mother in order to provide her with a lucrative meal-ticket, bitterly adding: “Il y a mères et mères [There are mothers ... and then there are mothers].” Whilst both Fernande and the young Albanian mother are alienated from their babies, the reader is left in no doubt of the paradoxical coupling of the two mothers and the allusion to Fernande’s disjunction from idealised maternal aspirations and practices.

While the inclusion of this story in *Nouvelles orientales* serves the author’s purpose of publishing a collection of entertaining ancient tales, her rather more subliminal intention comes as no surprise to us. The very aspects of her being which this idealistic young mother passionately begs to retain are her powers to see and to continue to nourish her baby, while physically and spiritually absent. Conversely, Fernande not only turned away her eyes from her new baby but, as we have seen, she had also made the decision not to breast-feed her. Though these actions were no doubt borne by fatigue and the convention of the day, they combine to set Fernande in stark contrast with the Albanian mother. The metaphorical brick wall which the author has built to immure her from her personal angst serves here to imprison the mother, separating her from her baby in *Le Lait de la mort*. The image of Fernande, physically present, yet emotionally absent, is cleverly juxtaposed with that of the mother sentenced to entombment yet determined that though she will die, her son will live on, his presence ensured despite her absence, his new life ensured despite her death. Whilst the addition of the gypsy anecdote adds a certain aesthetic drama, it paraphrases undeniably the author’s maternal resentment. Furthermore, the author here shows her Janus face, her emotions torn between resentment and desire, as she vacillates between anger and longing. According to Nancy Miller, the object of these conflicting sensibilities is “the mother we think didn’t love us [...] the mother whose recognition we seek ceaselessly,

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uselessly, and whose darkness has migrated within us. This is the mother who keeps us imagining — and longing for — the Good Mother.”

With roles now reversed, the author, when speaking later of the characters she has created, confessed:

I have been more inclined to deepen, develop, and nourish those beings with whom I was already in the habit of living, getting to know them better as I have learned more about life and improving on a world that was already my own... I am not yet through watching them live. They will have surprises in store for me until the end of my days.

Despite her anathema for procreation, the author spoke with surprising maternal tenderness of the characters she had ‘borne,’ the only offspring she would conceive and nurture without the implications of the physical act. More than merely two-dimensional characters on a page, they existed for her as living beings and family members, much as ‘imaginary friends’, created by a lonely child.

**Motivated by Michel**

![Michel de Crayencour, father of Marguerite Yourcenar, ca. 1909](image)

It is not surprising that the author’s literary career emanated from the fractured and unconventional life she shared with Michel, often marked by the latter’s lengthy absences until his death in 1929. The author’s education was perhaps Bohemian by modern standards being provided in an unstructured manner almost uniquely by Michel — “[un] homme cultivé, docteur en droit et officier d’ Académie, passionné de littérature [a cultured man with a diploma in law, an

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129 Yourcenar, “Carnet de notes de L’Oeuvre au noir” [Reflections on the composition of The Abyss], Nouvelle Revue Francaise 452 and 453 (September and October 1990). An expansive examination of auto-fiction is beyond the scope of this chapter and will be addressed in the following chapter.
“officier d’Académie,” who had his own passion for literature.¹³⁰ She later described her father as “un lettré comme on l’était autrefois, pour l’amour des livres, pas pour «faire des recherches», ou même, systématiquement, pour s’instruire [a man of letters of the old school who read because he loved books, not for the sake of ‘research’ or even learning, in any systematic sense].”¹³¹ Michel’s singular influence may have been considered as indoctrination had it not enlivened a deeper thirst in his daughter, introducing her to an eclectic range of literature which would sustain her through his absences, and upon which she would expand throughout her life. Marguerite benefited from Michel’s refusal to typecast his daughter by her gender, instead encouraging her in her freedom of thought and deed. To designate the nature of Michel is to characterise his daughter:

Il était de ces Français lettrés, directs, aventureux, incroyablement impulsive et indépendant, tout de premier movement, se cabrant contre toute intrusion, contre tout ce qui pouvait s’imposer du dehors

He was one of those Frenchmen of a bygone era who were literate, straightforward, adventurous, incredibly impulsive and independent, quick to make up their minds, and impatient of the slightest interference or limitation on their freedom.¹³²

In a letter from Louise de Borchgraeve to Yourcenar, cited by Goslar, the writer further portrays Michel’s character and his devotion to his daughter:

Tu as eu un père! Quel homme, son intelligence fulgurante, la profondeur et la vérité de tout ce qu’il pensait, le courage de sa franchise, de son originalité, son aspiration à la Beauté en toute chose... Combien ton cher père voulait t’armer contre la vie ... cette toute petite fille, objet de toutes ses pensées et de tout son amour."¹³³

¹³⁰ Savigneau, (1990), p. 47; Savigneau, (1993), p. 36, n.16. One becomes an “officier d’Académie” by virtue of receiving the “palmes académiques”, a decoration for services rendered to education in France. See also Halley, p. 26, who describes him as “un aristocrate cultivé, passionné de littérature et de beaux-arts, aimant l’aventure, et les voyages qui l’éloignent de sa famille trop conventionnelle à ses yeux [a cultivated aristocrat, empassioned by literature and fine arts, loving adventure and the travel which distances him from his family which he deems to be overly conventional].”


¹³³ Letter from Louise de Borchgraeve to Marguerite Yourcenar, dated 26th April, 1955. Yourcenar would remain in contact with the writer from her youth until the death of the latter in 1986, at the age of 100. An infatuation by this woman for Michel, to whom he was related by marriage, is apparent. Goslar, p. 94.
You had one special father! What a man, his lightening intelligence, the depth and truth of all that he thought, the courage of his frankness, of his originality, his aspiration towards Beauty in all things ... How your dear father wanted to arm you against life ... this tiny daughter, object of all his thoughts and all his love.

Louise's obvious infatuation is, according to Goslar, unsurprising given Michel's apparent qualities: “il est généreux, élégant, jamais vulgaire et ... ne dit jamais de mal de personne ni ne se permet de juger des autres [he is generous, elegant, never vulgar and ... never speaks badly of anyone nor permits himself to judge others].”

With the sale of the family estate at Mont Noir in 1912, Michel and Marguerite moved to Paris, where her intellect was further sharpened by classical theatre, museum visits and extensive reading of sophisticated literature. An enforced sojourn in London in 1914 to escape the disruptions to French life occasioned by World War One invasions, introduced Yourcenar to English history and language, museums and monuments, the most influential of which was a statue of Hadrian, who was to become the character for whom the author is best known. A study of Latin and Greek was also commenced by father and daughter at this time, interspersed with the shared reading of Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Plato, amongst others.

At the end of the Great War, Michel moved his household to the south of France to take advantage of the climate and the proximity to casinos, in order to replenish his rapidly dissipating fortune. Whilst his absences provided the solitude for her further studies, there can be no doubt that his daughter's sense of abandonment, initially by her mother and now frequently by her father, was reinforced. Meanwhile, his rare presence enriched their shared enjoyment of the literature of paradoxically long-absent writers, mentioned above, who enlivened the past: “Virgil in Latin, Homer in Greek”, to whom were added Ibsen, Nietzsche and Selma Lagerlöf, whom Yourcenar, following her father, considered all her life “un écrivain de génie [a writer of genius].” Emboldened and stimulated by her reading, Yourcenar began her literary journey.

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134 Goslar, p. 95. In order to strengthen this character analysis, Goslar cites the idealistic and romantic responses to «Mes confidences», a questionnaire, completed by Michel in May, 1913 at Enghien and discovered amongst Yourcenar’s personal papers at Petite Plaisance.

135 Halley notes perceptively at p. 25, that “si elle avait suivi l’enseignement d’un lycée de jeune filles, elle n’aurait pas bénéficié de l’apprentissage du grec ancien, si important pour son avenir littéraire, qui ne fut intégré qu’en 1923 [had she been taught at a school for young girls, she would not have benefitted from the study of ancient Greek, so important for her literary career, which was only integrated in 1923].”

136 Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 48; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 30. Yourcenar’s admiration of Selma Lagerlöf dates back to translations of the Swedish writer’s tales to which she was exposed during her childhood. Such veneration is hardly surprising given the many shared aspects of their lives. Both had a father who had left the family in financial difficulty, resulting in sale of the family estate; both wrote poetry
With Michel’s encouragement and financial assistance, she published *Le Jardin des Chimères* in 1921, a drama in verse based on the life of Icarus, which she would later describe as “«plein de clichés poétiques inévitables chez une enfant qui a trop lu» [“full of the poetic clichés that are inevitable in the case of a child who has read too much”].”¹³⁷ She confessed to being heavily influenced by Victor Hugo, “almost to the point of plagiarism,” and to her inclusion of two lines in the poem having been lifted from Desportes, the sixteenth century French poet:

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Le ciel fut son désir, la mer sa sépulture,
Est-il plus beau dessin ou plus riche tombeau?
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Her delight with her depiction of Daedalus conversing with Death highlights her early fascination with this terminus of life and suggests a preoccupation borne by her loss.

The absence of a mother facilitated a somewhat unconventional education by her father with an emphasis on ageless authors, sculptors and painters. Her choice, then, for the title of this first collection of poems, *Le Jardin des Chimères*, can therefore be inferred with some confidence, chimeras being fire-breathing female monsters from Greek mythology with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a serpent’s tail. Imagination fuelled by reading, solitude and loss had created a monstrous creature from her absent mother, a fascination ironically sparked by her father.¹³⁸ A youthful confidence enriched by years of classical reading had prompted a sought-after catharsis from her writing which endured throughout her lifetime.

From an early age and taught briefly before adopting a literary career. Both became the first of their countrywomen to be admitted to their respective Academies, whilst Selma Lagerlöf was also the first female to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, a recognition she received in 1909. From 1894, she shared her life with Sophie Elkan who appears to have had a strong influence on her writing as did Grace Frick for Yourcenar. Both companions displayed jealousy towards competing interests in the lives of the writers and both predeceased their partners. The Swedish Nobel Laureate died in 1940, just as the French writer’s life with Grace Frick was beginning, highlighting the cyclic path of death and rebirth. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selma_Lagerlöf_16/08/2012](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selma_Lagerlöf_16/08/2012). It is entirely reasonable to conjecture that Yourcenar felt an affinity with Selma Lagerlöf which transcended her writing.¹³⁷ Cited by Savigneau, (1990), p. 63; Savigneau, (1993), p. 52. The author’s choice of the story of Icarus is not casual, but replete with authorial purpose. The freedom Icarus owed to his father, Daedalus, should be read as a metaphor for the literary “wings” Michel provided for his daughter. Icarus’ plunge into the sea after flying too close to the sun is mirrored by the author’s attempt at freedom and independence in her flight to the United States; Icarus’ watery end reinforces the author’s affinity with the Little Mermaid whose maritime existence prevented the independence she sought.

¹³⁹ So also Adrienne Rich, (1976), *Of Women born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York, Norton, p. 245, cited by Heilbrun, who observes that “[i]t is a painful fact that a nurturing father, who replaces rather than complements a mother, must be loved at the mother’s expense, whatever the reasons for the mother’s absence.” (Italics are those of Rich.)
This publication was followed in 1922 by *Les Dieux ne sont pas morts*, a second collection of poems, many of which had been written earlier than those of *Le Jardin des Chimères*. This second collection “[c]omposta di 52 poesie scritte tra il 1915 e il 1920 […] è una testimonianza preziosa sulla formazione culturale della Yourcenar [comprising fifty two poems written between 1915 and 1920 (…) is a precious testimony on the cultural formation of Yourcenar]”\(^{140}\) asserts Françoise Bonali Fiquet. It contained “overtones of just about all the poets of the nineteenth century,”\(^{141}\) to which she had been exposed during her teen years and revealed “[l’]ammirazione della giovane per l’Antichità e i suoi splendidi monumenti, i suoi artisti eterni, i suoi valori universali [(t)he admiration of the young woman for antiquity, its splendid monuments, its eternal artists, its universal values]”\(^{142}\)—themes to which she would return throughout her career. On this assertion, Halley notes that these:

> “questions qu’[elle] se posait à seize ans [la] hanteront durant toute son existence. C’est d’ailleurs une des caractéristiques majeures de l’œuvre de Yourcenar qui n’a cessé de reprendre les mêmes thèmes, de réinterroger les mêmes questions, d’investir les mêmes territoires, mais sous des éclairages, des angles d’approche chaque fois différents\(^{143}\) these questions which she was posing to herself at sixteen years of age will haunt her throughout her entire life. Furthermore one of the major characteristics of Yourcenar’s œuvre is that it always followed the same themes, asked the same questions, attacked the same grounds, but each time with a different aspect and angle of approach.

The poems had become a catalyst in the birth of her literary independence and a pronounced influence on its content. Introduced to her by her father, they would become the basis of many of her characters throughout her œuvre, and via the insistence of detailed and lengthy *préfaces* and *postfaces*, the writer instructed the reader in the interpretation and understanding of her recreations. She would be read as she intended, or so was her obsession! If


\(^{141}\) Ibid., p.34.

\(^{142}\) Halley, cited by Bonali Fiquet, p. 51.

\(^{143}\) Halley, p. 317. See n. 71 above on this theme. So also Rémy Poignault, *Marguerite Yourcenar: una passion ragionata per l’Antichità*, in *Marguerite Yourcenar: Adriano, l’antichità immaginata.*, at p. 69, “Una parte consideravole dell’opera di Marguerite Yourcenar consiste nel rivitalizzare questa fonte di inspirazione greca [A considerable proportion of the œuvre of Marguerite Yourcenar consists of revitalising this font of Greek inspiration].”
the gods which inhabited this other-worldly realm could be re-animated by her writing, it would be unwise to reject the notion that the creative energy of this young and imaginative writer might in such a way enliven a maternal presence from these absent spectres, a task at which she would continually labour.

**Separation and Rebirth, Identity and Recognition**

At this time, Marguerite and Michel created the _nom de plume_ of Yourcenar for the new author, an almost perfect anagram of the Crayencour family name,¹⁴⁴ thereby emphasising her birth as a writer and allegorical rebirth as an individual, forever terminating her association with family tradition, an alienation which had begun many years before when Michel severed ancestral ties by selling Mont Noir to establish with his daughter a marginal independent life together. We would argue that her assertion that a pseudonym “vous éloigne [...] des entraves familiales [frees you from possible family fetters]”¹⁴⁵ betrays her conviction of perpetual rather than potential constraints and represents an attempt to distance herself from the circumstances of her birth, for which, we have suggested, she felt responsible. Heilbrun, supporting this view, posits that “women who begin to write another story [about their life] often wrote it under another name.”¹⁴⁶ Viewed simply as a literary ploy between father and daughter, Yourcenar clearly saw, however, the appropriation of a new name as the opportune moment to eradicate her past through the adoption of a new persona, also obviating the necessity for the presence of two parents for her creation. Yet, one might construe that this new being had been created by two ‘parents’: Michel and Marguerite, suggesting a marital or sexual tone¹⁴⁷ to their relationship, the lifelong complexities of which will be discussed below. We have already seen an example of such


¹⁴⁶ Heilbrun, p. 121.

¹⁴⁷ Goslar’s statement at p. 40 is percipient: “Son père, ayant déjà cinquante ans […] savait très certainement qu’il ne brillerait jamais à ses yeux à la manière d’un Adonis curieux de mesurer sa force et son pouvoir de séduction sur la fillette [Her father, already fifty years of age (…) knew very well that he would never shine in her eyes in the manner of an Adonis curious to measure his force and his power of seduction over the young girl].” Whilst we cannot be certain of the genesis of Goslar’s statement, it complies with both Michel’s reputation with women, and our hypothesis of the father/daughter relationship to which we have alluded.
collaboration in the renaissance by the daughter of her father’s earlier text,\textsuperscript{148} on which Halley’s psychoanalytical viewpoint, heavily embossed with the vocabulary of fecundity, provides support for our analysis:

La fille réécrivant, pour l’améliorer, le texte dont un père, usé par la vie, n’est plus capable d’«accoucher» et donnant naissance à une nouvelle création engendrée par le père et la fille, éclaire d’une lumière singulièrerie et secrète l’étonnante proximité créatrice de ces deux êtres\textsuperscript{149}

The daughter rewriting, in order to perfect, the text which a father, consumed by life is no longer capable of ‘producing’ and giving birth to a new creation engendered by the father and the daughter, illuminates with a singular and secret brilliance the astonishing and creative proximity of these two beings.

Allusion to the ramifications of Miguel’s death in *Anna, soror...* (1981), are undeniable reflections on the choices made by the author to absent both her family name and any potential issue from her future: “Son sang et son nom ne lui survivraient pas [His blood and his name would not survive him].” \textsuperscript{150} Yet this unequivocal echo of her personal scenario denies the assertions made by the author through her character, Alexis, on the implication and immutability of one’s name:

[n]otre rôle, dans la vie de famille, est fixé une fois pour toutes par rapport à celui des autres. On est le fils, le frère, le mari [...] Ce rôle nous est particulier comme notre nom [...] Le reste n’a pas d’importance; le reste, c’est notre vie

In family life, our role is fixed once and for all by the relationship to the roles of others. One is the son, the brother, the husband (...) This role belongs to us like our name (...) The rest is of no importance; the rest is our life.\textsuperscript{151}

Clearly, her name and her role had weighed heavily on the author. The adoption of this alternative persona by such means might erase any anxiety relating to the circumstances of her birth and remove the toll of the sexual act which initiated the procreation process. Her previous identity and problematic personal history were therefore ingeniously and permanently annihilated by masterful strokes of a pen. She immediately became, or attempted to become, gender-neutral, calling herself Marg Yourcenar in order to create the mystery and/or the equality

\textsuperscript{148} See n. 93 above.
\textsuperscript{149} Halley, p. 30, whose choice of language reinforces his conviction.
she sought, the style of her writing giving no indication of her identity. Accordingly, Shurr
determines Yourcenar’s style as ‘androgy nous’, her womanhood not having “obviously shaped her
creative expression,” observing that “characters which identify a female sensibility or the literary
style of a woman writer are particularly absent in her novels.” She notes further, however, that
“as an artist, [Yourcenar] relates more easily to the masculine experience than to the feminine.”

Her own persona now successfully enshrouded, the mask became a device similarly
adopted for many of her characters, either as heavy makeup to disguise emotional or physical
scars, such as Sophie in *Le Coup de grâce*, (1939), or Lina Chiari in *Denier du rêve*, (1934). Sappho’s
appearance in *Sappho ou le suicide* in *Feux*, (1936) is accordingly and dramatically disguised,
appearing “pâle comme la neige, la mort, ou le visage clair des lépreuses. Et comme elle se farde
pour cacher cette pâleur, elle a l’air du cadavre d’une femme assassinée, avec sur les joues un peu
de son propre sang [pale as snow, as death or as the clear face of a woman who has leprosy. And
since she wears rouge to hide this whiteness, she looks like the corpse of a murdered woman with
a little of her own blood on her cheeks].” Applying a titular mask, Yourcenar appropriates a
change of name for Zeno, who becomes Theus in *L’Œuvre au noir*, (1968), as he flees
incrimination for heresy under his genuine identity. By this adoption, he repudiates the doubly
nihilistic combination of ‘zero’ and ‘non’ (Ze-no), the significance of which is intensified without a
family name as identifier, for the more divine incarnation of Theus, arguably appropriate for the
son of a priest.

Considerable scholarship exists concerning the appropriation of the writer’s alter-ego.
Linda Stillman, in her paper entitled “Marguerite Yourcenar and the Phallacy of Indifference”
adopts a psychoanalytical approach to the author’s choice of name:

The curvaceous feminoglyphic letter C (on the level of the fantasm, the shape of
the breast, the hip, the belly, the womb) cleaves the writer’s name in two. If the 
reader were to go one step further, and delete the new monogram – the Y – from

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152 Shurr, p. 89. See Gorman, p.63 who notes Shurr’s confusion of autobiography and fiction, together with
her apparent confusion of narrator, character and author.
Press, Oxford), p. 1634f. Zeno (335-263 BC) is noted as the founder of Stoicism, who taught in the Stoa
Poecile (Painted Colonnade) in Athens which gave its name to Stoicism. A further reference is made to a
Zeno who was a physician in the second century BC, who participated in traditions of pulse theory,
pharmacology and Hippocratic lexicography. Yourcenar’s character appears to have reflected an
amalgamation of these classical identities.
the gynecentric pen-name, what remains is an anagram of rancœur, the bitterness or resentment one retains after a disappointment or injustice.\textsuperscript{155}

Whilst this rejection is both creative and speculative, its affinity with the author’s stated intention is rather more doubtful. Stillman’s analysis of the choice of the letter \textit{Y} which, for Yourcenar, represents “a tree, with arms spread,” is more convincing as is her observation of the new name functioning as a mask:

The open-armed tree, this ideogram of the friendly phallus, then becomes quite literally an amicable version of the original letter, the letter of the letter, the model of all difference and of all possible literality. The chosen name thus functions like a mask, assuring veiling and transgression, endowing its wearer with a new persona, allowing her to forge another signature, the name of the symbolic other. Thus difference was only the possibility of difference before the assigning of the name.\textsuperscript{156}

Yourcenar would never return to her birth name, adopting her \textit{nom de plume} as her legal identity in the U.S.A. in 1947. This repudiation of her past and her femininity finds substance in her writing. Throughout her œuvre, the feminine voice is silenced, their identities subsumed by dominant and opiniated male characters, the majority of whom are homosexual or bi-sexual. In \textit{Alexis ou le traité du vain combat}, Monique is a mere spectre, identified by her motherhood, a mute object of Alexis’ respect who, however, cannot command his affection. By contrast, so expertly and sensitively did Yourcenar expound the emotions and sufferings of Alexis, so completely did she identify with the psychological torments of his character, that it was generally assumed that such male-intuitive qualities attested to the gender of the writer.

That her work lacked the cloying, emotional sentimentality of many female British writers of the era, such as Georgette Heyer and Agatha Christie, who wrote romantic novels under the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott, is not surprising given her leaning towards lesbianism, and the universally male library and point of view to which she was almost exclusively exposed. She was influenced by classical text and erudition, by a deep sensitivity and passion for detail, using a: “langue dépouillée, presque abstraite, à la fois circonspecte et précise [spare, almost abstract language, both circumspect and precise].”\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{155} Stillman, p.263.  
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p. 264.  
Yet, whilst Yourcenar declared her work to be universal and without gender-driven style or content, her readers read her differently, certain of the emotions behind her choice of character and scenario. Not only was her world governed by paternal influence, it was dramatically prejudiced by rejection of the maternal. Positive maternal role-models in her own ancestry were rare; that of her mother was non-existent, whilst the patent hostility demonstrated towards the young Marguerite by Michel’s mother, the “detestable” Noémi, would elicit only animosity from her grand-daughter.158 With the exception of Alexis and Monique, her major characters are unlikely to reproduce, given the tendency towards homosexuality amongst the predominant males, (Eric, Conrad, Hadrian, Antinoüs, Zeno etc); as we have seen, persistent denial of potential motherhood in her œuvre suggests an attempt to liberate herself from the guilt associated with that event which resulted in the death of her mother. In Mémoires d’Hadrien, the emperor’s wife, Sabina, “se félicitait de mourir sans enfants [congratulated herself on dying without children],”159 her animosity towards her husband overwhelming any desires for motherhood. Yourcenar’s research into the life of her emperor reinforced her own emotional propensities with apparent historical accuracy.160

158 Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in EM, (1991), p. 730f; Yourcenar, DD, (1991), p. 33f. Yourcenar contends that, later in her life, Noémi “disapproved of her son’s second marriage, and even more of Fernande’s pregnancy.” Her response to the announcement of Marguerite’s birth betrayed only her concerns for the halving of her grandson’s already diminished inheritance: “Le petit Michel est coupé en deux [Little Michel has been cut in two],” a comment which reflected her condemnation of her son’s financial extravagance and repeated irresponsibility. Affection between mother and son had emphatically cooled over time, the author claiming at p. 709; p. 5 of the same texts that “L’insupportable Noémi, mère de M. de C*** est détestée par lui entre toutes les femmes [Monsieur de C.’s insufferable mother, Noémi [was detested by him] more than any other woman he knew.” This animosity was due in no small part to Noémi’s reaction to Michel’s imparting of the news of the accident which had taken his sister, Gabrielle’s life: “«Pourquoi faut-il que ce soit elle?» [Why did it have to be her?]” As Noémi died when Marguerite was five years old, the life-long animosity held by the author and demonstrated by her repeated use of pejorative epithets for her grandmother patently reflects her father’s prejudicial influence. For reference to Yourcenar’s employment of the present tense and its identification with moments of stress for the author, see van Woerkum, Le brassage des choses: autobiographie et mélange des genres dans Le Labyrinthe du Monde de Marguerite Yourcenar.


Though by the date of its publication the author had been exposed as a woman, her novel *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, exemplifies her literary proficiency in the art of subsuming her gender by adopting a technical mastery which artfully conveys not only the psyche and authority of the emperor, but also his profound emotional angst at his loss:

[J’ai lutté contra la douleur comme contre une gangrene [...] Peines perdus:
Comme un ouvrier consciencieux s’épuise à copier un chef d’œuvre, je m’acharnais à exiger de ma mémoire une exactitude incense: je recréais cette poitrine haute et bombée comme un bouclier. Parfois, l’image jaillissait d’elle-même; un flot de douceur m’emportait [...] Tout manquait à la fois: l’associé des fêtes nocturnes, le jeune homme qui s’asseyait sur les talons pour aider Euphorion à rectifier les plis de ma toge

I fought against my grief, battling as if it were gangrene (...) Such efforts proved futile; instead, like some painstaking workman who toils to copy a masterpiece, I exhausted myself in tasking my memory for fanatical exactitude, evoking that smooth chest, high and rounded as a shield. Sometimes the image leapt to mind of itself, and a flood of tenderness swept over me (...) I had lost everything at once, the companion of the night’s delights and the young friend squatting low to his heels to help Euphorion with the folds of my toga.¹⁶¹

From the moment of Antinoüs’ appearance in Hadrian’s life, the emperor’s control is weakened, so overwhelmed is he by passion for the young Bithynian. Antinoüs’ disappearance brings the emperor to his knees emotionally, as he vacillates between the guilt wrought by his recent manner towards Antinoüs and the desperation he feels at his loss. Only by prolonged inner struggle can he regain a semblance of his former presence, his self-mastery a reflection of the literary prowess of the author and her personal goal for eradication of her own inner demons.

That her choice of character reflects her father’s continued influence in her life cannot be denied, Hadrian’s passion at his loss a suggestion that Michel’s absence continues to haunt the author.

In January 1981, nearly three decades after the publication of this text, Yourcenar became the first woman since its foundation in 1636, to be elected to the hitherto prestigious male bastion, the Académie Française. Perhaps surprisingly, this elevation as an *Immortelle* did not meet with a unanimous, laudatory refrain, the feminist community of the period greeting the “news of her election as a confirmation of the Academy’s continuing male orientation rather than as a vindication of the talents of women writers.” Simone de Beauvoir reportedly deemed the election to be a “non-event”. Further, Charlotte Hogsett cites Catherine Clément to reinforce her assertion that Yourcenar “wrote differently from how you might expect a woman to write; she wrote like a man”: “Les académiciens français ne s’y ont pas trompés, qui la désirent dans leur confrérie: rien en elle de féminin [The French academicians who want her in their brotherhood have made no mistake: there is nothing feminine in her].” As we have argued, this is not surprising. Both the literary influences encouraged by her father, which promulgated views on “women, sexuality [and] power, from the subjectivity of male [writers],” and the circumstances of her birth which would deny her feminism combined to achieve this end, empowering the allegorical narrative throughout her œuvre.

The prevalent allusion to the extremities of life, the continuum of which is so insistent for Yourcenar, is reinforced in her biographical essay, *Mishima, a Vision of the Void*, originally published in 1980. In this work, she notes Mishima’s description of the delivery by caesarean section of the child of Yuichi and his wife, Yasuko: “Yasuko’s body moved like the mouth of a

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162 A detailed investigation on ‘*maîtrise de soi*’ will be undertaken in the chapter following.
163 Matthieu Galey, whose reverential account of Yourcenar’s reception does not disguise his distaste, writes: “In her ample, black-velvet greatcoat, with a white collar, and a shawl, also white, on her head, Marguerite’s entrance was quite stunning...it was as if a large termite, inseminated by her insects, which were buzzing excitedly around her, were going to lay some eggs, beneath the gaze of the presidential couple, impassively perched on their Louis XV chairs.” Galey, *Journal 1974-1986*, p.161, cited by Savigneau, (1990), p. 417; Savigneau, (1993), p. 399. Ironically, Galey’s account alludes to a fecundity desperately eschewed by the author.
165 Ibid.
167 See Adrienne Rich on the influence of male poets who “spoke from some extraordinary height”, cited by Heilbrun, p. 66.
person vomiting.”  

For Yourcenar, this is a scene of both fascination and revulsion which serves to recollect vividly the scene of her own birth, so profoundly evocative of both a beginning and an ending which must irrevocably involve her: “A scene of initiation, like every death and every birth, that conventions throughout the world contrive to cover with a sheet, and from which we discreetly turn our eyes.” The sheet provides further evidence for the double binary of birth and death, presence and absence; the pristine fabric wrapping utilised for both the newly born and the newly deceased reinforces this nexus, and creates the screen sought by the author to shield her from the connotations of her involvement.

There can be no doubt that the death of her companion, Grace Frick, during the year prior to publication of this work influenced her analysis of Mishima’s writing, so replete with these references to death, both veiled and manifest, and forged an undeniable parallel between her absent mother and her partner.

**Travel and its influences**

The decade of the 1920s was one of self-discovery and travel for our author, both aspects deeply impacting the characterization of her novels. In 1922, after travelling to Venice

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168 So also Murphy, p. 118, who hypothesises that, in an examination of Marguerite Duras’ more dysfunctional characters, “[n]ausea and vomiting are symbolic of rejection of social codification”. Similarly, Yourcenar’s fascination with this description of ultimate physical purgation reinforces her disjunction with the notion of childbirth and its myriad implications, and her persistent alienation from the self-perpetuating code of human reproduction.


170 See Yourcenar, P, (1984), p. 98, for the author’s use of the double binary as Electa invents her impending delivery of a child to encourage a visit by her detested mother, Clytemnestra, whom Electra plans to murder. Aegisthus’ observation to Electra at p. 105 “You used your child to kill your mother” reinforces Yourcenar’s enduring guilt surrounding the circumstances of her birth. Further reference to the sheet motif above, and to Greek myth, predominant in Yourcenar’s corpus, may be found in David Malouf, *Ransom*, Second ed. (Sydney: Random House, Australia, 2010)., p. 193. Achilles identifies the undeniable circle of life on being exposed to the fragrance of dried herbs and lye in the room where the body of Hector has been laid out for anointing and wrapping in linen. Recognising this olfactory stimulant as identical to that which he had experienced as a child when taken to the laundry-room by his nurse in search of a sheet, he muses: “This is the first world we come into […] this world of hot-water pitchers and oil jars and freshly laundered linen or wool. And the last place we pass through before our body is done with it all.”

171 As with Selma Lagerlöf, aspects of Yourcenar’s life mirrored those of Yukio Mishima. His first book, *The Forest in Full Bloom*, inspired by ancient Japanese poetry and written in his sixteenth year, provides the basis for aspects of his later writing. This scenario bears several points in common with the composition of *Le Jardin des Chimères* and *Les Dieux ne sont pas morts*. Mishima’s fascination with European literature — both classical and modern — was pronounced, as was his love of Greece and later study of her language. His adoption of Yukio Mishima as a nom de plume to replace his birth name of Kimitake Hiraoka coincided with the publication of his first book and replicates the timing of this identity exchange for Yourcenar. Ironically, the Japanese author, like Lagerlöf and Yourcenar, was also attracted by members of his own gender.
with her father, she began a series of passionate discovery tours through Italy. In Verona, she witnessed the march on Rome and in later years became closely associated with exiled Italian intellectuals; these encounters allowed her to develop her views on Fascism which, in 1934,\textsuperscript{172} formed the catalyst for penning \textit{Denier du rêve}, cited above:

«C’est toujours un moment grave que celui où un jeune esprit jusque-là insoucieux de politique découvre soudain que l’injustice et l’intérêt mal entendu passent et repassent devant lui dans les rues d’une ville avec des effets de cape et d’uniforme, ou s’attablent au café sous l’aspect de bons bourgeois qui ne prennent pas parti. 1922 a été pour moi une de ces dates et le lieu de la révélation de Venise et Vérone […] [le] désordre d’où auraient dû sortir des réformes aient succédé les rodomontades du fascism pour finir par Hitler vociférant à Naples»

It is always a serious moment when a young mind once unconcerned, with politics suddenly discovers that injustice and calculated interests poorly understood are passing back and forth before one on the streets of a city, impressively decked out in capes and uniforms, or are sitting at a café in the guise of upstanding bourgeois who don’t take sides. For me, 1922 was one of those milestones, and the place where revelation occurred was Venice and Verona (…)

The disorder from which reforms should have emerged gave way to fascist sabre rattling and ended up with Hitler barking angrily in Naples.\textsuperscript{173}

Yet, the novel is not merely a political treatise, the content suggesting deeper and personally emotive influences. As argued earlier, the opus contains a litany of allusions to darkness, haunting spectres and absences, fertility and death. The masks adopted by several of the characters, including Lina and Angiola are exemplars of the craft of the author, and avatars of her denial. The political tension of the attempted assassination and Marcella’s subsequent death which brings the novel to its climax veil but do not obscure the driving force of the novel: the impact of maternal and paternal abandonment.\textsuperscript{174}

\textsuperscript{172} A second, definitive version of \textit{Denier du rêve} would appear in 1959.

\textsuperscript{173} Yourcenar, cited by Savigneau, (1990), p. 75 (n. 10); Savigneau, (1993), p. 64f (n.13).

\textsuperscript{174} For a detailed analysis of this text and its importance in the author’s corpus, see the chapter below, entitled ‘Denier du rêve — a study of absence and presence.’
A later sojourn in Naples in 1925 encouraged her penning of the compelling novel, *Anna, soror...*,\(^{175}\) which tells of an incestuous love affair between Anna and her brother Miguel toward the end of the sixteenth century. From the church of San Giovanni a Mare where Anna is depicted opening Miguel’s coffin, to Castel Sant’Elmo, the setting for the lives of the characters and the Certosa next door where an ailing and remorseful Don Alvaro settles to end his days, to the small, desolate villages of the Basilicata where Valentina and her children arrive for grape harvest, all were visited by the author at this time and were important stimuli for her writing: “Jamais invention romanesque ne fut plus immédiatement inspirée par les lieux où on la plaçait [Never was a novel’s creation more directly inspired by the locales in which it is placed].”\(^{176}\)

In later years, the author would observe that, despite her relatively immature age of twenty one years at the time of writing *Anna, soror...*, she became maternally immersed in the characters to whom she had given birth, enabling her to slip easily between them, evincing:

cette indifférence au sexe qui est, je crois, celle de tous les créateurs en présence de leurs créatures, et qui ferme ignominieusement la bouche aux gens qui s’étonnent qu’un homme puisse exceller à dépeindre les emotions d’une femme that indifference to sex which is, I believe, that of all creators in the presence of their creations, and which silences with shame those who express astonishment that a man could excel in depicting a woman’s emotions.\(^{177}\)

Whilst it might be said that to create a character of one’s own age and gender should be relatively straight-forward, the author is at equal ease with the aging Don Alvaro, unable to forgive Anna for Miguel’s death, and Valentina, the mother of Anna and Miguel, passive and peacefully detached, despite her awareness of the simmering emotion between her children. This somewhat idealistic mother figure will later be reprised in the characters of Monique (*Alexis*) and Plotina (*Mémoires d’Hadrien*) who, like Valentina, remain as background, yet instructive characters in her œuvre, just

\(^{175}\) Though written during the spring of 1925, and immediately following her return from Naples, *Anna, soror...* would not be published until 1981.


\(^{177}\) Yourcenar notes also the successful paradox of Shakespeare’s Juliet, Racine’s Phèdre and Roxane, Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina and Natasha and Charlotte Bronte’s Rochester or Selma Lagerlöf’s Gösta Berling. To emphasise the ability to immerse oneself completely into one’s creative moment she also references Flaubert’s letter to Louise Colet at the time of composing *Madame Bovary*: “Today, for example, both a man and a woman, a lover and a mistress at the same time, I rode on horseback through a forest beneath the yellow leaves of an autumn afternoon, and I was the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words they spoke, and the red sun which closed their eyelids brimming with love.” (*Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert*, letter to Louise Colet of 23 December 1853, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol II, p.483.)
as Fernande exists insistently in the life of the author. Perpetually denied centre stage, each exudes an incontrovertible impact on the protagonist, absence becoming an axiomatic presence by its very repetition.

**Absence and Presence; Infatuation as Catalyst**

Her own sexuality was blurred during the 1920s, a period which André Fraigneau remarks as one of “«diversité de désires de Marguerite» [diverse desires of Marguerite Yourcenar].”  

Although she maintained occasional relationships with men, she was known for her intense dalliances with the women whom she met in Parisian tea shops, principally at the Thé Colombin and the Wagram, “confiant seulement à la toute fin de sa vie sa fascination pour la vie nocturne, les quartiers de prostituées, la débauche, qui jusque-là n’apparaissent que dans son œuvre [confiding only at the very end of her life her fascination for night life, red light districts and debauchery, which, until then, had only appeared in her work].” As noted above, we would argue that such relationships removed her from the prison of conventional sexuality and procreation, and the implied guilt of such associations with her birth. Shotter and Gergen, in their study *Texts of Identity*, cite psychoanalytic formulations such as those of Bieber (1971), Caprio (1955) and Socarides (1965) who presented lesbians as:

- the product of a dysfunctional upbringing, suffering from unresolved castration anxiety or Õedipal conflicts, pursuing other women in a futile attempt to substitute a clitoris for a nipple as a result of their unresolved weaning problems.

Whilst we cannot be certain if any aspects of these analyses may have been appropriate for Yourcenar, we can surmise with confidence that by choosing female partners, she avoided replacing the paramount male influence in her life, her father Michel, with a male sexual partner.

We should also note here the analysis of Sigmund Freud who postulates that the “lady-love” pursued by one of his patients was a substitute for her mother, whose affection had earlier been diverted by the untimely birth of another child when the patient herself was pubescent. A revival of her infantile Õedipus complex saw her fantasising about having her father’s child, particularly one in his image. When her mother became pregnant, she turned away from her father and, indeed, from all men, seeking an alternative avenue for her libido. Freud further

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hypothesises, however, that her own motherhood or that of her love interest became unimportant as a *sine qua non*, when the intensity of the relationship with the other woman increased its imperative. Furthermore, Freud claims that the slim figure of his patient’s love interest reminded her of the brother, of whom she was very fond. 181 This analysis is thus particularly pertinent to Yourcenar whose affection for Grace Frick could be seen as fulfilling a dual desperation for the author. Grace not only filled the void of the mother Yourcenar had never known, but given Grace’s slim build and rather severe appearance, an image of Michel can clearly be envisaged. Grace, therefore, realises for Yourcenar a unique duality of affection, embodying both Fernande and Michel and, by reviving the past into the present, introduces another layer onto Yourcenar’s anathema for motherhood.

However, it is also not surprising that, labouring through the void created by Michel’s death in 1929 which deprived her of stimulating male companionship, she began to pursue André Fraigneau,182 her editor at Editions Grasset in Paris. He was the perfect father-substitute: a literary expert who admired her writing style, and a homosexual who was therefore as sexually unavailable to her as her father, Michel. Fraigneau, a most unwilling recipient of her affections, commented:

Elle cherchait sans cesse à séduire. Elle a essayé avec plusieurs de mes amis […] Elle m’envoyait des poèmes, elle voulait me voir souvent, lorsqu’elle était à Paris, ce qui n’était heureusement pas très fréquent […] Elle était vraiment intelligente et douée. Mais elle n’est jamais entrée dans ma vie privée, sans même parler de relation amoureuse […] Elle était le type même de la femme qui aime les femmes. Pourtant, j’ai vite compris qu’elle rêvait d’être la maîtresse d’hommes qui aiment les hommes. Et elle était tenace, comme pour tout


182 She also maintained a close relationship at this time with André Embiricos, the Greek poet and psychoanalyst, the exact nature of which has never been established, such was the discretion of both writers. Never-the-less, it could be said that this powerful Greek influence in her life, however temporal, may have been a further catalyst for the later intensity of *Mémoires d’Hadrien. Nouvelles orientales*, published as a collection for the first time in 1938, was dedicated to Embiricos, despite Yourcenar’s habitual aversion to such ostentation. Although he severed their relationship the following year, the 1963 publication of *Nouvelles orientales* maintains this dedication.
She was constantly seeking to seduce. She tried with several of my friends. She would send me poems, she wanted to see me often, when she was in Paris, which fortunately was not very frequently (...) She was really intelligent and gifted. But she never became part of my private life, to say nothing of there having been an amorous relationship (...) She was the very epitome of a woman who loves women. None-the-less, I soon realised that she dreamed of being the mistress of men who love men. And she was persistent, as in everything else.¹⁸³

Whether it was the writer’s desire for control over her prey, or the pervading denial of her driving force, she persisted in both her relentless pursuit of Fraigneau and her insistence on the impact of his rebuff. Le Coup de grâce, (1939), considered to be the author’s most autobiographical novel, passionately reflects the drama being played out with André Fraigneau. Eric’s observation of Sophie’s situation reveals the author’s painful appreciation of reality:

Le comique de la chose était que c’est justement mes qualités de froideur et de refus qui m’avaient fait aimer: elle m’eût repoussé avec horreur, si elle avait aperçu dans mes yeux, à nos premières rencontres, cette lueur que maintenant elle mourait de n’y pas voir.

What was ludicrous in the whole affair was this: it was my coldness and unresponsiveness that had won her; if in our first encounters she had seen in my eyes what she now sought there in vain she would have repulsed me with horror.¹⁸⁴

This confession by the author, adroitly offered by Eric, serves to substantiate our argument. André’s coldness encouraged Yourcenar’s persistence with her ardour which ironically maintained her in the semblance of a conventional ‘relationship’; whilst her purporting to seek his favour was another of her masks, she was protected by his sexual unavailability. Had there been the suggestion of reciprocated affection by André, Yourcenar’s dual fears of the potential implications of their sexual act might have been realised; there can be no doubt that Yourcenar’s flight would have been immediate.

The author maintains her mask as Sophie who becomes the victim of Eric’s egocentric personality in Le Coup de grâce, his affection reserved uniquely for Sophie’s brother, Conrad. The novel, set against a background of Baltic unrest, portrays the story of this trio, the doomed affection of Sophie for Eric, his dominance over both brother and sister, and the eventual stifling

of Sophie’s adoration and ultimately her life by the arrogance and rigidity of Eric. In an explosion
of traditional plot and character sequence, Sophie takes the ultimate revenge by insisting that Eric
adopt the role as her executioner in the firing squad, an event which, having been undertaken,
will realise her coup de grâce and infuse his life with perpetual remorse, such was her intent: “J’ai
compris depuis qu’elle n’avait voulu que se venger, et me léguer des remords […] On est toujours
pris au piège avec ces femmes [But I understood afterwards that she only wished to take revenge,
leaving me prey to remorse (...) One is always trapped, somehow, in dealings with women].”

Juxtaposition of birth and death, absence and presence are intensified by the author at
this moment of impending execution as Eric muses on the resultant elimination by his act of
Sophie’s prospects of motherhood and the traits she might impart to a child: “[J]e me sentis
étreint d’une sorte de regret absurde pour les enfants que cette femme aurait pu mettre au
monde, et qui auraient hérité de son courage et de ses yeux [I felt pangs of something like regret,
absurdly enough, for the children that this woman might have borne, who would have inherited
her courage and her eyes].” Despite this apparent sentiment, Eric’s perpetually detached
emotion towards Sophie is betrayed by the author’s unimpassioned use of “this woman” to
ensure his psychological distance in her physical presence. However, it would be superficial to
consider Sophie only as the pallid but unsuccessful admirer of Eric. She would never be fulfilled
by Eric, yet ironically her passion designs her coup de grâce; Sophie’s ultimate supremacy over
Eric is only realised by her death. In his study of 19th-century literature, R.M. Adams postulates:

Self-fulfilment through self-annihilation, victory for will through denial of will, light
through darkness – the effect of all these swiftly multiplying paradoxes is to suggest
a world outside thought, a world of exploding potent consciousness which mere
language is unable to contain.

Sophie’s progressive loss of identity is paradoxically reversed with her insistence that Eric
performs her physical annihilation. Though her ultimate self-effacement is symbolised by Eric’s
removal of her physical identity with his poor aim, her “self-fulfilment” and a “victory for [her] will
through denial of [Eric’s] will” are ensured. Not only is he powerless against Sophie’s
determination, he will remain forever haunted by both her absence and the eternal presence of
the memory of his deed, doomed to repetition by the act of remembering in order to recount his

187 Robert Martin Adams, Nil : Episodes in the Literary Conquests of Void during the Nineteenth Century,
(London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 82, cited by Murphy, p. 20f (n.36).
tale. Reference to an impossible relationship between Sophie and potential offspring is replete with unspoken allusion on many levels: to the impossible bond between Marguerite and Fernande which was annihilated by the death of the latter; to the unlikelihood of a reciprocated alliance with Fraigneau; and to the inconceivability of Yourcenar’s own procreation. We have already referenced the echoing of Yourcenarian themes in the Durasian corpus, thus Murphy’s conclusion is important and equally relevant to Yourcenar’s œuvre: “The story of an impossible but necessary love whose essence is the fragile moment of dissolution of self in an absolute, metaphoric love-death persist in nearly all of the novels.  

Sophie’s complex character is examined in depth by Kajsa Andersson in her 1986 doctoral thesis entitled Le «don sombre», Le theme de la mort dans quatre romans de Marguerite Yourcenar. Andersson’s assessment of Sophie as “une femme courageuse à l’âme héroïque [a courageous woman with an heroic soul] reflects her strong and liberated masculine side, “ce qui n’est pas toujours la règle pour les personnages féminins de l’universe yourcenarien [which is not always the rule for female characters in the Yourcenarian universe].” Moreover, Andersson enumerates Sophie’s typically feminine and diverse occupations: “elle est maîtresse de maison (p. 98), servante (p.133), actrice de cinéma (p. 126) […] petite bonne (p. 120), comtesse (p. 140), paysanne (p. 112), héroïne (p. 95) [ she is mistress of the house, servant, cinema actress, (…) little maid, countess, peasant, heroine], which she counters with Sophie’s more masculine attributes as observed by Eric, for whom she appeared as “le frère de son frère [her brother’s brother]” (p. 99), a “jeune valet de ferme [a young farm hand]” (p. 112), “un garçon manqué [a failed boy]” (p. 113) and in her drunken state Andersson notes that “le corps de Sophie apparaît comme celui d’un homme [Sophie’s body appeared like that of a man].” Sophie’s possession of these complementary virtues, Andersson concludes, renders her character as clearly androgynous, her bisexuality conforming comfortably to the Yourcenarian paradigm.

188 Murphy, p. 153.
189 Kajsa Andersson, "Le "don sombre"; le thème de la mort dans quatre romans de Marguerite Yourcenar" (University of Uppsala, Sweden, 1989), p. 64.
190 Ibid, p. 65. The page numbers quoted here by Andersson are those from Œuvres romanesques.
191 Ibid. Yourcenar asserted in her interview with Matthieu Galey that specifically feminine virtues, which feminists often pretend to disdain such as “la douceur, la bonté, la finesse, la délicatesse [gentleness,kindness,subtlety, delicacy]” are all virtues important also to men who, in lacking them to some degree, would be considered a brute and not a man. She adds that the absence of typically masculine virtues such as “le courage, l’endurance, l’énergie physique, la maîtresse de soi [courage, endurance, physical strength, self-control]” in a woman would render her simply as slight or spineless, appending her desire for these complementary virtues to be possessed by all for the benefit of mankind. Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 286; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 223.
192 Andersson, p. 66.
Andersson’s conception of Sophie as the ‘Earth Mother’ is also instructive. She notes Yourcenar’s repeated depiction of Sophie as peasant-like in both appearance and demeanour, likening this association with ‘the earth’ to fecundity. This is heightened at the moment prior to her death, as Eric’s thoughts turn to Sophie’s “corps vivant et chaud [body, so alive and warm]” and his regret for “les enfants que cette femme aurait pu mettre au monde [the children that this woman might have born].” Thus, Yourcenar’s persistent allusion to her absent mother is palpable in Andersson’s reference to Mircea Eliade’s theory that

La Terre devient (également) déesse de la Mort [...] parce qu’elle est sentie comme la matrice universelle [...] la mort est considérée comme un retour à la Mère, une réintégration provisoire du sein maternel

The Earth (equally) becomes the goddess of Death (...) because she is perceived as the universal uterus (...) death is considered as a return to the Mother, a provisional reintegration of the maternal breast.

As we have contended, the writing of this novel was inspired by a tempestuous period during the author’s life. Following her father’s death in January, 1929, Yourcenar had met Fraigneau, who was a great admirer of the maturity expressed in her writing. Having sought an intense attachment, albeit one which was “safe”, her infatuation with Fraigneau was therefore undoubtedly enhanced by his praise and inflamed by the recent loss of her father, an event which, in turn, had rekindled the subconscious pain of her mother’s absence. His repudiation of this affection also formed the catalyst for La Nouvelle Eurydice, published in 1931, a text repeating the formula of a trio of characters popular with the author, where the male falls in love with the female who loves the other male, who prefers men. That this scenario echoes the actual relationship which the author surmised between her father, Jeanne de Vietinghoff and her husband, Conrad, has long been suspected and highlights the extent to which her life and those who surrounded her provided an insistent catalyst for her writing.

André Fraigneau’s rejection of her amorous advances reignited those earlier rejections in her life, foremost in her psyche that of her mother, who denied her the very sustenance to survive, then disappeared permanently from her life. Although the author refused to acknowledge these emotional pressures, her desires to seduce form the very heart of her need for control and, in the event of longevity, some degree of affection and permanence from the

194 Ibid.
association. Such had not been possible in her relationship with Fernande, and more recently she had suffered from the impact of her father’s absence. It now seemed that her confused desire for a relationship with André Fraigneau was being similarly rebuffed. Fraigneau’s rejection which enlivened Fernande’s presence and heightened the recent loss of her father, became the catalyst for a new opus.

The publisher later acknowledged that “«Je sais que Feux est le résultat de son échec avec moi» [“I know that Fires is the result of her failure with me”].”\textsuperscript{196} Feux, “[p]roduit d’une crise passionnelle [the product of a love crisis]”\textsuperscript{197} appeared in 1936 as a collection of nine “lyrical prose pieces” inspired by Greek myths (again, Michel’s influence), but heavily accentuated by authorial outpourings:

A travers la fougue ou la désinvolture inseparables de ce genre d’aveux quasi publics, certains passages de Feux me semblent aujourd’hui contenir des vérités entrevues de bonne heure, mais qu’ensuite toute la vie n’aura pas été de trop pour essayer de retrouver et d’authentifier. Ce bal masqué a été l’une des étapes d’une prise de conscience

Through the dash and unconstraint of these sort of quasi-public confessions, certain passages of Fires seem to me to contain today truths glimpsed early on that needed a whole lifetime to be rediscovered and authenticated. For me, this masked ball was only a stage of awareness.\textsuperscript{198}

The collection was “reissued” in 1957 and again in 1981, for which issue the above preface was penned in 1974. Her attempt in 1936 at catharsis appears not only to have been thwarted, but this failure intensified over the decades which followed:

Dans Feux, où je croyais ne faire que glorifier un amour très concret, ou peut-être exorciser celui-ci, l’idolâtrie de l’être aimé s’associe très visiblement à des passions plus abstraites, mais non moins intenses, qui prévalent parfois sur l’obsession sentimentale et charnelle

In Fires, where I thought I was only glorifying or perhaps exorcising a very concrete love, the worshipping of the person loved is very clearly associated

\textsuperscript{196} Cited by Savigneau, (1990), p. 113; Savigneau, (1993), p. 102.
with more abstract but no less intense notions, and these notions sometimes prevail over the carnal and sentimental obsession.\textsuperscript{199}

The binary of presence and absence which so haunted her life finds emphasis in this work:

Absent, ta figure se dilate au point d’emplir l’univers. Tu passes à l’état fluide qui est celui des fantômes. Présent, elle se condense; tu atteins aux concentrations des métaux les plus lourds, de l’iridium, du mercure. Je meurs de ce poids quand il me tombe sur le cœur

Absent, your face expands so that it fills the universe. You reach the fluid state which is one of ghosts. Present, your face condenses, you achieve the concentration of the heaviest metals, of iridium, of mercury. This weight kills me when it falls on my heart.\textsuperscript{200}

The futility and terminus of this impossible relationship are emphasised; life and love, despite disparate pathways, are juxtaposed with the inevitability of death: “Solitude ... Je ne crois pas comme ils croient, je ne vis pas comme ils vivent, je n’aime pas comme ils aiment ... Je mourrai comme ils meurent [Loneliness ... I don’t believe as they do, I don’t live as they do, I don’t love as they do ... I will die as they die.\textsuperscript{201} Whilst it is undeniably of Fraigneau that she writes, the ghost of Michel haunts her writing:

\begin{quote}
Elle fabrique sa beauté, sa chasteté, ses faiblesses; elle les extrait du fond d’elle-même; elle isole de lui cette purité détestable pour pouvoir la haïr sous la figure d’une fade vierge

She manufactures his beauty, his chastity, his weaknesses, extracting these from deep within herself; to be able to hate it under the guise of an insipid virgin, she removes his detestable purity.\textsuperscript{202}
\end{quote}

Extensive references to death impact the text, interspersed with diary-like notations reflecting the darkness of her psyche. The birth/death nexus, so prevalent in the author’s corpus, finds evidence in this text which reflects her recent emotional trauma: “les femmes hurlantes, enfantant la mort par la brèche des blessures [(the women) howling, giving birth to death through the gaps in their wounds].”\textsuperscript{203}

In the preface to *Antigone ou le choix* (Antigone or the Choice), Yourcenar’s brief but explicit statement lies at the heart of her corpus: “j’ai au fond de moi ma douleur, comme une espèce d’horrible enfant [I have deep within me my suffering like a sort of terrible offspring].” Her guilt and resentment towards her mother, together with her sense of abandonment, initially by Fernande and later by significant others in her life, Barbe and Michel amongst those, have ironically personified her suffering as a “terrible offspring” — the child she chose never to carry for reasons discussed elsewhere in this thesis. Employing the vocabulary of fecundity, Yourcenar, intensifies the irony with the immaculate conception of Mary Magdalene — with child though not physically impregnated — who declares: “nous allions au-devant de toutes les douleurs pour l’enfantement d’une nouvelle vie [we would bear every conceivable pain to beget a new life].” Yet, it is not the existence of human life Yourcenar seeks at her core, but an ataraxic life — a locus amœnus, free from emotional disturbance and anxiety. Thus, writing became her hope of catharsis, the choice of characters from ancient Greek mythology, so familiar to her, lending her writing the distance and depth of passion necessary for her intention, whilst de-personalising her prose. Evidence for the intensity of this process is found early in her corpus in a revelatory admission by Alexis: “Je travaillais comme travaillent ceux qui cherchent un refuge dans une occupation [I worked the way people work when they are seeking refuge in an occupation].” Despair at the failure, the death of her relationship with Fraigneau resulted in a dark and brooding outpouring of passion, influenced by the absent writers encouraged by Michel, infused by references to mythological Greek warfare and published at a time when the world at large was on the brink of a dark and foreboding time in its history. In 1936, cocooned in her despair, the author resumed her wanderlust, seeking objects of seduction, and notifying friends by correspondence of various European hotels she would occupy in turn during the year. Apart from a period in the late 1930s, which she spent in Greece, collaborating with the Greek writer,
Constantine Dimaras, on a translation into French of the poetry of Constantine Cavafy, Yourcenar would not involve herself in any further major literary undertaking at this time, with the exception of the appearance in diverse 1937 revues of several stories destined for the later publication of *Nouvelles orientales*, followed by the completion of *Le Coup de grâce* late in 1938.

**Birth and Death: The Frick Years (1937 – 1979)**

![Marguerite Yourcenar and Grace Frick, 1936, just before their introduction](image)

This apparent hiatus in her creative output bore immediate correlation to Yourcenar’s private life. In 1937, she met Grace Frick, an American academic, in Paris and travelled with her through Europe, subsequently spending the winter of that year together in America. Whether this was initially a rebound from the failure of her passion for Fraigneau and the desperate need to seduce and resume mastery of herself and others, cannot be ascertained, but it would appear that it was indeed Grace Frick who controlled this woman, whom she adored. However, Yourcenar’s unresolved emotional malaise saw her return to Europe in April 1938, where she

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209 The success of this collaboration is not agreed. Despite his open admiration of Yourcenar’s intelligence and eclectic abilities, Dimaras found her to be both “authoritarian [and] stubborn”, possessing a loose interpretation of the genre of translation. Insisting on the integrity of the lack of leniency in his “view of translation”, he contrasted Yourcenar’s sole concern “with what she thought sounded good in French”, her works often resulting in “French poems, adapted from Greek poems, but in no instance are they translated.” Savigneau, (1990), p. 118f; Savigneau, (1993), p. 108. Similarly, in 1937 Yourcenar visited Virginia Woolf in London to seek her direction in the translation of *The Waves*, despite which Savigneau argues that the work is “truffée de «faux sens» [riddled with misrenderings],” a vagueness which Yourcenar suggests was borne by the author’s lack of understanding of the problems of translation. Savigneau, (1990), p. 123; Savigneau, (1993), p. 113.
determined to expunge André Fraigneau from her thoughts. Her penning of the transitional work, *Le Coup de grâce*, would allow her the hope of this catharsis. As we have seen, Eric’s hands, like those of Lady Macbeth, will be permanently stained by Sophie’s blood. A personal quest for emotional remission which began with *Feux* reached its climax with the final words of *Le Coup de grâce*. It is not impossible that this title, patently chosen to highlight Sophie’s ultimate triumph, may also represent the symbiotic presence of Grace in Marguerite’s life and the coup she had achieved in focussing the latter’s affections elsewhere, a timely happenstance which expedited the writing of this work bearing a dedication to her.\(^{210}\)

Following the declaration of war between France and Germany in 1939, Yourcenar left for New York and a relationship with Grace Frick which would endure until the latter’s death in 1979.\(^{211}\) Her financial reliance on Grace was such that her literary output would be limited at the outset to articles in periodicals, whilst she voluntarily taught courses in French and History of Art at Hartford, and undertook a lecture tour in Chicago and several south and western states before securing a part-time post at Sarah Lawrence College in New York State. It was in New York at the apartment of a Polish friend that she learnt of the fall of Paris in 1940, both weeping at the irretrievable and apparent end of the Europe they had known and of a life of undeniable freedoms: “[T]ous deux pleurent ensemble sur ce qui leur paraît la fin definitive d’un monde”.\(^{212}\)

In 1942, at the time of her first visit to Mount Desert Island in Maine, the location for the home Grace would purchase for the couple in 1950, the author wrote a dramatic work, *Le Mystère d’Alceste*, inspired by Euripides’ tragic tale which centres upon the spiritual combat of Hercules against Death. The author noted in the long preface to this work, that “«les thèmes traditionnels du sacrifice et de l’héroïsme sont traités sans biaisement et sans objection» [“the traditional themes of sacrifice and heroism are treated with neither avoidance or objection”].”\(^{213}\) This is not surprising. The continent where she had enjoyed a lifetime of freedoms on so many levels had fallen to the Germans and she found herself at an unfamiliar distance, absent and interned in a new land with an ever-present, intense and possessive partner. Hercules’ combat

\(^{210}\) Reference is made by Savigneau, (1990), p. 135; Savigneau, (1993), p. 124, to Fraigneau’s collection of short stories ironically entitled *La Grâce humaine* which was also appearing at this time.

\(^{211}\) This decision, which influenced the author’s life exponentially, may be seen to echo Heilbrun’s encapsulation at p. 4, of George Eliot’s albeit heterosexual scenario: “By one outrageous act she escaped social demands, the compulsion to motherhood, and despair of her lack of accepted sex appeal; by the same act she satisfied her sexual desires, her need for a certain dependency, and, above all, her need for space in which to work.”

\(^{212}\) Yourcenar, OR, (1982), *The Pléiade*’s “Chronologie”, p.xxi.

\(^{213}\) See Savigneau, (1990), p. 158, (n. 17); Savigneau, (1993), p. 146, (n.20.)
with Death must have seemed all too real and an echo of the stifling personal situation in which she now found herself. Financial hardship exacerbated this imposed confinement, increasing both her reliance on Grace Frick and her resultant depression. Redolent with expressions of her mute alienation in this foreign land, Yourcenar also penned *La Petite Sirène* during this period, as we have seen, an adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson’s *Little Mermaid*.\(^{214}\) As noted, her literary output at this time had stagnated until a voice from her past penetrated this void.

Though the dating remains uncertain for the arrival of a trunk, retrieved from a Swiss hotel, containing “quelques pages d’une troisième rédaction de *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, ébauchée en 1937-1938 [several pages of a third composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*, outlined in 1937-1938],”\(^{215}\) it can reasonably be dated to late 1948 or early 1949. This timely delivery provided her creativity with a necessary renaissance as Yourcenar breathed life into Hadrian during the two year period to follow, resulting in the publication in 1951 of this work for which the author is perhaps most renowned:

> Like a painter who has chosen a landscape, but who constantly shifts his easel now right, now left, I had at last found a point from which to view the book.\(^{216}\)

Her writing through this period was feverish, with Grace Frick providing constant support and encouragement. The passion which the author and her partner shared is reflected in her writing by the passion she retained for her subject. The two women worked together in their study, the one mirroring the other, this collaboration evident today in the partners’ desk located in the study at “Petite Plaisance”, the home they created together on Mount Desert Island, Maine. The trunk’s arrival was indeed fortuitous and, given Grace Frick’s ardour for the author and her undeniable control over their lives, her influence on this composition should not be underestimated. Whilst assumptions might be made about dominance of one over the other, based on the disparate appearances of the two women and their social demeanours, anticipated clarification of this hypothesis cannot be evaluated until at least fifty years after the author’s

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\(^{214}\) A more expansive analysis of the significance of this play has already been undertaken above at p. 39f.

\(^{215}\) Yourcenar, OR, (1982), p. xxiii. The Pléiade’s “Chronologie” notes the arrival of the trunk in “[n]ovembre ou début décembre 1948”, yet Savigneau, (1990), p. 187; Savigneau, (1993), p. 175, reveals that Yourcenar marked her calendar for 24\(^{th}\) January 1949 in large letters with this important event, underlining her notation to highlight her excitement of this event and the import it carried for her writing. Though the outlines therein contained had been penned in the 1930’s, earlier attempts at this epistle from Hadrian to Marcus Aurelius had been relegated to the waste basket as early as 1923 or 1924. The confusion of the dates is therefore curious, given the repetitive apparition of this character, and her intuition that this was the definitive moment to complete this composition.

death when correspondence between the couple which has been sealed in the archives at Harvard University is released. Yet, given the complicated nature of the epistolary genre with its omissions, ruptures and selective inclusions, we can never be certain that the release of this correspondence will provide definitive answers.

Yourcenar’s affection and respect for Grace is reflected in her composition of an article for the local newspaper at Northeast Harbor, following Grace’s passing, which includes a dedication for Grace’s unselfish abandonment of her own career to become Yourcenar’s literary assistant, companion and translator, and praises Grace’s “générosité, sa gentillesse et sa profond sympathie pour tous ceux qu’elle rencontrait et connaissait, son intérêt pour les causes humanitaires, écologiques et éducatives et son courage dans sa longue maladie [generosity, kindness and profound sympathy for all whom she met and knew, her interest in humanitarian, environmental and educational causes and her courage during her long illness].”

That this intensely private relationship, touched by profound respect was not overtly touted is recognised by Goslar:

Grace, c’est le sujet tabou! Grace, c’est elle qu’on cache aux journalistes ou qu’on présente comme la tradutrice, parfois, timidement comme la compagne ... comme l’amie avec qu’on vit, mais jamais comme l’être élu et véritablement aimé
Grace is the taboo subject! Grace, it is she whom one hides from journalists or whom one presents as the translator, at times timidly as the companion ... as the friend one lives with, but never as the chosen and truly loved one.

Goslar’s conclusion is emphatic: “L’a-t-elle aimée? Bien sûr! On ne vit pas quarante ans avec quelqu’un sans l’aider! [Did she love her? Certainly! One doesn’t live for forty years with someone without loving them].” In “Reflections on the Composition of Memoirs of Hadrian” the author’s affection and indebtedness to her companion are expounded:

Even the longest dedication is too short and too commonplace to honour a friendship so uncommon. When I try to define this asset which has been mine now for years, I tell myself that such a privilege, however rare it may be, is surely not unique; that in the whole adventure of bringing a book successfully to its conclusion, or even in the entire life of some fortunate writers, there must have

217 Goslar, p. 314.
218 Ibid, p. 313.
219 Ibid, p. 311.
been sometimes, in the background, perhaps, someone who will not let pass the weak or inaccurate sentence which we ourselves would retain, out of fatigue; someone who would re-read with us for the twentieth time, if need be, a questionable page; someone [...] who shares with us, and with equal fervour the joys of art and of living, the endless work which both require...someone who is neither our shadow nor our reflection, nor even our complement, but simply himself; someone who leaves us ideally free, but who nevertheless obliges us to be fully what we are. Hospes Comesque.220

The outpourings of affection and gratitude thus expressed entwine friendship with literary volume, and belie any sense of imprisonment later suggested by her fascination with the Carceri (Prisons) of Piranesi, a mirror of the sense of entrapment experienced by her father. The warmth expressed by this dedication also reflects the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, observed by Jane Rule as follows:

as nearly patterned on a middle-class marriage as possible, in which Gertrude would be the husband, Alice the wife, all understanding, tending, admiring. But Alice [...] seems to have managed Gertrude much as any other loving and clever wife has managed a husband who needs to feel superior, but is bound by dependent needs, both emotional and practical.221

So when did this relationship pass from “«une passion, ensuite [à] une habitude, enfin seulement une femme qui soigne une autre femme malade» [a passion (to) a habit, then just one woman looking after another who was ill],”222 as the author would later confide? Did she unconsciously recognise herself in Hadrian? An excerpt from the Pléiade’s “Chronologie” suggests this to be so:

220 Ibid., pp. 342-43.
222 Savigneau, (1990), p. 394; Savigneau, (1993), p. 377. Ironically, if we set aside Grace’s cancer, it was a more frequent occurrence for Grace to be nursing Yourcenar through her many real or imagined bouts of illness. For evidence of these illnesses, see Yourcenar’s archives held in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, especially a letter dated 27th January, 1973 from Grace Frick to Gertrude Frick, a neighbour on Mount Desert Island, outlining details of Yourcenar’s recent hospital admission which included numerous tests and administration of heart and blood pressure medication; a further letter to the same recipient dated 12th February, 1974 referring to further hospitalisation admissions for Yourcenar, and another undated but postmarked November, 1977, detailing illnesses (all filed under Houghton Library call number bMS Fr 372 [1312]). So also, a typewritten letter by Yourcenar to her doctor outlining the symptoms of ill health experienced over many years, including palpitations, chest pain, trembling, nausea and dizziness when under physical stress (bMS Fr 372.2 [48]). This archival evidence has been personally sighted by the writer.
Ce récit, mis dans sa propre bouche, de la vie d’un homme arrivé lentement au pouvoir suprême, qui a beaucoup agi, travaillé, joui et vécu, présente en même temps une sorte de testament politique du plus éclairé des empereurs, nourri de ce qui est déjà de son temps la culture antique.

This chronicle, placed in his own words, of the life of a man recently risen to supreme power, who has energetically worked, loved and lived, also presents a sort of political testament of the most enlightened of emperors, nourished by what is already in his time, the culture of antiquity.

This is the very reflection of the person she saw herself to be: someone who had recently risen to her potential, someone who had been extraordinarily active, worked, loved and lived intensely, whose very being had been nourished by antiquity and absent demons. Hadrian had learnt Latin and Greek to augment his native Sevillian tongue, just as Yourcenar had also learnt these languages in her youth to allow her a wider literary selection. Despite her eclectic reading habits, albeit guided by her father in her youth, the overt influence of ancient Greek culture on her work is undeniable as is her propensity for homosexual or bisexual characters. Thus, given this intensity and propinquity, and the identification with Hadrian’s hypochondria and life-long melancholy which she developed with her protagonist during the long months of composition, it can be guessed with some confidence that she began to channel her own emotions into Hadrian’s relationship with Antinoüs, conveying to Hadrian the sense of being stifled which had begun to engulf her after years of sexual independence:

\[(L)\text{e poids de l’amour, comme celui d’un bras tendrement posé au travers d’une poitrine, devenait peu à peu lourd à porter [...] j’étais repris par ma rage de ne dépendre exclusivement d’aucun être.}\]

\[(T)\text{he weight of love, like that of an arm thrown tenderly across the chest, becomes little by little too heavy to bear (...) I was again seized by a mania for avoiding exclusive dependence on any one being.}\]

Again, we see her life mirrored in her art. Hadrian’s anguish which lay in his “besoin de rabrouer cette tendresse ombrageuse qui risquait d’encombrer [s]a vie [need to wound this umbrageous affection which threatened to encumber (his) life]” reflects, or was reflected in, the author’s manner towards her companion. Matthieu Galey’s suggestion that, without Antinoüs, Hadrian

\[\text{\cite{Yourcenar, OR, (1982), p. xxiv.}}\]
might have been an “emperor like the rest” met with a vehement denial by the author, and her assertion that he would have been “a great civil servant, a great man of letters, and a great prince.”²²⁶ We can’t know whether the journalist was implying the extent of Grace Frick’s influence on Yourcenar, yet her insistent response suggests a double denial.

**Abyss, Imprisonment and Fatalism**

[Image of Petite Plaisance, Mount Desert Island, Maine]

The impending completion of *Mémoires d’Hadrien* intensified Grace Frick’s search for a permanent residence for the couple on Mount Desert Island, so concerned was she that, following the novel’s publication in Paris, her companion might rekindle her relationships in Europe. In September, 1950, Grace’s purchase of “Petite Plaisance” was finalised, a place of solitude and retreat, ironically or cleverly decorated by Grace Frick with memorabilia of the author’s youth or gifts subsequently received, allowing Europe to surround them in maritime America and to provide for her the necessary magnet for her companion’s presence. The fear of imprisonment only exacerbated the author’s wanderlust, mirroring that of Hadrian; many and extensive travels to Europe ensued, during one of which she wrote to a friend: “«Les Etats-Unis? J’y ai gardé une petite maison […] où je compte retourner de temps en temps pour travailler, si cela m’est possible, mais pas avant un an en tout cas [“Regarding the United States? I’ve kept a

²²⁶ Yourcenar, WOE, p. 126.
small house there (...) which I plan to return to from time to time to work, if I can do so, but no sooner than a year from now in any case”.

The singular personal pronoun betrays a pretence of independence and estrangement, the writer feigning a certain freedom, which might obscure any cloying amorous connection or pressure for a hasty return. The Pléiade’s “Chronologie” supports this with mention of sojourns in Paris, Switzerland, England, Belgium, and Scandinavia, seemingly without Grace Frick who was working on the translations of both Mémoires d’Hadrien, which appeared in New York in 1954, and Le Coup de grâce, published in 1957. The author’s preoccupations in Europe at this time appeared centred around the faults of modern society, civil rights, protests against nuclear proliferation, over-population and animal cruelty, aspects of which gained increasing mention in her writing. These altruistic obsessions with the human condition and devotion to the interests of the global community absented her momentarily from the exile of her physical and emotional imprisonment on Mount Desert Island. In that place, Grace Frick’s battle was just beginning.

Her diagnosis with breast cancer in 1958 must have had a significant and unexpected impact on the lives of these two women. A looming despondency at the possibility of enforced inertia is reflected in the author’s intention to re-institute preparatory reading for L’Œuvre au noir, the darkness and import of her future suggested by the title, equally relevant in the English translation, The Abyss. That life provided a catalyst for this opus is not surprising at a time when Yourcenar could neither separate from the weighty demands of her personal life, both contemporaneous and past, nor find a solution for her psychological malaise. It would be capricious to overlook the choice of title, symbolic of the psychological torment and depression which increasingly enveloped her. Her despair reawakened memories of her ancestors in Flanders, details of whom were augmented by a book from her father’s family library entitled Mémoires anonymes sur les troubles des Pays-Bas, (Anonymous Memoirs of the Disturbances in the Low Countries.)

Michel’s continued presence and influence are persistently evident.

Set in the mid sixteenth century, L’Œuvre au noir tells the story of Zeno, who struggles with the concepts of the church, the family, the authorities and the university where he studies anatomy and medicine. His mother, Hilzonda, pregnant to and abandoned by the Italian

clergyman, Messer Alberico de’ Numi, gives birth to Zeno in a scene redolent of that of Fernande, following the birth of Marguerite: “Inerte dans son lit d’accouchée, elle regarda avec indifférence les bonnes emmailloter cette petite masse brûnatre à la lueur des braises du foyer [Inert in the bed of her confinement, she looked on with indifference as the maids swaddled that brown little mass in the glow of embers on the hearth].”

Fernande’s indifference and denial of nurture to her daughter noted earlier are hauntingly recaptured in Hilzonda. Her apathy towards the inconvenient presence of the child, who was a constant reminder of the absence of the father, manifests itself by her refusal to provide her son with life-giving sustenance: “[E]lle ne jetait qu’un coup d’œil à son fils tétant goulûment une servante [[S]he would throw no more than a glance at her son, greedily suckling there at a servant’s breast].” Zeno’s existence, a perpetual recognition of the death of a passion his mother had shared with the clergyman, provides further evidence for the double binary of birth/death and absence/presence, together with the thread of Fernande running persistently through Yourcenar’s œuvre. That Zeno, the character with the nihilistic name, and whom she confessed loving “«comme un frère» [“like a brother”],” has been endowed with the same birthdate as Fernande, the personage whom our author persistently avowed meant nothing to her, is surely not coincidental. The author’s insistent denials should therefore be read with rather less confidence.

Echos of her father, Michel, are found in the character of Simon Andriansen - “twice widowed” and with “an indifference in matters of money” - who attempts to nurture Zeno as his own when he marries Hilzonda. Death also continues to haunt Simon’s life, until the birth of a daughter: “Plusieurs nouveau-nés [...] leur étaient morts l’un après l’autre [...] Enfin, une fille naquit et vécut [Several infants born to them (...) died one after the other (...) Finally a daughter was born who survived].” For both men, the birth of a daughter directly negated any further procreation, the author closing this avenue for her characters just as she determined she had, either directly or indirectly, for her father. As we have argued, this burden of responsibility for

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230 Yourcenar, ON, (1968), in OR, (1982), p. 570; Yourcenar, TA, (1985), p. 22. The similarity is reinforced: Fernande’s placenta was removed from the scene of the confinement and disposed of in the kitchen hearth, traditionally a location of family warmth and creation, but now a setting for eradication. This identification of the hearth with death is later doubly reinforced in the scene of the laying-out of Jan Myers’ body in the room adjoining the hearth where the fire had died out.
233 Savigneau, (1990), p. 20; Savigneau, (1993), p. 11. For further reference to this birthdate, see the chapter entitled ‘Memory as autobiography’, n. 257.
her mother’s death, though often denied, regularly influenced her writing and became a significant persuasion for her repeated choice of ‘barren’ sexual partners.

The family’s fortunes diminish with their association with the Anabaptists in Münster. Death and irony litter the pages, Hilzonda meeting her end dressed in her best finery. The now motherless child, Martha, a mirror of Marguerite, is adopted by Johanna, a coalescence of both Barbe and the Fraulein, governesses of the author’s youth — a further invocation of the pain of her abandonment. The pattern of desertion, so insisted upon throughout the opus, prevails until Zeno’s final decision to abandon life itself. Zeno’s death by the letting of his veins would ultimately take place whilst incarcerated, a metaphor for the author’s enduring imprisonment by the memory of the circumstances of her birth and their aftermath. Throughout her life, this initial abandonment was exacerbated by others, not least that of her father, these absences provoking her search for passion and literary fulfilment which encouraged a continual blurring of the boundaries between life and fiction. The darkness of Zeno’s downwardly spiralling existence is reflected in his demise in a sombre prison cell in Bruges. Whilst his death, following charges brought against him by both ecclesiastic and civil authorities, would provide his only means of liberation, Zeno chose not to die like his mother, inviting execution at another’s hand, but to conclude his presence by not unexpected means – the slashing of both a vein in his foot and a wrist artery. The resultant gush of blood, so suggestive of the scene at the author’s birth, plays out with the death of the alchemist/philosopher/physician, unable and unwilling to sustain his own life. Zeno’s existence is extinguished, as a symbolic darkness tightens its hold on the day, the presence of the gaoler with the symbolic name of Hermann Mohr, too late to prevent the inevitable absence of his prisoner. The city of Bruges therefore becomes the cyclic location for both Zeno’s birth and death, the setting for his presence in, and his absence from, a life pervaded by death and darkness: repeated as inter-textual themes of nexus and disjunction in the author’s œuvre.

The penning of L’Œuvre au noir, like that of Mémoires d’Hadrien, was begun while the author was in her twenties, yet only gained momentum at a time of emotional crisis for her. Whilst the author draws on the historian Dio Cassius and the Latin chronicler, Spartanus, for

According to the Introduction of the Historia Augusta, p.xii, the biographies are the work of six different authors, Aelius Spartanus being credited with the de vita Hadriani. This claim has been widely disputed in more recent studies: Fergus Millar, A Study of Cassius Dio (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).p.124, in which Millar opines that “the problem of the Historia Augusta is one into which sane men refrain from entering.” Syme concurs with Hermann Dessau’s 1889 thesis: “not six authors but one, and he was writing towards 400”, suggesting this theory to have garnered a wide measure of acceptance in recent years, though in the
the detail of Hadrian’s life, she relies on the lives of known contemporaries of the fictional Zeno to provide the historical parallels and to nourish his character and his tale. The author confessed to Matthieu Galey: “Il est toujours agréable de donner à un être qui a vécu un petit relais dans le temps [It is always pleasant to give a figure from the past a new lease on life],” a passion for the literary creation of characters who fulfilled her professional being, yet a biological imperative which she would eschew in reality.

Her fascination with Hadrian237 which had begun in 1914 during a visit to London with Michel, was reinforced ten years later in Rome when they discovered both the Villa Adriana and

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237 Syme’s following description of Hadrian might have been of Yourcenar: “Hadrian might be defined as an ‘intellectual’, with all that the term connotes of good or bad, serious or frivolous. The intellectual falls into a recognizable category, all too familiar in the cultivated societies of the modern world. He is curious and conceited, instable and petulant; against birth and class, authority and tradition. He dabbles in the arts, he admires the beauties of nature. A cosmopolitan by his tastes, he is devoted to foreign travel; he detests nationalism, militarism, and the cult of power; and he will defend ‘les droits de l’homme’ or the cause of universal peace.” Syme, (1991), p.103. The author’s seduction by the emperor’s persona is therefore hardly surprising. See also Alexander (1938) who notes that Hadrian’s personality is revealed in a scant collection of letters and speech fragments remaining from his rule, which attest to his respect for the auctoritas of lawyers and administrators (p.152ff), his recognition of the legal position of the mater familias (p. 164), the humanitas he manifested at both the beginning and end of his reign, allowing taxes on small land holdings to be paid by instalments and payment to the fiscus only after mine owners had struck ore (p. 166f). Such benevolent characteristics deny Hadrian’s brutal side witnessed at the beginning and end of his rule, with the executions of the four consuls, Palma, Celsus, Nigrinus and Lusius, and later Servianus and Fuscus, which tarnished his favourable reputation. Millar, (1964), p. 64. Yourcenar adopts Dio Cassius’ phrase “varius, multiplex, multiformis” Dio Cassius, Roman History, Books LXI - LXV, ed. J. Henderson, trans. Ernest Carey, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), Epitome de Caes. 14, 6, as a chapter heading to highlight the multi-faceted nature of the man just prior to his elevation to high office. HA 14, 11 notes with expanded detail: “He was in the same person, austere and genial, dignified and playful, dilatory and quick to act, niggardly and generous, deceitful and straightforward, cruel and merciful, and always in all things changeable.” Benario (1980), p.13, underlines Hadrian’s complex personality and, doubtfully that “an ideal biography may [ever] be written”, he joins Syme in praise of Yourcenar’s “remarkable [success] in evoking the character of the man.”
the genius of the architect and engraver, Piranesi. Scenes created by this Italian artisan grace the walls of Petite Plaisance and served as the impetus for an essay in the collection, *Sous benefice d’inventaire*, which appeared in 1962. *Le cerveau noir de Piranèse*, published in English as *The Dark Brain of Piranesi*, details the life and works of the engraver whose dark depictions of prisons with stairways climbing to indeterminate reaches, of heavy and threatening machineries suggestive of instruments of torture and gigantic, marauding animals so magnetised the author and found affinity with the dark place in which she saw herself in the early 1960s. After this significant passage of time, “ses noires images issues, dit-on, d’un accès de fièvre [his black images said to be the result of an attack of fever]” serve her authorial purpose as she recognised in them the torment of her own life, perceived as a prison, as we have argued above: a life symbolised by the staircases, leading nowhere, a life marked by the absence of any promise of liberation from the agoraphobia and claustrophobia experienced in her darkest moments; a further and evocative means of revisiting and refocusing the demons of her past.

For a detailed study of Piranesi’s unparalleled *Pianta delle fabbriche esistenti nella Villa Adriana*, and his detailed etchings of the Villa, see William L. MacDonald and John A. Pinto, *Hadrian’s Villa and its Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). pp. 246 – 265. In 1941, Yourcenar and Frick purchased four Piranesi engravings, one of which depicts the chapel of the Canopus at the Villa Adriana decorated with statues of Antinoüs and various priestesses on which she gazed for years, without realising their later import on her life, Yourcenar, *Carnet de notes* in OR, (1982), p.522. In recognition of the author’s erudite portrayal of Hadrian, the Largo Marguerite Yourcenar has been created in her honour at the Villa to delineate the open area in front of the display gallery at the Canopus. The Egyptian Canopus was a religious centre, 22 kilometres from Alexandria, where worship of the Nile, Serapis-Osiris and Adonis was practiced, MacDonald and Pinto, p. 109. We must assume that it is this affiliation with pilgrimage which has suggested its association with Yourcenar. The reputation in Hadrian’s time as a location synonymous with degeneracy must be set aside.

Marguerite Yourcenar, *Sous bénéfice d’inventaire* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1978). p.130. Piranesi had indeed suffered with malaria in 1742 at the age of twenty-two, an illness which may have heightened his depictions with a sense of anxiety.
In 1761, seventeen years after the original publication, Piranesi produced *Carceri* (Prisons), a second edition of his engravings. These were noticeably more sombre than the original:

Il a multiplié les hachures permettant de plus généreux encrages, diminué les grands espaces clairs, assombri et augmenté les pans d’ombre; un peu partout aussi, il a ajouté aux mystérieuses machines se profilant au premier plan ou dans les recoins de salles, roues, poulies, grues, treuils et cabestans, des détails qui en font décidément des instruments de torture plutôt que les engins de construction qu’elles auraient aussi bien pu être; les roues at les plates-formes se sont sinistrement hérissons de clous.

He multiplied the cross-hatchings permitting more generous ink usage, diminished the large light spaces, darkened and increased areas of shade, and almost everywhere, he added to the mysterious machines outlined in the foreground or in the nooks of rooms, wheels, pulleys, cranes, winches and capstans, details which decidedly made instruments of torture of them rather than the engines of construction which they could have been; the wheels and platforms bristled ominously with nails.

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Piranesi: *Ruderi del Canopo nella Villa Adriana a Tivoli, da Vedute di Roma*, 1778. (Marguerite Yourcenar’s collection)

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It also comes as no surprise to discover Yourcenar’s affinity with the Japanese writer, Yukio Mishima, whose suicide in 1970 ironically coincided with his delivery earlier that day of the final pages of *The Sea of Fertility* to his publishers. The juxtaposition of fecundity and death are as apparent in the life of this Japanese writer as they had been in the life of our author. In 1978, the year before Grace Frick’s death, Yourcenar began research on *Mishima ou la vision du vide* (*Mishima or a Vision of the Void*), ultimately published in 1981. It is not difficult to read the angst behind the title, and to appreciate that twenty years had elapsed since Grace Frick’s original diagnosis, during which time, surgery, convalescence and immobility had punctuated their lives and produced a certain retreat from the earlier pattern of literary outpourings, with journal entries and general correspondence replacing novels. The future alone must have indeed seemed like an inevitable void for the author.

The Japanese poet had been born Kimitake Hiraoka in 1925 and had chosen a pseudonym at the time of the publication of his first book, *The Forest in Full Bloom*: Mishima is the name of a forest at the foot of Mount Fuji, while Yukio suggests snow.²⁴¹ He studied the Greek language, and read modern European literature widely; other similarities are patent:

> Under the surface of his books, the obsessions, the passions, the aversions of adolescence and adulthood continued to tunnel like labyrinthine caverns.²⁴²

By means of contrast, however, Yourcenar remarks on “this taste in Mishima for women endowed with both sagacity and strength.”²⁴³ As we have argued earlier, such female characters are rare in Yourcenar’s corpus, or are relegated to the background (Lina, Plotina, Monique) existing merely as passive reflections of the more insistent male. Despite this general respect for women found in Mishima’s writings, Yourcenar’s reference to the “insipid conversation of the ladies” in *Runaway Horses* should be noted.

Her fascination with the writings of Mishima centres on their dark content and their preoccupation with death, not surprising in a culture which so revered suicide. Obsessed with the mystery of his own demise, he would be photographed suffering his end in numerous guises: drowning in mud, being run over by a cement truck, pierced by arrows, or performing seppuku.²⁴⁴ This last method would be his ultimate and long premeditated choice, his life irreparably

stigmatised by his having been excused military service during World War II: “the traditional seppuku of protest and admonition, disembowelling immediately followed by decapitation with a sword when the presence of an aid permits it.” This role was fulfilled by his companion, Morita, who followed Mishima into death. Yourcenar insists at p. 141 that no further inference than a respectful and strong bond between the two men should be made and that over-emphasis of a sensual relationship is not warranted. Given Mishima’s confessed homosexuality, this direction seems naive in the extreme and a challenge to reason. It is, however, conceivable that Yourcenar’s insistence is instructional with regard to her own relationship with Grace Frick, and as such suggests a disincentive to public enquiry into her own sexuality.

As we have noted, we cannot not know with certainty the nature of the relationship between Grace Frick and Marguerite Yourcenar during the last decade of Grace’s life. We would argue that it had deteriorated to one of mutual resentment: Grace of Yourcenar’s growing renown, exemplified by the accolades and prizes with which the author was being increasingly honoured, and of a future in which Grace would not be included; Yourcenar of Grace’s illness and her immobilisation at her friend’s bedside. Following Grace Frick’s death in 1979, Marguerite Yourcenar would allege that “leur vie commune n’était qu’une coexistence pas toujours pacifique [the life they had shared was nothing more than a not always peaceful coexistence]”— a somewhat banal summation of their forty years together. Dee Dee Wilson, nurse to both Grace and later to Marguerite observes with acuity:

Pendant des années, j’ai cru que Madame, si douce, si tranquille, était prisonnière de Grace, de son autorité, de son énergie, de son mauvais caractère. Quand je suis venue à Petite Plaisance pour soigner Grace, j’ai compris que je m’étais trompée: la prisonnière, c’était elle
For years I thought that Madame, who was always so sweet, and so calm, was Grace’s prisoner, imprisoned by her authority, her energy, and her bad temper. When I came to Petite Plaisance to look after Grace, I realised that I had been mistaken: she was the one who was the prisoner.

Despite this observation, there were no doubt times when the reverse was true. These were both strong, sagacious women, each possessing a determination to fulfil their goals. Ironically, those goals were probably identical: Yourcenar’s literary success and happiness, a goal

247 Ibid.
which, for both, created a prison of their lives. Imprisoned throughout her life by the circumstances of her birth and the subsequent spectres of abandonment and alienation, both maternal and paternal, as we have seen reflected throughout her œuvre, the author would remain so by her relationship with Grace Frick, who denied her independence and liberty. Her only means of escaping this darkness was to absent herself in her writing, and to revert to a quest for her past as she researched her family origins, a world in which Grace had no part. The publications of Souvenirs pieux (Dear Departed) in 1974, and Archives du nord (How Many Years?) in 1977 were the result of this desire for freedom and identity and provide the details of her life which had seemed to the author either unnecessary or too painful for her to explore in her youth. The last volume of her trilogy, Le Labyrinthe du monde, entitled Quoi? L’éternité (What? Eternity), incomplete at the writer’s death and posthumously published in 1988, outlines not an expected account of the life of the writer, herself, but “reprend une fois de plus la figure du père derrière laquelle le moi de l’écrivain ne cesse de se cacher [takes up once more the figure of the father behind which the ‘moi’ of the writer ceaselessly hides].”

Yourcenar’s writing had long assumed a quest for catharsis, and though atmospheric with darkness and spectres, and haunted by the juxtaposition between birth and death, it epitomised a life repeatedly overwhelmed by presence and absence, and a sense of abandonment which had begun with her birth. Accordingly, Doré, in her acclaimed publication, Yourcenar ou le féminin insoutenable, highlights in her conclusion evidence for the:

ventre maternel fantastique, image récurrente, qui, d’un texte à l’autre, constitue de fait l’encreux du discours yourcenarien. L’écriture toute entière […] reproduit sans cesse ce ventre maternel, où gîte l’enfant. C’est la tour [...] le prison ou le labyrinthe, c’est l’île […], le marécage, la grotte ou la cathédrale, c’est la chambre […] même le cercueil, c’est un lieu dont il s’agit de sortir à moins qu’on rêve d’y retourner [une espace qui relève] cette mère morte jamais tout à fait quittée fantastic maternal womb, a recurring image, which, from one text to another effectively constitutes the ink of the Yourcenarian discourse. The entire corpus (...) ceaselessly reproduces this maternal womb, where the infant shelters.

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249 Doré, p. 312. All such metaphorical spaces may be discovered in the Yourcenarian corpus, reinforcing her lifetime obsession and imprisonment.
It is the tower (...), the prison or the labyrinth, it is the island (...), the marsh, the
cave or the cathedral, it is the room (...) even the coffin, it is the place from which
one might leave unless one dreams of returning there (a space which recalls) this
dead mother never quite left behind.

Yourcenar posits in a letter written by Fernande to Michel just before their marriage, in
which she intended to offer him comfort as he commemorated the anniversary of Berthe’s death,
that Fernande advised him to forget the past, adding that “le passé n’est vraiment passé pour
nous que quand il est oublié [the past is truly past for us only when it has been forgotten].”
Yourcenar’s repeated assertions that the past meant little to her are belied by its insistence in her
œuvre. The author not only intentionally situated her novels in a past milieu, she persistently
revived her memories to enrich her texts and so to pave her path to ataraxia. Yet, memory and its
expression through her corpus, would deny her the symbolic power she sought from its authority,
would challenge her assertions of freedom, and ensure the perpetuity of her torment.

words to Alfred Feuillée, a popular philosopher of the time, evidence offered by the mature Marguerite at p.
929; p. 312 that her mother “ne dédaignait pas les lectures sérieuses [did not scorn serious books].”
Memory as Autobiography—Liberty from her Prisons or a faux ami?

We have noted that memory, with all its complicated attributes, forms the motor of Marguerite Yourcenar’s fiction, yet it becomes increasingly apparent as her corpus advances, that memory applies a relentlessly negative catalyst to the content of her novels, enshrouding each one with an aura of darkness and trauma as memories are enlivened by her characters. Whilst an expectation of whimsical anecdotes from the pen of such a lauded and intelligent writer would be both facetious and counter-intuitive, the reader is exposed not to intimate chronicles driven by pleasurable memories recalled from her youth, but to a library of deeply impassioned texts which appear to reflect personal torment concerning her past, despite the author’s repeated and nettled denials that the absences and abandonments of her life were meaningful in any way.

Without authorial guidance, we are therefore left to hypothesise whether the evocation of these memories which suggest a genesis in deep personal and psychological pain were the result of guilt occasioned by the circumstances of her birth, regret surrounding the absence of a maternal presence in her life, anger directed towards her mother for abandoning her, or the combination of all three scenarios, exacerbated by the absence of her father, immediately following completion of her first major work, *Alexis ou le traité du vain combat*, when the author was just twenty-five years old. Following Michel’s death in 1929, Yourcenar’s being assumed a bleak countenance, her sexuality was further tested, (suspicions concerning her sexual orientation having become nascent following her sensitive drawing of Alexis), and her writing adopted a decided veil of darkness, her characters or their memories often shrouded by the pall of death: “l’énigme d’être une morte s’était ajoutée chez elle au mystère d’être une femme [the enigma of death was added to the mystery of womanhood].”

Aspects of the renowned French author, George Perec’s life and literature provide profound affinity with those of Marguerite Yourcenar. Born a generation after Yourcenar in 1936, and predeceasing her in 1982, Perec was orphaned early in his life by the consequences of war. His father was killed whilst fighting in France in 1940, and, only two years later, his mother was deported to Auschwitz, dying when the young George was six years old. As a young man, Perec worked in a research library as an archivist, an atmosphere which many feel influenced his literary style with the detail and historical allusion we identify with Yourcenar. His novel, *La Vie mode d’emploi (Life a User’s Manual)* (1978), based on the lives of the residents of a fictional Parisian

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apartment block, bears similarities to Yourcenar’s *Denier du rêve, (A Coin in Nine Hands)* (originally published in 1934), which depicts aspects in the lives of a group of characters united by the circulation of a coin in Fascist Rome.

The void engendered by his missing parents prompted Perec to write in the absence of clear memories or the possibility of accurately reviving their presence, his melancholy evident in *W ou le souvenir d’enfance (W or the memory of Childhood)* (1975):


Accordingly, Yourcenar also wrote both to remember and to forget, in a quest for her own ontology and individual presence whilst enduring the vacuum of her parents’ absence.

In her detailed study, *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates provides us with a valuable insight into the mechanics of how we remember, by alluding to an ancient anecdote. Simonides of Ceos (circa 556 to 468B.C.) had been invited by Scopas, a Thessalian nobleman, to entertain his guests at a banquet by reciting a lyric poem in honour of his host. Scopas then refused to pay more than half of the agreed sum, claiming that Simonides had devoted half the poem to the twin gods, Castor and Pollux. During the absence of the poet, who had subsequently left the banqueting hall as a result of a message claiming that two young men awaited him outside, the roof of the hall collapsed killing all the guests who remained within. When the extent of their injuries prevented identification by relatives, Simonides, by recalling the location of each guest at the table, provided this clarification. The poet is therefore claimed to be the inventor of the art of memory, for which he cited orderly arrangement as essential.\footnote{Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd., 1966). p.1f.}

Cicero, in his discussion of memory as one of the five aspects of rhetoric in *De oratore*, introduces the mnemonic of places and images (*loci* and *imaginæ*) as facilitators for Roman rhetors in their delivery of lengthy speeches with faultless accuracy:

> [P]ersons desiring to train this facility (of memory) must select places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and store those images in the places, so that the order of the places will preserve the order of the things, and the images of the things will denote the things themselves, and we shall employ the
places and images respectively as a wax writing-tablet and the letters written on it.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, II, lxxxvi, 351-4, cited by Yates, p. 2.}

A further exponent of this mnemonic place system was Quintilian, the first century rhetor, whose \textit{Institutio oratoria} provides the method for remembering a building in detail, memorising the location of all the rooms including the décor with certain exactitude. The images by which a speech is to be remembered are then allocated to the details recalled in the building, the orator then moving about the building in his imagination as he gives his speech whilst drawing on the images he has placed on memorised locations in that building. According to Yates “[t]he formation of the \textit{loci} is of the greatest importance, for the same set of \textit{loci} can be used again and again for remembering different material […] by placing another set of images for another set of material” when the first set has faded and been effaced when no further use is made of them.\footnote{Yates, p. 7.}

Whether Yourcenar’s custom of recalling her past to enliven her writing might be attributed to the practice of mnemonics can be guessed with rather less confidence. Whilst she does draw on the \textit{locus} of the beach at Scheveningen, recalled from her youth to evoke both the negative \textit{imago} of the octopus, which so haunts Lina Chiari in \textit{Le Denier du rêve}, juxtaposed with that of the positive Jeanne de Vietinghoff whom the author idealised as a maternal image,\footnote{Delcroix, p. 229, expands this perception to suggest that Yourcenar has chosen Jeanne from amongst those — Fernande, Marie (the Virgin), and Jeanne — who wanted to “faire de [leur] mieux [do their best]” for her. He cites from \textit{AN}, p. 1402: “Je n’étais pas la fille de Marie; je n’étais pas non plus la fille de Fernande; elle était trop lointaine, trop fragile, trop dissipée dans l’oubli. J’étais davantage la fille de Jeanne, de celle qui s’était promis de veiller sur moi dès ma naissance, et que Michel, en dépit de toutes ses rancœurs, n’avait cessé de me proposer comme une image parfait de la femme [I wasn’t the daughter of Mary; nor was I the daughter of Fernande; she was too distant, too fragile, too dissipated into the forgotten past. I was more the daughter of Jeanne, of she who had promised to take care of me since my birth, and whom Michel, dispute his rancor, had never ceased to suggest to me as the perfect image of a woman].”}

Yourcenar’s prose, with its absence of the first person singular pronoun, is undeniably de-personalised from a superficial viewpoint, in order to create a dissolution of self. Yet the signposts to her anguish and the insertion of innumerable autobiographical aspects of her life are patent to a regular reader of Yourcenar; witness her attribution of Fernande’s birthdate (24\textsuperscript{th} February)\footnote{The date of Zeno’s birth is variously attested: Savigneau, (1990), notes at p.20; Savigneau, (1993), p.11f, that the date above coincided with Fernande’s birth date, yet at p. 298 (1990); p. 283 (1993), this same biographer gives his birth date as 23\textsuperscript{rd} February — a date Yourcenar has noted in her personal notebook beside the birthdays of friends and relatives she did not want to forget. See also n. 233. See also Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 150, in which Matthieu Galey quotes Yourcenar’s notation of the date as “27\textsuperscript{th} February, and I had his chart cast”. Fernande’s \textit{souvenir pieux} only provides the precision of her date of death.} to Zeno, whom she confesses to have “aim[é] comme un frère [love(d) like a
brother];” the setting of Cinema Mondo in Denier du rêve for the encounter between Alessandro and Angiola — a scene which reproduces the author’s pain of having been regularly abandoned in a theatre by her governess, Barbe — a pattern of desertion being clearly established from an early age; her choice of Adriansen for the family name of the twice-widowed gentleman who marries Hilzonda in L’Œuvre au noir which recalls both Yourcenar’s seventeenth century ancestor François Adriansen, and Michel’s marital status following Fernande’s death; and the autobiographical nature of Le Coup de grâce, a novel she quotes in the Pléiade’s “Chronologie” as being “s’inspiré d’un épisode authentique [inspired by an authentic event]” in which Eric’s “beauté altière, «son étroit profil» et «l’arrogance de ses rares sourires» [haughty good looks, his “narrow profile,” and his “arrogant smile”]” replicated those of André Fraigneau with whom Yourcenar had fallen in love, the author penning herself into the novel as the misused but determined Sophie.

Furthermore, Yourcenar uses members of the de Vietinghoff family, whose name had been closely associated with the Crayencours, to suffuse several of her characters with realism: the patriarch, Conrad, not only gives his name to the object of Eric’s passion in Le Coup de grâce, but also, as a musician with homosexual tendencies — a suspicion strongly maintained by Yourcenar — serves as the model for Alexis in the novel of that name. Conrad de Vietinghoff’s

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wife, Jeanne, was believed by the author to be the object of a shared schoolgirl infatuation with Fernande, and later, after the latter’s death, as the lover of Yourcenar’s father, Michel. She was always held in the highest esteem by Yourcenar, who revered Jeanne as the ideal mother; the comparison between Jeanne, la mère idéale, and the absence of, and abandonment by, her own mother, la mère biologique, is made by the author in Nouvelles orientales: “Il y a mères et mères [There are mothers...and then there are mothers],” an allusion we have noted in the previous chapter. Jeanne is depicted as Monique in Souvenirs pieux (Dear Departed) and Archives du nord (How Many Years?) which, with Quoi? L’Eternité (What? Eternity), form the trilogy Le Labyrinthe du monde (The Labyrinth of the World), Monique also having been earlier adopted by Yourcenar as the name of Alexis’ idealised wife in the aforementioned novel. These notable examples are amongst many applied by the author and evident in her writing to enliven ideal maternal presence — a task at which she would relentlessly labour.

If Eric was modelled on the homosexual André Fraigneau, Yourcenar was undeniably enamoured of the latter, having seen in him the attributes of her father, Michel. Fraigneau was also a well-read man with decidedly literary expertise who, like Michel, admired Yourcenar’s writing style. So convinced was Fraigneau of Yourcenar’s knowledge of Greek as

261 Yourcenar notes in a letter to her friend and proof-reader, Jeanne Carayon, cited by Savigneau (1990) at p. 355 that Jeanne de Vietinghoff had written a novel in which she describes “sa première rencontre avec un homme qui de toute évidence est mon père, parmi les cyprès et les ruines de la villa Adriana [her first encounter with a man who from all indications is my father, among the cypresses and ruins of the Villa Adriana].” Savigneau (1993), p. 339 (see n. 21). Yourcenar asserts that this meeting actually took place at the marriage of Fernande and Michel, adding however that “ce décor imaginaire la rapproche curieusement de ma constellation [this imaginary setting draws it curiously near to my own constellation].” Yourcenar must have rejoiced in this serendipitous moment which entwined Hadrian with these idealised identities. Jeanne’s purchase of a villa in Roquebrune, a village close to Michel’s home at the time was not accidental and lends strength to Yourcenar’s conviction of their relationship.

262 Savigneau, (1990), p. 51; Savigneau, (1993), p. 40. In Yourcenar’s tribute to Jeanne de Vietinghoff which was published in La Revue Mondiale on 15th February, 1929, pp. 413-18, the author is effusive concerning Jeanne’s “génie du cœur” [heart of genius], her beauty and her perfection. On hearing of Jeanne de Vietinghoff’s death, Yourcenar was further moved to compose “Sept poèmes pour une morte [Seven poems for a dead woman]” which was published in 1931 in Le Manuscrit Autographe under the title “Sept poèmes pour Isolde morte [Seven poems for a Mortal Isolde].” See Savigneau, (1990), p. 260; Savigneau, (1993), p. 246; also Chronologie, OR, p. xvii, which provides the publication date as 1930, and confirms the author’s affection for Jeanne “qui avait fini par constituer pour elle une sorte d’idéal humain [who finished up by becoming for her a type of human ideal],” thereby personifying the emotional fulcrum in the tripartite relationship between the author and her parents.

263 Attributions by Yourcenar to her characters of the names, personal traits and details from the lives of those whose existence was so significantly interwoven with that of the author, are provided in expansive detail in the chapter entitled ‘Marguerite Yourcenar, imprisoned by her birth’. Given this ardent necessity for Yourcenar to recall her past into the present, the absence of any reference, either oblique or directed, to Grace Frick, the partner to whom Yourcenar devoted forty years of her life, comes as no surprise. Her existence as a catalyst to the author’s memories, however, must be construed with some confidence.
exemplified in her earlier texts, that he invited her and fellow French writer, Gaston Baissette, also being published at that time by Grasset, to join him in developing their Greek ardour through literary and physical journeys — a diversion which resulted not only in their writing sketches based on Greek mythology, but also in Yourcenar’s profound passion for Greece, its antiquity and literature, all of which would forever evoke the memories of Michel and Fraigneau. Yet, despite Fraigneau’s rejection of her which was to prompt a confessed attempt at catharsis in the writing of both *Feux* and *Le Coup de grâce*, the author’s pursuit of gay women not only removed her from the emotional prisons associated with her birth, but also freed her from the procreative implications of her gender and a potential repetition of the tragedy of her birth. Her choice of female partners also avoided any prospect of replacing the man who had been the paramount influence in her life — her father, Michel, who had ironically sparked her imagination with his literary choices which, for a young and impressionable mind, had indirectly created a haunting image of her mother. Thus, we must conclude that if Yourcenar’s attraction to gay men reinforced her propinquity with Michel, her adoption of lesbian relationships not only repulsed his patriarchal influence, but bore an insistent and contemporaneous reminder of Fernande.

As we have seen, the choice of a *nom de plume* created with Michel’s approbation and encouragement would allow her notionally to sever past family ties, and to create a new identity, removing both the implications of her parents’ sexual act which had resulted in such tragedy, and the guilt implied by her role in her mother’s death. Yet, as can be concluded from these observations, Yourcenar’s attempted repudiation of the past and of her own femininity are not convincing, her newly adopted name and identity acting merely as a smoke-screen to mask the emotions embedded profoundly in the cavern of her psyche. She remained a slave to her past, seeking in her writing continual emancipation from her memories, whilst enshrouding herself inescapably in their bonds.

In his recent work, *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World*, Richard H. Armstrong’s observation is relevant to this reflection on the influence of memory in Yourcenar’s texts:

264 Yourcenar’s tale ‘*Ariane et l’aventurier*’ (*Ariane and the Adventurer*) written during these literary games in 1932, and evoking the myth of the labyrinth, would later provide “le point de depart de la pièce qu’elle écrira dans le milieu des années quarante: *Qui n’a pas son Minotaure?* [the point of departure for the play she would write during the mid-forties: *Qui n’a pas son Minotaure? (To Each His Minotaur).”* Savigneau, (1990), p. 103; Savigneau, (1993), p. 92.
To relate the past to the present, or vice versa, entails memory work that encodes or implies some sort of narrative. Whether we are dealing with biography, history, or myth, narrative orders time for us in such a way that we clarify our relationship with the past and in a sense negotiate its “pastness” and relevance to truth in the present [...] Analysis is a process for breaking-up, excavating, and critiquing our standard view of the past, based on the assumption that this standard view occludes a living past we won’t allow ourselves to see or talk about.265

Thus, unable to face these ghosts from the past, Yourcenar, through her texts, phrases a series of confessions to the reader, each embellished by her memories, which we read “in between the words.” In his expansive study, *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault supports the notion of a transmuted ideology for story-telling, reasoning that:

Western man has become a confessing animal. Whence a metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard [...] to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which from the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage.

Whence too this new way of philosophising: seeking the fundamental relation to the true, not simply in oneself — in some forgotten knowledge, or in a certain primal trace — but in the self examination that yields, through a multitude of fleeting impressions, the basic certainties of consciousness.266

He also notes that:

truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation.267

Yet, it becomes apparent that for Yourcenar, there has been no articulation or liberation through the mechanism of her confessions, but an enduring entrapment or constraint by the web of her memories. The truth which surfaces in between her words “like a shimmering image” announces to the reader the writer’s patent tangle of tortured emotions, yet denies liberation to

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267 Ibid., p. 60.
the writer. That her final texts which comprise *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, the third volume of which, *Quoi? L'Éternité* remained incomplete at her death, were based on her desire to confirm the positivity of her ontology by determining her ancestry,\textsuperscript{268} attests to her insistent quest for a *maîtrise de soi* (a mastery of herself) and provides evidence for our assertions of a search for freedom from her psychological imprisonment by her memories.\textsuperscript{269} Such pursuit of the related goals of identity and liberty, consistently and patently unfulfilled, are encapsulated by Yourcenar’s labyrinthine allusion, and recognised by Poignault in his recent text *Marguerite Yourcenar: una passione ragionata per l'Antichità* (Marguerite Yourcenar: a reasoned passion for Antiquity), published in *Marguerite Yourcenar: Adriano, l'anticità immaginata*:

> Il Minotauro, che [Teseo] crede aver ucciso, non è che un’immagine di se stesso che non ha saputo riconoscere. Il mostro rimane eternamente vivo perché è costituito, per ognuno, dai propri demoni.\textsuperscript{270}

The Minotaur, which (Theseus) believes he has killed, is only an image of himself which he has failed to identify. The monster remains eternally alive because it is constituted, for each person, from his own demons.

Such desire for self-mastery, Foucault argues, finds its roots in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity when the attitude which caused an individual to respect the *nomoi* — the laws and customs — was more important than their content, accent being placed on:

> the relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from being carried away by the appetites and pleasures, to maintain mastery and superiority over them, to keep his senses in a state of tranquillity, to remain free from interior bondage to the passions, and to achieve a mode of being that could be defined by the full enjoyment of oneself, or the perfect supremacy of oneself over oneself.\textsuperscript{271}

Yourcenar’s attempts at such self-mastery and, *ipso facto*, her pursuit of *ataraxia*, though unadmitted, should be investigated through her treatment of the second century Roman emperor, Hadrian, whose achievement of an image of serenity and equilibrium in this text

\textsuperscript{268} So also Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 85, for his conviction that “the key environment in the individual’s formation is the family.” He also notes the formulation of family memoirs “in which the lives of other family members are rendered as either equal in importance to or more important than the life of the reporting self.”

\textsuperscript{269} See also Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 173, who notes that the “sombre preoccupation of Augustine with the manner in which a man could imprison himself […] by his past actions makes *Confessions* a very modern book.”

\textsuperscript{270} *Marguerite Yourcenar: Adriano, l'anticità immaginata*. p. 66ff.

contribute, according to Poignault, overwhelmingly to its literary reception.\textsuperscript{272} That Yourcenar has not chosen an anonymous Roman, but a man of great power — “un empereur regnant à une époque considérée depuis l'Antiquité comme un âge d’or [an emperor reigning during a period considered since antiquity as a golden age]”\textsuperscript{273} — is significant when considering his confessions of vulnerability and self-doubt. Thus the supreme power he seeks is not politically driven, but a self-mastery which is fundamental to his identity and therefore highlights the elevation of its personal import for the author.

Marguerite Yourcenar, 1924, Villa Adriana

Yourcenar’s fascination with the emperor, Hadrian, began in 1924 when she visited the Villa Adriana in Italy with her father, memories of these two men who held places of paramount affection and import for the writer forever inextricably associated, and undeniably linking Michel with antiquity.\textsuperscript{274} Events of the twenty-seven years which filled the interlude between this visit

\textsuperscript{272} See Poignault, “Maîtrise du monde et maîtrise de soi dans Mémoires d'Hadrien.”, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{274} For an expansive study of the Villa Adriana, see MacDonald and Pinto, \textit{Hadrian's Villa and its Legacy}. The Villa, located 28 kilometres south-east of Rome and purported to cover a 120 hectare site - larger than that of Pompeii - was built on a hillside south-west of the village of Tivoli. Building began around 118 A.D., following a somewhat disorderly plan devised by Hadrian which allowed for significant areas to be set aside for gardens and contemplative spaces between the architectural structures, constructed in the classical style and following proven engineering techniques. The buildings and surrounding gardens were then filled with statuary and countless artefacts – many were Hadrianic copies of centuries-earlier Greek originals — which would later provide a detailed understanding of Roman cultural life of the period. According to the authors
and the publication of Mémories d’Hadrien provide the reader with an appreciation for the psyche of the writer which has informed the character of the protagonist. Poignault asserts that the reconstruction of post-war Europe, which coincided with the arrival from Switzerland of the trunk containing her early manuscripts, allowed her to have “une vue plus complète d’Hadrien [a more complete view of Hadrian],” who, like those in contemporary Europe, realised the need for order which might permit social well-being and harmony.

Yet, it is the nature of the author’s private life which contributes the vivid colour to her writing during this epoch: The illness and subsequent death of her father, to whom she felt so emotionally and creatively bound, provided an insight into the polar extremes of strength and weakness in Hadrian’s character; the unrequited affection she felt for André Fraigneau must have assisted her appreciation of Antinoüs’ devotion to Hadrian and the suffering felt by the young Bythinian at the aloofness of the emperor, and Yourcenar’s meeting with Grace Frick and the development of their mutual passion undoubtedly expanded the writer’s sensitivity towards the homosexual relationship between Hadrian and Antinoüs. However, whilst these aspects of Yourcenar’s private life surely contributed to her reputation and power as a writer, their

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276 Ironically, Yourcenar had proposed a novel on Antinoüs to her publishers, Grasset, in the years 1929-30. This timing coincides with the beginnings of her infatuation for Fraigneau, one of her editors at Grasset.
psychological impacts on her appear to have articulated her pursuit of unconfessed freedoms through her texts.

In his recent journal article, “Hadrian’s Practice of Freedom: Yourcenar, Beauvoir and Foucault,” Paul Miller asserts that Yourcenar anticipates Foucault’s arguments on freedom, both writers alluding to antiquity to strengthen their views. We have already argued Yourcenar’s reliance on antiquity — that it is this very antiquity which attaches Yourcenar to her ghosts, binding her to those who have formed the foundations of her very being and from whom she apparently labours to be free, despite her perceived freedoms of thought and sexual orientation, voiced by the protagonist in Mémoires d’Hadrien. Miller comes close to this realisation when he notes that:

Yourcenar [...] does not so much practice a strict historicism or antiquarianism in writing Mémoires, but rather through a concentration on getting the history right, she is able to produce a work that transcends both its temporal and its narrative frame, to unveil the radically new. History becomes a means of engaging the present, not simply through a process of allegorisation — the past as the present in costume [...] but through a reframing of the present by engaging with the specificity of the past [...] The past does not so much become our model as a way of thinking differently, of engaging the present from a fundamentally new perspective [...] Through the specificity of her commitment to the past, she unveils a fundamentally new relation to the present that is fully assimilable to neither.

Whilst we would agree with Miller’s contention that Yourcenar reframes the present by “engaging with the specificity of the past”, an opportunity to extrapolate on this analysis might have been seized had he considered the impetus for Yourcenar’s adoption of this process. It was apparently unremarkable for erudite and opinionated authors writing in post-war France (or the United States) to couch their contemporary political or socialist views in the dialogue of their characters. Yet, Yourcenar is not known for her overtly political commentary and it seems unlikely that she intended her texts as an avenue for such literary device. Her lack of political interest in favour of the aesthetic is evinced by the following remark:

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277 Miller, "Hadrian's Practice of Freedom: Yourcenar, Beauvoir, and Foucault."
278 Ibid., p. 276f. So also Armstrong, p. 135, who asserts that “the past, when subjected to repression, is dynamically submerged in the present to which it stands in an uncanny causal relation.”
je me suis éloignée très vite de la politique en me persuadant que l’essentiel était ailleurs, que le drame profond se situe au niveau de l’éducation, de la pensée, de la conversion personnelles

I distanced myself very early from politics, persuaded that the essential was elsewhere, that the fundamental drama is at the level of education, of thought, of personal conversion.279

We have argued that Yourcenar’s frequent recalling of the past into the present,280 and its emphasis in her texts as the author appears deliberately to eschew the contemporary, betrays the insistence of antiquity in her life through the influence of her father,281 and provides a means of facilitating her mastery of the present. Equally, we witness her struggles with absences in the present which are apparently managed by recalling the past to fill the void. It can therefore be concluded that Yourcenar’s manipulation of antiquity is driven by personal imperatives, as opposed to the more stylistic intent suggested by Miller.

Thus, Yourcenar’s focus on antiquity repudiates the political and philosophical culture Miller perceives in the writing of her contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, and appears emphatically aimed at the author’s self-mastery as exemplified by the confessions made by Hadrian early in the Mémoires, and subsequently following the death of Antinoûs, and the Jewish uprising in 132AD — a conquest of self which would be both protracted and difficult. At this confronting moment in the emperor’s life, Poignault contends that:

Hadrien souffre à l’idée que toutes les valeurs qu’il a défendues puissent disparaître totalement. Ce n’est que plus tard qu’il se convaincra que le temps n’efface pas toutes les traces

Hadrian suffers with the idea that all the values which he has defended can totally disappear. It is only later that he will convince himself that time does not remove all the traces.282

280 See Brown, p. 173, who argues that “Augustine regarded a man’s past as very much alive in his present.”
281 So Halley, p. 26: “Les plus anciens souvenirs de son lien avec son père […] ont pourtant déjà un rapport avec la littérature qui sera le ferment principal de leur relation. La voix qui prendra une grande importance dans toute l’œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar, est déjà la source des bonheurs artistiques de l’enfant [The oldest memories of her link with her father (…) already have however a rapport with literature which will be the principal agent of their relationship. The voice, which will hold a great importance in the complete works of Marguerite Yourcenar, is already the source of the artistic well-being of the child.]”
Poignault’s statement can be variously understood: The more likely and optimistic reading suggests that although Hadrian despairs that his long-defended ideals have been eradicated by a war for which he feels partially responsible, though did not desire, they will be countered by the later realisation that time will facilitate the reconstruction of his framework of order; alternatively, the reader might assume the more negative interpretation that traces of Hadrian’s youthful bellicosity lie buried not too deeply in his psyche. Whilst this political crisis, exacerbated by illness and despair, leads Hadrian to consider suicide, his ultimate self-mastery over the liberating temptation of death will allow his desired acceptance and serenity: “dans un sens plus profond et connu de moi seul, j’avais triomphé [in a sense more profound, and known to me alone, I had triumphed].”283 This Yourcenarian Hadrian, at peace with himself and his role, is at odds with the histories reflected by Dio Cassius and the Historia Augusta which depict a Hadrian taunted by suicide, suffering with dementia and aggravated by the attentions of his doctors. The pro-senatorial prejudice, which lay counter to Hadrian’s political centralism, is deemed responsible for the negative content of these sources and depicts an historical figure far from Yourcenarian marble idealism.

Miller’s observation of Yourcenar’s writing as “marble-like”284 is also ironic and demands further analysis. Surely, he intends an understanding of ‘polished’ as he continues to describe her “erudition and painstaking revision” yet elsewhere in this thesis we have noted her frequent reference to statuary, both the traditionally marble and the paramount oxymoron of “statues of flesh” which portray both her entrapment by the past and her imperative to recall it to the present. Freud’s appropriation of the underworld is significant here and demands inclusion in this context:

[W]ishes of the past which have been abandoned, overlaid and repressed […] are not dead in our sense of the word but only like the shades in the Odyssey, which awoke to some sort of life as soon as they had tasted blood.285

Freud’s contention clearly enunciates Yourcenar’s torment: a past which remains in the shadows until awakened by memories, which subsequently nourish and inform the sanguine content of her corpus.

Miller’s summation of Yourcenar as a “classicist” is undeniably attributed to her erudition and historical detail which he compares favourably with Beauvoir’s decidedly existentialist interpretation of antiquity. Unlike Yourcenar whose education had been provided by her father, or in his absence, by her personal imperatives, Simone de Beauvoir had been the beneficiary of a classical French education at the lycée and later at the Sorbonne, and was considered by many to be a gifted novelist and political essayist. She taught Latin, was well read in Tacitus and Juvenal, and exhibited a familiarity with Seneca, Martial and Pliny the Younger. A discussion in *Le Deuxième Sexe* demonstrates her understanding of Roman marriage law and inheritance. She also had a passing knowledge of Greek, both language and customs. However, her intense passions were feminist politics and philosophy — notably the works of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Plato — an interest she shared with Jean-Paul Sartre, her companion both intellectually and emotionally. Together, they enjoyed an interest in antiquity which, rather than allowing a means of interrogating the present, provided an historical framework to philosophical thought. During the forties in Paris, they contributed to an intellectual circle which also counted François Mauriac, André Malraux and André Breton, to challenge class and gender structures and colonial domination in French society, Beauvoir becoming, according to Miller, “a figure of controversy for most of her life”.

Geographically, though certainly not intellectually if her letters to and from Europe at the time are to be our guide, Yourcenar was removed from the political imperatives and intellectual undercurrents of post-war France, having taken up residence on the east coast of the United States. Though she had initially struggled with this isolation, she would ultimately remove herself even further from the mainstream of French society by taking American citizenship in 1947, and settling on the remote Mount Desert Island off the coast of Maine in 1950 with her partner, Grace Frick. Whilst this decision may have exaggerated her pursuit of autonomy and eventual freedom, literary evidence indicates continued imprisonment, not only by the dominating presence of Grace, but also by the absences which haunted her past.

We must therefore question whether the timing of the penning of *Mémoires d’Hadrien* was in order for Yourcenar to pave a pathway to her psychological freedom in response to this

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288 Yourcenar admits in the “Avant-propos: Electre ou la chute des masques” (Foreword: Electra or the Fall of the Masks), pp. 17-20 that her penning of this text is in part a response to Sartre’s interpretation of Electra in his novel, *Les Mouches*.
weight of oppression, which might be enabled by personifying Hadrian’s liberation from his despair, or as a result of the fortuitous arrival of the trunk from Switzerland which contained her earlier outlines of the novel. In order to consider this point, let us examine several aspects of Hadrian’s personality. Whilst reflecting on the early years of his reign in a letter to Marcus Aurelius, Hadrian confesses:

Pour moi, j’ai cherché la liberté plus que la puissance, et la puissance seulement, parce que, en partie, elle favorisait la liberté. Ce qui m’intéressait n’était pas une philosophie de l’homme libre […] mais une technique; je voulais trouver la charnière où notre volonté s’articule au destin, où la discipline seconde, au lieu de la freiner, la nature. Comprends bien qu’il ne s’agit pas ici de la dure volonté du stoïque […] Tout en somme étant une décision de l’esprit, mais lente, mais insensible, et qui entraîne aussi l’adhésion du corps, je m’efforçais d’atteindre par degré cet état de liberté, ou de sous-mission presque pur

For my part I have sought liberty more than power, and power only because it can lead to freedom. What interested me was not a philosophy of the free man […] but technique: I hoped to discover that hinge where our will meets and moves with destiny, and where discipline strengthens, instead of restraining, our nature […] Since everything is finally a decision of the mind, however slowly and imperceptibly made, and involves also the body’s assent, I strove to attain by degrees to that state of liberty, or of submission, which is almost pure.  

According to Miller:

Yourcenar does not address the existentialist concept of freedom directly, but rather responds through the voice of Hadrian. This act of ventriloquism produces a complex […] set of speech acts that responds not only to the historical content of the author, but also to the fictional context of the character and his own historical context as understood by the author.

Thus, these theoretically framed speeches in Mémoires d’Hadrien function both as an address to Hadrian’s fictional Roman audience, and also to Yourcenar’s audience of contemporary readers, particularly at the time of the novel’s publication in post-war France. Yourcenar’s expert practice of addressing the present by reference to the past serves her authorial purpose on diverse levels.

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When Hadrian speaks of freedom or liberté, it is not the traditional Roman concept of libertas of which he speaks, which denoted freedom from slavery and against domination by those in power, but rather a freedom over oneself and therefore, a personal autonomy defined by discipline of the mind. The ultimate achievement of this power of the self over the self must then be understood as a form of submission, despite the apparent antithesis of the concepts of freedom and submission.291 Foucault expands on Yourcenar’s concept of freedom:

This individual freedom should not, however, be understood as the independence of a free will. Its polar opposite was not a natural determinism, nor was it the will of an all-powerful agency: it was an enslavement — the enslavement of the self by oneself. To be free in relation to pleasures was to be free of their authority; it was not to be their slave.292

Yourcenar, through Hadrian, denies the Stoic philosophy of being “condemned” to freedom as expounded by Beauvoir and Sartre, in favour of the power of technique — of training and disciplining the psyche, and ultimately the body — to attain the liberty or submission sought. Hadrian adds:

Et c’est de la sorte, avec un mélange de réserve et d’audace, de soumission et de révolte soigneusement concertées, d’exigence extrême et de concessions prudentes, que je me suis finalement accepté moi-même

And it is in such a way, with a mixture of reserve and of daring, of submission and revolt carefully concerted, of extreme demand and prudent concession, that I have finally learned to accept myself.293

Hadrian’s unselfconscious display of hubris is, however, temporal, dissipating later in his reign into melancholia on the discovery of Antinoüs’ death, and his further disappointment over the Jewish rebellion. Forced, over an extended period of time, to come to terms with the loss of his companion who, though of inferior social status, had exerted profound emotional power over the emperor, Hadrian was momentarily enslaved by the intense battle of the spirit necessary to regain his self-mastery. Despite being physically free from the cloving emotional shackles which

291 Foucault, (1985), notes however at p.83, that for a Roman woman to assume the correct level of moderation imposed by responsibilities to their home and family, it was necessary for them to “establish a relationship of superiority and domination over herself that was virile by definition.” He therefore sees a mastery of oneself as possessing both domination over immoderate behaviours, and submission to or acceptance of one’s sexual role.

292 Ibid., p. 79.

had weighed on him, he was now a victim of spiritual bondage, admitting that “[à] cette servitude de l’esprit, ou de l’imagination humaine, je préfère encore notre esclavage de fait [(t)o such bondage for the human mind and imagination I prefer even our avowed slavery].”

In Hadrian’s self-reconstruction, we see that of Yourcenar; as she painstakingly recreates his history, she attempts to find mastery of her own identity and the events which have shaped her life. Whilst her research into the events of Hadrian’s empire, his personality and that of those with whom he surrounded himself, is incontestable, it is her compassion for and identification with this historical identity, with all his strengths and weaknesses, which informs her literary character and lends passion to her writing. Evidence of this personalisation is provided early in Yourcenar’s œuvre when she offers a sensitive portrayal of Alexis’ tenuous confessions of his homosexuality in the récit of that name, conjecture surrounding her own sexual preferences at that time. Later, Hadrian, when referring to his relationship with Antinoüs, states with conviction: “Il va sans dire que je n’incrimine pas la préférence sensuelle, fort banale, qui en amour déterminait mon choix [It goes without saying that I lay no blame upon the physical desire, ordinary enough,

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which determined my choice in love].”295 Such a relationship would have been “ordinary enough” to a second century Roman but according to Miller, 296 was raising eyebrows in post-war France and required reinforcing as banal, and simply as a different sexual choice. It could be argued that Yourcenar was attempting to apply an historical perspective to contemporary ideology, and to imbue modern women with greater convictions concerning their sexual and political choices. Thus, whilst Hadrian and Yourcenar maintained an idealism, insistent of the rights of the individual which might determine their relative freedoms, each fought for a more personal mastery, that of oneself over oneself, where death no longer had the final word: “A chacun sa pente: à chacun aussi son but, son ambition si l’on veut, son goût le plus secret et son plus clair idéal [Each to his own bent; likewise each to his aim or his ambition, if you will, or his most secret desire and his highest ideal].”297

Just as Hadrian’s freedom is curtailed by the memory of Antinoüs and his untimely death, in which the emperor perceives his responsibility, Yourcenar’s freedom is destabilised by the memory of Fernande, whose untimely death is exacerbated by the role the author perceives she has played. Hadrian’s statues to Antinoüs and his creation of Antinoopolis298 in order to revive his memory are mirrored by Yourcenar’s novels in which references to ideal mothers and allusions to antiquity recall the parents who no longer exist for her. Hadrian’s admission that “Je ne savais pas que la douleur contient d’étranges labyrinthes, où je n’avais pas fini de marcher [(l)ittle did I know what strange labyrinths grief contains, or that I had yet to walk therein]”299 is reinforced by Poignault’s assessment of Hadrian’s dilemma: “la souffrance et le désespoir resurgissent quand on les croyait définitivement disparus [suffering and despair suddenly resurface when we think they’ve completely disappeared]”300 which, as we have noted, resonates sharply with Yourcenar. For both protagonist and author, death provides the catalyst for memory and the motor for action.

296 Miller, (2012), p. 277, also gives details at n. 14 of an extensive and growing bibliography on the subject of the invisibility of lesbianism in most Roman accounts.
298 The account of Yourcenar’s visit to this site on 22nd January 1982, the first anniversary of her induction into the Académie Française, is described by Jean-Pierre Cortegiani, librarian at that time of the French Institute at Cairo, and cited by Savigneau, (1990), at p. 426f; Savigneau, (1993), at p. 407. His observation of her ability to be “chez elle partout et nulle part [at home everywhere and nowhere]” — a trait she often attributed to her father, Michel — should also be noted.
Yourcenar’s emperor ultimately masters his grief as, despite the construction of cities and the commissioning of statues, Hadrian realises the hollowness of his actions. Although Hadrian speaks with Yourcenar’s voice, his ultimate tone of self-control does not reflect a similar level of attainment by the author. Her own liberty from her ghosts is less convincing as the bleakness of her future writing will attest, reinforcing our perception of her unrelenting imprisonment by memory, guilt and loss. The conclusion by some scholars that Hadrian is speaking with the author’s voice as he attains his level of peace is therefore illusory. Her reconstruction of the past is erudite and convincing and succeeds, not on a personal and philosophical level, but on the historical and the intuitive, given the author’s intellect and sensitivity to emotional malaise. Miller’s assertion that “discipline creates a space of the self that can be both liberating and repressive”\footnote{Miller, (2012), p. 282.} must therefore be applied separately to Hadrian and Yourcenar respectively.

If Yourcenar’s memories precipitate her towards confession of a psychological malaise and an ultimate goal of liberation through self-mastery, we are compelled to examine the subliminal message which shadows her penned expression. The emphasis here must lie with the word “beneath” for, as we have implicitly seen, it is not Yourcenar’s intention to write autobiography and provide documented personal detail. Yet, her writing does conform to Steele’s understanding of the genre:

it makes sense to me at least to think of autobiographies as being fuelled by an ensemble of passions, including the passion to know, which can come to a flourishing condition precisely when their circumstance is that of articulating the tale of the self. I think it was Santayana who judged that the Classic consolation is to know thyself, and the Romantic to evade it: and though the adjectives may be imprecise [...] we are often glad to elude ourselves, but the more glad for doing so knowingly: glad too to know ourselves, but happier when the exit is clearly indicated.\footnote{Peter Steele, \textit{The Autobiographical Passion; Studies in the Self on Show.} (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1989). p. 133.}

That Yourcenar’s writing is “fuelled by an ensemble of passions” is irrefutable. Her desire to fill her pages with an ardour for her task, embellished both patently and by suggestion with personal anecdotes and identities, in order, not only to entertain or to edify, but also to know, and yet to escape from herself, sits comfortably with Steele’s observations on autobiography. Yet, her writing provides merely an index of the truth. The reader remains uncertain, yet suspicious of
her motives; in *Labyrinthe du monde*, Yourcenar resorts to imagination to provide precision, whilst deliberately interchanging characters’ names to mask identities, resulting in a fluidity with honesty, and a sense for the reader that even in this most autobiographical writing, it is the escape from reality she seeks and not the proximity to it.

Jean Blot’s following assertion is therefore curious, but ironically best applied to this ‘autobiographical’ text: “[u]ne première absence paraît évidente: celle de l’auteur. Nulle part nous ne la retrouvons, ni elle, ni son milieu, ni sa condition, ni son pays, ni son temps [a first absence appears evident: that of the author. Nowhere can we find her, nor her social surroundings, nor her environment, nor her country, nor her period].” 303 Despite Blot’s argument for the author’s absence, her very presence is evident throughout her corpus, denying her assertions to the contrary. Whilst her stated intention is to distance herself from the narrative by employing an anterior setting for her texts, she may frequently be discovered, as we have argued, shadowing her characters in autobiographical and anecdotal detail. Yet, the absence of the first person singular pronoun — the “je” — is rarely employed by Yourcenar in this ‘autobiographical’ text.

Yourcenar’s choice of *Labyrinthe du monde* as the title for her trilogy is therefore intentionally constructive and perpetuates the motif of her veiled intention. Traditional interpretations of a labyrinth lead scholars to Greek mythology and the unicursal, non-branching path created at Knossos by Daedalus for King Minos. At the centre of the labyrinth, the Minotaur — half man, half bull — was to be found, and was eventually killed by the Athenian hero, Theseus, with the aid of Ariadne who provided him with a thread by which to retrace his path. Furthermore, in Plato’s *Euthydemus*, Socrates describes the labyrinthine line of a logical argument:

> then we got into a labyrinth, and when we thought we were at the end, came out again at the beginning, having still to seek a much as ever.304

Yourcenar’s appreciation of tales from antiquity, encouraged by her father, has already been stressed, so we might too readily conclude her adoption of the labyrinthine concept merely on literary precepts. However, through the lens of our hypothesis of *ataraxia*, the notion of the labyrinth as a form of pilgrimage should also be proposed, together with the author’s perception of the labyrinth as the eventual locus for her salvation as she enters the labyrinth at its opening

(birth orifice) in a redemptive journey back through her past to face her personal demons. These having been eliminated, she would retrace her steps along Ariadne’s thread (the umbilical cord) in order to emerge into a place of enlightenment and liberation, having reconstructed her life by returning to its beginnings. Her death prior to the completion of the final stage of this trilogy must be seen as evidence for her non-realisation of this sought-after emancipation from the traumas associated with her birth and, conforming with Socrates’ analogy, Yourcenar’s salvation appears to have been as far from that which she was at first seeking.

Yourcenar’s loss in her labyrinth is suggested by Paul Jay, in his study *Being in the Text*, as he draws our attention to the difficulty of literary identification with his observation that the “ever-present ontological gap between the self who is writing and the self-reflexive protagonist of the work” can result in autobiographical contradiction.\(^{305}\) It is therefore advisable, when considering an intertextual analysis, to ponder renegotiating Lejeune’s strict evaluation of the *pacte autobiographique*, or perhaps softening its rigidity. However, before we consider such a mutation, an examination of his terminology is essential to our understanding of the genre.

Philippe Lejeune’s acclaimed definition of autobiography as a:

\[\text{récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsque met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité}^{306}\]

is cited in translation by Smith and Watson as a:

retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality.\(^{307}\)

Lejeune’s additional qualifications to his definition should also be noted:

La définition met en jeu des éléments appartenant à quatre catégories différents:

1. *Forme du langage*
   a) récit
   b) en prose
2. *Sujet traité*: vie individuelle, histoire d’une personnalité

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3. *Situation de l’auteur*: identité de l’auteur (dont le nom renvoie à une personne réelle) et du narrateur

4. *Position du narrateur:*
   a) identité du narrateur et du personnage principal,
   b) perspective retrospective du récit.

The definition puts into play elements pertaining to four different categories:

1. *Form of language:*
   a) narrative
   b) prose

2. *Subject treated*: individual life, story of a personality

3. *Situation of the author*: identity of the author (whose name relates to a real person) and of the narrator

4. *Position of the narrator:*
   a) identity of the narrator and of the principal character,
   b) retrospective perspective of the narrative.

He concludes that every work which at the same time fulfils all the conditions indicated in all categories is designated as an autobiography, adding that there are genres similar to autobiography, yet which do not fulfil all the conditions he demands. Lejeune enumerates these, indicating the conditions not fulfilled by each genre:

- mémoire (memoir): (2),
- biographie (biography): (4a),
- roman personnel (personal novel): (3),
- poème autobiographique (autobiographical poem): (1b),
- journal intime (intimate journal): (4b),
- autoportrait ou essai (self-portrait or essay): (1a and 4b).

His further assessment that certain conditions can be fulfilled to a great extent, yet not totally, renders designation of autobiography particularly difficult.

Following Lejeune, Georges May undertook a comprehensive review of this genre and determined that:

309 Ibid.
l’autobiographie tend à être écrite à la première personne du singulier et à adopter un point de vue rétrospectif; mais l’ordre de présentation chronologique tend à y être le plus souvent modifié par l’intrusion des préoccupations présentes ou de diverses obsessions personnelles.

Autobiography tends to be written in the first person singular and to adopt a restrospective point of view; but the chronological order of presentation tends often to be modified by the intrusion of present preoccupations or by diverse personal obsessions.

Whilst we are unable, within the confines of this definition, to identify Yourcenar’s writing as autobiographical, the author’s “préoccupations présentes” and “diverses obsessions personnelles”, undeniably evident in her texts, conform to the latter aspect of May’s observation. May’s further notation of autobiography as an “alliage” (alloy) is particularly instructive in relation to Yourcenar’s œuvre: “l’autobiographie est, en effet, capable d’absorber les matériaux les plus divers, de les digérer, de les assimiler et de les métamorphoser en autobiographie [autobiography is, in effect, capable of absorbing the most diverse materials, of digesting them, assimilating them and transforming them into autobiography].” Appreciably, this amalgam, drawn from memories, photographs, letters, conversations, or historical details to enlist just a selection of catalysts, will vary from text to text. Thus, the difficulty in determining a clear distinction between the genres becomes apparent, a conclusion drawn by May when he states that “entre l’autobiographie et les mémoires ou entre l’autobiographie et le roman il n’existe pas de ligne de démarcation nette, que tout est affaire de dosages, de nuances [between autobiography and memoirs or between autobiography and novel there exists no clear line of demarcation, that it’s all a matter of combinations and nuances].” Any definitive classification of Yourcenar’s œuvre into a particular genre is therefore illusory.

In their detailed analysis, Reading Autobiography, a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define the Greek autos, bios and graphe as ‘self’, ‘life’ and ‘writing’ respectively. They also note that, according to Robert Folkenflik, the term autobiography and its synonym self-biography first appeared in the late eighteenth century in several forms [...] in both England and Germany with no sign that one use influenced another. Folkenflik also notes that until the

Ibid., p. 200f.
Ibid., p. 208.
The twentieth century the word *memoirs* [...] was commonly used to designate “self life writing.”

Smith and Watson add that despite the timing of the definition, the practice of such writing was evident in earlier centuries as “confessions” (Augustine, Rousseau), “memoirs” (Madame de Staël) or “essays of myself” (Montaigne). Smith and Watson define “autobiographical or life narrative” as:

the historically situated practice of self-representation. In such texts, narrators selectively engage their lived experience through personal storytelling. Located in specific times and places, they are at the same time in dialogue with the personal processes and archives of memory.

Several of Yourcenar’s texts fall into the category of “autobiographical narrative”; witness *Alexis ou le traité du vain combat* (1929), *Le Coup de grâce* (1939) and *Mémoires d’Hadrien* (1951) where the narrators “employ the intimate first-person voice as protagonists confiding their personal histories and trying to understand how their past lives have made them who they are.” As the author’s name differs from that of the narrator, these texts are technically classed as novels, despite *Mémoires d’Hadrien* appearing to be contemplations on his own life by an authentic historical identity. Thus, this text conforms to those novels set within the framework of fact, rather than an autobiographical récit.

By contrast, when the identity of author and narrator merge as one, the narrative is regarded as reflexive and autobiographical and denotes a distinguishing characteristic of life narrative, according to Lejeune. Smith and Watson also note the “temporal distinction between a novel and an autobiographical text. Novelists are not bound by historical time [while] life narrators have to anchor their narratives in their own temporal, geographical and cultural

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313 Smith and Watson, p. 2.
315 Ibid., p. 8.
316 Reference should here be made to the importance of the ‘récit à la française’ and its employment of the first-person narrator, a tradition found in Constant’s *Adolphe*. Yourcenar notes Gide’s employment of this style in Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 67: “Mais évidemment, ce qui rapprochait [Alexis] de Gide, c’est qu’il s’agissait d’un récit « à la française », et que ce genre de récit, pour nous, à cette époque-là, c’était Gide. On pensait toujours à lui dans ce cas-là. Je crois que la grande contribution de Gide a été de montrer aux jeunes écrivains d’alors qu’on pouvait employer cette forme qui paraissait démodé, contemporaine d’Adolphe […] et que cela donnait encore quelque chose [Obviously, the basis of the comparison with Gide is that the work was cast in the form known as the récit, which in our day is virtually synonymous with the name of Gide. Gide’s great contribution was to show the young writers of his day that that apparently outmoded form, which people had associated with Adolphe (…) was still usable, still had something to offer.] Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 45.
Historians and life narrators must also be scrupulous when providing verifiable historical and objective evidence, removing themselves from the narrative in order not to instil personal bias to their writing; novelists, however, have the luxury of verisimilitude or, in the extreme cases of sci-fi and fantasy, the complete suspension of credibility whilst awakening imagination and creativity.

As we have already argued, the genre of Yourcenar’s writing is therefore difficult to classify. Many of her novels are set in historical timeframes — Le Coup de grâce, Mémoires d’Hadrien, Anna, soror... and L’Œuvre au noir, for example. Others find their genesis in myth, as in the collections of Nouvelles orientales and Feux. Yet all, as we have averred, benefit from personal embellishment by the author and therefore become the vehicles for her own story, albeit one read “in between the words”. So, rather than being autobiographical treatises which would be expected to include the first person singular pronoun, Yourcenar’s texts might be classified as “self-analytical”, “self-reflexive” or “self-healing” — a writing cure perhaps, as we have suggested, as opposed to Freud’s notion of a talking cure — though either definition would have been loudly derided by the author.

In examining autobiographical theory and its relation to its curative powers, Jay observes that:

the writer’s past contains a power to liberate him from a debilitating spiritual and literary condition; that a chronological, biographical narrative self-analysis can help perform such a liberation; and that the power of his own creative language can, by transforming the past with which it is concerned, help transform the autobiographical protagonist who is its subject.\(^{318}\)

Paul J. Eakin expands on Jay’s notion of “narrative self-analysis” in his understanding of narrative identity. Eakin argues that:

*narrative* and *identity* are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self — the self of autobiographical discourse — does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative.\(^{319}\)

\(^{317}\) Ibid., p. 9.

\(^{318}\) Jay, p.33f.

\(^{319}\) Eakin, p. 100.
He concludes that “self and story [are] complementary, mutually constituting aspects of a single process of identity formation.”

To examine this further, it should be argued that “self and story” are constructs of memory of our actions and our former selves, which provide our present identity. Yet memory, which prevents “continuous estrangement from ourselves” must be seen, according to Eakin, as both constructed and plural: “each past experience is necessarily — both psychologically and neurologically — constructed anew in each memory event or act of recall.” Thus, Yourcenar’s memory of the beach at Scheviningen, alluded to above, applies a double intent of horror and delight, juxtaposed in order that the latter might diminish the former to facilitate the author’s healing process.

Just as Augustine intended in his Confessions, Yourcenar “writes of the past in order to ‘heal’ in the present.” Feeling unable to confess his thoughts orally, because to do so would have meant “dragging vivid thoughts ‘through the long twisting lanes of speech’,” Augustine’s written confessions which he intended would “gather [him] together again from the dissolved state in which [he] lay in shattered pieces” and succeed, as Brown asserts, as “an act of therapy”, are reminiscent of Yourcenar’s anguished Hadrian and, by association, with Yourcenar herself, as she applies retrospection in order to facilitate introspection and ultimate healing. However, whilst Augustine’s intentions are clear, those of Yourcenar are heavily veiled in her writing, which lacks the rigid structure suggested by Jay. By her insistent denials of what others have read between the lines in her texts, it is apparent that her conscious self does not recognise her pursuit of a writing cure or any form of catharsis. Moreover, Yourcenar’s choleric dismissal

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320 Ibid.
321 Ibid., p. 107. See also n. 253 above for Yates’ theory of the reuse of a set of loci to produce differing memory responses. Her observation expands on the mnemonic theory of loci and imagines practiced by Cicero and Quintilian.
323 Jay, p. 23f.
324 Brown, p. 165. As we have asserted for Yourcenar, Brown argues that “[t]he many attempts to explain the book in terms of a single, external provocation, or of a single philosophical idée fixe, ignore the life that runs through it.” For a thorough discussion, particularly of the Confessions as “a masterpiece of strictly intellectual autobiography [in which he] analyses his past feelings with ferocious honesty.” see pp. 158-181.
325 See Anne Boissier, “Yourcenar et Freud: Un Refus d’héritage,” in La Réception critique de l’œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar (Clermont-Ferrand2007)., pp 1-7. Boissier, at p. 1, reinforces evidence of Yourcenar’s literary denials which have given rise to “brilliant” scholarly studies by those including Pascale Doré, Carole Allamand, and Simone Proust, who are unanimous in their conclusion that “l’œuvre [yourcenarien] découlerait de la perte déniée de Fernande [the (Yourcenarian) œuvre flowed from the denied loss of Fernande].” At p. 6, Boissier notes “le refus répété par Yourcenar, de considérer la mort de sa mère comme un désastre [the repeated refusal by Yourcenar to consider her mother’s death as a disaster].” She further adds that Doré “voit dans la perte déniée de Fernande «un rampart contre la douleur et la culpabilité[…] un abject
of such interpretation betrays her fear of any such personal intrusion or approximation to the truth. Indeed, her instructive insertions of *préfaces* and *postfaces* demand that we read her as she would intend.

We can conclude, therefore, that Yourcenar’s texts are, in fact, autobiographical by association, that is they allude to identities from her youth — her parents, the members of the de Vietinghoff family, and her governess Barbe to name the most notable — who people her writing in countless masked guises to create the melancholy she holds for the dead. She never identifies them definitively, and occasionally when approaching doing so, confutes their names as we have seen, in order to mask their identity, protect her privacy and to maintain the mystery and creativity of the novel. Scenes which are particularly emotive such as her mother’s death-bed are recreated, as in *Denier du rêve* and *L’Œuvre au noir*, for example, though necessarily by imagination.

Jacques Lacan’s “insistence on the discursive nature of [a] talking cure”\(^\text{326}\) might equally apply to our ‘writing cure’:

What we teach the subject to recognise as his unconscious is his history - that is to say, we help him to perfect the contemporary historisation of the facts which have already determined a certain number of the historical ‘turning points’ in his existence.

Lacan teaches his subjects to perfect their narrative, the process of which becomes the vehicle for the subject’s cure, where:

the recuperative power of the narrative resides not in its factualness but rather in the creative capacity of language itself [...] The psycho-analytic process turns on the subject’s formulation of the past into a narrative, not on the past itself, which really has no existence outside that formulation.\(^\text{327}\)

maternel […] un féminin unsoutenble» qui alimenterait l’écriture [sees in the denied loss of Fernande “a fortification against pain and culpability (...) an odious maternal figure (...) an intolerable feminine persona” who nourishes her writing].” The 2007 colloque, at which Boissier’s paper was presented, was attended by the writer.\(^\text{326}\)


\(^{327}\) Ibid. So too, Hanns Sachs, an important member of the early psychoanalytic movement, made the following comment in his memoirs. He noted, after attending Freud’s lectures at the University of Vienna, that he “began to understand the unconscious as the presence of an inner destiny which decrees that the same pattern must be re-lived since the wheel of life turns around a fixed centre, and that the oldest experiences repeat themselves over and over again under various disguises (repetition-compulsion).” Sachs, Hanns, *Freud: Master and Friend*, (1946), Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 45, cited by Armstrong, p. 138.
Thus the past, and Yourcenar’s memory of it, become not the focal point of her cure but merely the framework for its process. Similarly, Marcel Proust, best known for his early twentieth-century writing, outlines how memories of his past life also provide his literary impetus: 

I understood that all these raw materials for a literary work were actually my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous pleasures, in idleness, in tenderness, in sorrow, that they had been stored up by me without my divining their ultimate purpose.  

Yourcenar was familiar with the writing of Proust, whose texts replete with “«évocations tournoyantes et confuses» ['shifting and confused gusts of memory']” she read in her youth. Moreover, anecdotal evidence exists of her having lectured on him repeatedly after her arrival in the United States, despite her consideration of his style to be “subdivisé à l’extrême, confus à force d’abondance, débordé sans cesse par les pensées subies et non dirigées [subdivided in the extreme, confusing by dint of its abundance, ceaselessly foundering in thoughts that are submitted to rather than directed].” Her apparent yet perhaps unintentional stylistic emulation of his writing which sought salvation and redemption through memorialisation of the past is therefore surprising, yet complies with our assertion of her denial of such pursuits. When Yourcenar likens the appearance of her father, Michel, at the age of fifty as bearing “le portrait d’un Saint-Loup à l’époque où il s’inquiète encore de Rachel, ou de Monsieur d’Amercœur [the image of a Saint-Loup back when he still worried about Rachel, or about Monsieur Amercœur]”

329 Savigneau, (1990), p. 44; Savigneau, (1993), p. 33. This phrase recalls the thoughts of “l’enfant seul dans la nuit, sur lesquelles il s’attarde au tout début de Du côté de chez Swann [the child alone in the night, on which he dwells at the beginning of Du côté de chez Swann (Swann’s Way)].” Proust’s wait for his mother no doubt recalled for Yourcenar similar attendance on her father whilst he pursued the delights of the casino or frequent trysts with unnamed women.
331 Cited by Savigneau, (1990), p.43; Savigneau, (1993), p.32. That Proust’s novel was begun in 1909 and was in constant creation and revision until his death in 1922, is further echoed by Yourcenar’s literary technique.
— all characters in Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* — the nexus between Proust, Michel and Yourcenar’s quest for healing by recalling the past through literary endeavour is compelling.

Proust’s allegorical text which, in redemptive pursuit, draws from events, personalities and places in his own life anticipates Yourcenar’s veiled methodology. Just as Yourcenar sought a rebirth, which began with the adoption of a *nom de plume* and continued through her texts, Proust sought this liberation simply by literary expression. The writers apply a “creative re-reading of the past” where memory is re-fashioned into “symbolic representation” which either masks reality or renders it more palatable. For both writers then, “the autobiographical novel is a kind of burial place, a place where the past’s laid to rest in the very act of giving it new life in a fictional form.”

The irony remains that, for both Proust and Yourcenar, their own death was realised before the completion of the writing of their ‘autobiographical’ works and, as such, surely their salvation remained illusory, as Proust’s own words attest:

> C’est peine perdue que nous cherchions à évoquer [notre passé], tous les efforts de notre intelligence sont inutiles. Il est caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée.

It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture (the past): all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside he realm.

In his vast study, *Realms of Memory*, Pierre Nora observes that “[memory] is also completely saturated in history, if only because it is concerned with a basically constructed phenomenon, a fabrication of hindsight,” that is to say, an internalised or personalised version of the past which, in Yourcenar’s case, is edited to comply with her catharsis. Yet, Nora also tells us that “history also brings forgetfulness.” It is no revelation that memories lose their clarity over time, often becoming embellished, reinterpreted or re-fashioned to pique a fascination for the reader, or to challenge the individual tasked with recalling the past.

In her trilogy, *Labyrinthe du monde*, Yourcenar relies on anecdotes, letters and administrative detail to verify her ancestry and to bring life to her antecedents. The result is a family ‘history’ replete with fabricated details of life which reads more like a novel than an

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332 Jay, p. 146ff.
336 For further reference to the plurality of memory, see n. 253 and n. 321 above.
autobiography. To exemplify this *romanesque* style, the following anecdote instances an event which occurred in the business managed by Maud, Michel’s English mistress during the eighteen-seventies — a business, according to Yourcenar which specialised in:

> les etiquettes et les prospectus [qui] promettaient tantôt la jeunesse éternelle, tantôt des formes arrondis sans excès, tantôt les trente-six beautés des odalisques du sérail, les lèvres lisses et l’haleine pure brochures (which) promise eternal youth, voluptuous but not excessively rounded figures, the thirty six charms of the odalisques of the seraglio, glossy lips, sweet breath.\(^{337}\)

A crisis erupts when “une actrice gorgée de gin entre acheter une pomade pour les seins, et, dégrafant son corsage, insiste que M. Michel l’applique lui-même sur sa poitrine fanée [an actress besotted with gin comes in to buy some pomade for her breasts. Unhooking her bodice, she insists that Mr. Michel apply it himself to her sagging torso].”\(^{338}\) Having also discovered that the business was a centre for those seeking the services of prostitutes and abortionists, the possibility that Michel — embarrassed by the memory of his role in this shady realm — shared this lascivious detail with Yourcenar or any of his family is a challenge to reason. His relatives disapproved of his liaison with Maud, especially as he had met her after having deserted the army to flee to England in the wake of an unsettled gambling debt which threatened to result in his prosecution. He remained with her for several months before returning to France and re-joining his regiment. Four years later, he repeated the desertion and returned to Maud, an action which terminated his continuous service in the army, prevented his return to France, and soured relations with his family.

Thus, family members and those events and people who have had a place in the author’s story become characters in a ‘narrative fiction’, the reader challenged to accept the credibility of the writing. Again, we have an instance of Yourcenar’s drawing on the past, yet masking its honesty. The author’s fictionalisation of her own story persuades us that its reality is too painful and yet she insists on retrospection to achieve a desired and liberating introspection.

As we have seen, Yourcenar often sought the unattainable. Following the death of her partner, Grace Frick, in 1979, the author immediately formed a relationship with Jerry Wilson, a homosexual who had arrived at Petite Plaisance with a French film crew just prior to Frick’s death,

\(^{338}\) Ibid.
and whom the latter had suggested to Yourcenar would be an efficient secretary and pleasant travelling partner for the author. Yourcenar quickly became obsessively attached to the young man, in an attempt perhaps to revisit history and to replicate, albeit with greater success, her involvement with Fraigneau some fifty years earlier.\textsuperscript{339} That Yourcenar called Wilson ‘André’ as she was speaking to him immediately following her heart surgery in 1985, lends strength to her perception of the two men as one. Alluding to the age difference between Yourcenar and Wilson, Savigneau suggests Yourcenar’s “identification entre Antinoüs et Hadrien d’un côté, Jerry et elle de l’autre [identification (…) between Antinoüs and Hadrian, on the one hand, and Wilson and her, on the other].”\textsuperscript{340}

![Bust of Antinoüs, private collection, Paris](image)

The author’s allusion to antiquity not only also recalls Michel, but reminds us of his sexual unavailability to the author; Wilson died at the age of thirty-six from AIDS. We cannot be certain of the true nature of the relationship between Yourcenar and Wilson, nor the extent to which one was the prisoner of the other — a conceivable replication of the relationship between Frick and the author. She would later comment: “«Tous les rapports de ma vie […] ont été étrangement biaisés, et d’autant plus intenses qu’ils l’étaient» [“All the relationships of my life (...) have been

\textsuperscript{339} See p. 134 below for further reference to Yourcenar’s attraction to gay men based on their sexual unavailability which enlivened memories of Michel for the author.

strangely askew, and all the more intense as a result”]. There can be no doubt that this intensity in her private life informs and lends creative authority to her literary endeavour.

Anne Clancier, in her publication *Psychanalyse et critique littéraire*, reveals that we owe a form of literary critique — psychobiography, based on the studies of Freud, and designating new contexts for self-referential writing— to Jean Delay. He underlines Freud’s argument that:

[i]l se révéla — ce que d’ailleurs les romanciers et les connoissseurs du cœur humain savaient depuis longtemps — que les impressions de cette toute première période de la vie laissaient des traces ineffaçables

it is revealed — that which elsewhere novelists and experts of the human heart knew long ago — that the impressions of this very first period of life leave indelible traces.

Drawing on his own study of *La Jeunesse d’André Gide* (André Gide’s Youth), Delay observes not what the author has revealed about himself, but what he hasn’t said, and what sustains the roots of his writing — details which often remain unconscious to the author — likening these obvious catalysts to his writing as just the tip of the iceberg. Such an observation may also be applied appositely to Yourcenar whose style, as we have earlier noted, has frequently been compared with Gide; witness their respective inclusion of homosexual characters and their effacement of women into inconspicuous shades when compared with the amplification of male protagonists. Yourcenar’s life, therefore, replete with the absences and rejections of her early years, reflects Freud’s paradigm; her sense of emptiness and the darkness of her world, her

343 Anne Clancier, *Psychanalyse et critique littéraire* (Toulouse: Privat, 1973). p. 65. So also Brown’s assessment of Augustine: “as with so many clever people, such simple roots were all the stronger for being largely unconscious,” p. 175. See too May, who notes at p. 40 that in many autobiographies, “l’auteur est, en effet, souvent poussé par les forces dont il n’a pas conscience ou qu’il essaye de masquer [ the author is, in fact, often driven by unconscious forces or those he attempts to mask].”
344 For a comparative study of Gide’s apparent yet denied influence on Yourcenar, see Carole Allemand, “Yourcenar et Gide: Paternité ou parricide,” *SIEY* Bulletin No. 18, December 1997, pp. 19-37. She notes, at p.20, Yourcenar’s own observation that both she and Gide drew on Virgil’s second *Eclogue* for their respective creations of Alexis and Corydon, and chose similar sub-titles: Yourcenar’s *Le Traité du vain combat* and Gide’s *Le Traité du vain désir*. Despite this, she claims in the preface of *Alexis* that, given her indifference to contemporary literature, Gide’s influence on her writing was ‘faible [weak]’. Allemand therefore concludes Yourcenar’s denial of Gide’s ‘paternité’ and goes so far as to suggest ‘parricide’. Allemand further notes at p. 23ff the similarities, which remain unrecognised by Yourcenar, between her *Alexis* and Gide’s *L’Immoraliste*. On this, see also Peter G. Christensen, “Self-deceit in the récits of Yourcenar and Gide,” *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 30, pp 17-27 (1984).
longing for affection countered by a pursuit of liberation, are all denied by the author yet manifest in her writing, and replicating Delay’s iceberg, their greater substance lies below the surface.

Like Yourcenar, Freud was consumed by antiquity and an avid reader, his library shelves laden with both classic and contemporary authors, considered “les monuments de la littérature mondiale [monuments of world literature]”345 including Aristophanes, Goethe, Hesiod, Horace, Milton, Kipling, Wilde, Nietzsche and Shakespeare, to name only a few, and all of whom, he claimed as his mentors. A man with universal tastes, Freud makes the following observation reflecting the unique powers of art:

Art is the sole domain where the omnipotence of ideas is timeless. Only in art does it still happen that a man tormented by desires achieves something which resembles satisfaction; and thanks to artistic illusion, this game produces the same effects which might suggest reality. It is with conviction that we speak of the magic of art and that the artist is compared to a magician.346

So too, Georges May viewed autobiography as a “philtre magique” which permits one to “[r]animer ses souvenirs en les écrivant, […] fuir dans son passé et oublier le présent malheureux [revive one’s memories by writing them down, to escape into one’s past and to forget the unhappy present],”347 a device which we have argued suffused Yourcenar’s texts. John Lechte, in his paper, *Art, Love and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva*, claims that for Kristeva, “there is no fundamental discontinuity between the function of a work of art and the life of the individual”, whilst adding that the work of art should not necessarily be seen simply as representative of the intentions or personality of the artist.348 Lechte further contends that:

Although the function of art might depend on the (psychological) state of the subject […] Kristeva views art less as an object, and more as a process, or practice, which ‘creates’ the subject; […] this dynamic conception of art speaks to our current crisis where the individual’s symbolic and imaginary capacities have become atrophied [evincing] a growing absence of love, and an increasing presence of melancholia and depression.349

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345 Bellemin-Noël, p. 11.
347 May, p. 50.
349 Ibid., p. 24f.
As we understand Kristeva’s concept of art as global, and therefore also inclusive of writing, Yourcenar’s Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé, (How Wang-Fô was Saved) — based on a Taoist tale from ancient China — sympathetically complies with both aspects as the author weaves the magic of the Chinese painter into her revelatory short story, the first of the ten which comprise the 1963 edition of Nouvelles orientales.\footnote{Nouvelles orientales was originally published in 1938 at Gallimard, though several of the short stories had appeared during the previous year in various French Revues: Les Nouvelles Littéraires, La Revue de France, La Revue de Paris for example. The 1963 publication included all but one of the earlier issue, the author herself having decided that Les Emmurés du Kremlin did not even warrant rearrangement. Yourcenar confesses, however, to rewriting the conclusion of Kâli décapitée, whilst the other tales remain largely as they were originally published, albeit with numerous stylistic corrections.} The tale recounts the story of the renowned painter, Wang-Fô, his faithful disciple, Ling, and Ling’s beautiful, but not surprisingly, nameless wife. Following the demonstrated pattern of Yourcenar’s earlier texts, aspects of her life embellish the tale as we learn that Ling’s mother, also unidentified, was an only child — the daughter of a jade merchant who berated her for not being a boy. Whilst it is unlikely that Michel’s attitude towards his only daughter was one of animosity because of her gender, we cannot know whether he treated her differently. Indeed, it would appear that Michel’s literary choices eschewed any particular gender direction, creating instead a male/female intersection in the only means available to him. Yourcenar’s customs in search of particular female diversion at the time of her writing this collection find echo in Ling’s propensity to frequent ‘maisons de thé’ (tea rooms); moreover, his offering to Wang-Fô of the bedroom in which his parents had died recalls the locus of Fernande’s death, and enlivens the absence of both the author’s parents — each perpetually haunting spectres for Yourcenar.

Ling’s preference for Wang-Fô’s portraits of his wife over her natural beauty result in her husband’s disregard for her, the physical diminution of her appearance and in her ultimate suicide, after which the artist’s vivid portrait of her deathly pallor maintained her existence for Ling so realistically that his mourning for her was eliminated, her re-created presence masking her absence. Yourcenar’s account in her narrative that “Ling ferma derrière lui la porte de son passé [Ling closed the door of his past behind him]”\footnote{Yourcenar, NO, (1963), p. 15; Yourcenar, OT, (1992), p. 6.} resonates as a metaphor for Yourcenar’s prior adoption of her nom-de-plume which effectively severed her past existence, whilst providing rebirth as a new identity. The phrase also ironically anticipates Yourcenar’s flight to the United States the year following the text’s publication to join Grace Frick, whom she had met in Paris just after her completion of the collection of stories.
Wang-Fô’s ability to bring his portraits to life by adding extra colour to the eyes of his subjects, thereby echoing the author’s propensity to enrich her literary outpourings with personal embellishment, brings him to the attention of the Emperor who announces to the artist: “je dois te promener le long des corridors de ma mémoire, et te raconter toute ma vie [I must take you with me down the corridors of my memory and tell you the story of my life]”\textsuperscript{352} — a blatant clarification of Yourcenar’s unconfessed literary process. The Emperor’s confession that he has been deceived by the perfection of Wang-Fô’s artistry, which masks the cruel reality of the world and its inhabitants and leads to a suspension of credibility, mirrors our appreciation of Yourcenar’s ‘autobiography.’

At the announcement by the Emperor that he intends to remove the painter’s eyes and hands, the means by which he sees and creates his false empire, Ling springs to his master’s aid and is subsequently decapitated; somewhat ironically, the artist, who perpetually eschews the reality of the situation, marvels at the intensity of colour in Ling’s spent blood on the green stone pavement. Wang-Fô is requested by the Emperor to perform a final task prior to his disfigurement: he is to finish an incomplete silken scroll, on which are sketched mountains, and rivers running to the sea. His gift for his craft is such that, as he undertakes the Emperor’s demand, the painted sea begins to fill the jade blue room in which he paints, submerging the Emperor and all his assembled courtesans. Ling, who appears wearing his every-day clothes, yet with a red scarf around his neck which denotes his earlier fate, proceeds to help his master into the rowboat which has been painted into the foreground of the painting. As Ling rows the painter to safety, the water in the great hall of the Emperor recedes, the clothing of those present appearing remarkably dry, with the exception of remnants of foam on the fringed hem of the Emperor’s cloak. The painting which can be observed lying on a low table displays a boat containing two men receding into the distance, their faces no longer distinguishable, yet Ling’s red scarf and Wang-Fô’s beard can be seen blowing in the wind. The Emperor watches as a mist lowers over the painted water and the canoe disappears around a rock, its wake smoothing onto an empty sea. “Wang-Fô et son disciple Ling disparurent à jamais sur cette mer de jade bleu que Wang-Fô venait d’inventer [Wang-Fô and his disciple Ling vanished forever on the jade blue sea that Wang-Fô had just created].”\textsuperscript{353}

\textsuperscript{353} Yourcenar, NO, (1963), p. 27; Yourcenar, OT, (1992), p. 20.
This remarkable adaptation of the Chinese tale encapsulates Yourcenar’s unadmitted ideologies, parallels of which are discernible early in her corpus and enhance her insistent perspective. In *Alexis*, the protagonist finds his freedom through the music which had earlier provided his income. Hypnotised by his hands resting on the piano keys, he emphatically declares: “Mes mains, Monique, me libéreraient de vous […] elles m’ouvriraient, mes mains libératrices, la porte du départ [My hands, Monique, were to liberate me from you (...) they would open for me, these liberating hands, the doors of departure],” allowing him a “moyen de contact avec la vie des autres [means of contact with the life of other people].” 354 habitually prevented to an incarcerated soul. Kajsa Andersson, in her doctoral thesis, Le «don sombre», supports this theme of liberation by the exercising of one’s art, observing that it is equally central in Yourcenar’s *Sappho ou le Suicide* (*Feux*, 1936), in which Sappho, the acrobat, is saved from her intended suicide by falling into the circus net,355 Yourcenar cynically remarking that “ceux qui manquent leur vie courent aussi le risque de rater leur suicide [those failing at life run the risk of missing their suicide].” Just as Alexis and Sappho are saved by their skills, Wang-Fô utilises his artistic talent to paint himself and Ling into his silk scroll in order to escape his ultimate fate (it comes as no surprise that Ling’s wife is absent from this scene!). Yourcenar, applying the powers of her literary craft, appears to ‘paint’ herself into her texts by drawing on aspects of her life and individuals whose absence she regrets, to create a vehicle by which she can liberate herself from her torment. In a further emulation of Wang-Fô, the author also conflates the reality of her situation with creativity and a denial of her subconscious intention.

This observation appears to be countered by Albert Camus who boldly declared that “[l]’idée que tout écrivain écrit forcément sur lui-même et se peint dans ses livres est une des puerilités que le romantisme nous a léguées 357 [t]he idea that every writer necessarily writes

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355 Andersson, p. 36.
about himself and paints himself into his books is one of the puerile notions bequeathed by ‘romantism’.

Yet, further consideration of this view reveals an apparent criticism of the generalist aspects of the movement, rather than the specific notion of ‘self-narration’ per se. His following qualification lends strength to this theory:

Les œuvres d’un homme retracent souvent l’histoire de ses nostalgies ou de ses tentations, presque jamais sa propre histoire, surtout lorsqu’elles prétendent à être autobiographiques. Aucun homme n’a jamais osé se peindre tel qu’il est.

The works of a man often retrace the history of his melancholies or of his temptations, hardly ever his own history, especially when they pretend to be autobiographical. No man has ever dared to paint himself just as he is.

We have seen that Yourcenar did not write accepted autobiography in the strict terms dictated by Lejeune, and did not consciously set out to “paint [herself] just as [she was].” Yet, Comme Wang-Fô fut sauvé is a text which clearly demonstrates “the history of [her] melancholies” and, whilst this does not purport to be her own story, her desire for liberation, enabled by the artist, to escape the deeds of the past is manifest. Furthermore, behind the words of this misogynist tale, we read her struggles with the absence of her mother, her role in that outcome, the sexual act which created her own existence and subsequently resulted in the disparagement of the female in her œuvre, together with the frequent absences of the man who framed her character which culminated in the permanent void left by his death.

In her wider corpus, she vacillates between the desire to enliven their presence by recalling her past through reference to antiquity and an unabashed allusion to the idealism of certain mothers, all of which is heavily framed by the unrelenting spectre of death. This is contrasted by her seeming desire to distance herself from these influences and to deny, with repeated assertion, that absence has formed a meaningful catalyst for her œuvre. The regular presence of familiar spectres in her writing and the masking of reality which is a commonplace throughout her texts reinforce our contention that she felt imprisoned by the circumstances of her life and sought a catharsis through her writing.

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358 Ibid.
Accordingly, we turn again to the work of Julia Kristeva, who maintains not only that melancholia and depression have been themes in both literature and art, but also asserts that “[d]epression is at the threshold of creativity” — a view dating back to the ancient Greeks who believed that “the depressive state was a precondition for thought, philosophy and genius”\(^{359}\) and can often be connected to the relationship with the mother.\(^{360}\) Greatly influenced by the legacy of Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* in which he “links melancholia with the experience of mourning, noting that both phenomena involve the irrevocable loss of the beloved object (which at the same time is secretly hated), a loss that is never worked through,” Kristeva supports his association of *Eros*, which she infers as the creator of bonds, with *Thanatos*, the death drive, which she signifies as “the disintegration of bonds and the ceasing of circulation, communication, and social relationships.”\(^{361}\)

Many scholars would easily attribute the notion of *Eros* to Yourcenar, who was undeniably passionate in her relationships, not only with characters she created, but also in her attachments to the many individuals who entered meaningfully into her life, especially André Fraigneau, Grace Frick and Jerry Wilson, as we have already observed. Whilst *Thanatos* is perhaps a more obscure concept to apply when attempting to define the author, we have noted her detachment from society and extreme discomfort at the time of her departure from Europe — an act perceived, no doubt, by many Europeans as social death — and subsequent arrival in the United States, her melancholy for her former life and reluctance to immerse herself in her new world emotionally reflected in her play, *La petite sirène* (The Little Mermaid). Her ultimate removal to the home she shared with Grace Frick on the distant shores of Mount Desert Island in Maine reinforces this desire for social ostracism — a philosophy which not only set her apart geographically from her European counterparts, but also psychologically during this period of desired post-war social cohesion in Europe.

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\(^{359}\) Kristeva, *Interviews*. p. 82.

\(^{360}\) See also S. Neuman, ‘Your Past…Your Future’: Autobiography and Mothers’ Bodies in *Genre *Trope* Gender: Essays by Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon and Shirley Neuman*, Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1992, pp. 51-86, cited by Eakin at p. 56f: “The mother may well be the primary source of relational identity, but her invisibility in stories of ‘self-individuation’ has contributed to our difficulty in recognising identity precisely as relational.” Yourcenar’s suppression of the maternal body is therefore instructive. Eakin, at p. 179, also cites Kim Chernin’s autobiography, *In My Mother’s House: A Daughter’s Story*, (1983), in asserting her belief that “relational identity must be understood in generational perspective, for every mother has also been a daughter.” Yet, as not every daughter aspires to motherhood, the corollary cannot always apply. In Yourcenar’s case, her mother was perceived as the transgressor and not to be emulated.

\(^{361}\) Kristeva, p. 79.
Kristeva also contends that “it is important to show how much the depressed person, who experiences a pain that often remains silent, is secretly emotional and cunningly impassioned”, asserting that “melancholia [is] an unnameable and empty perversion”\(^{362}\) and the “equivalent of mourning for a partial loss which cannot be symbolised […] Kristeva refers here to the ‘dénégation’ of language which relates to the absence of the object. Language begins with a dénégation, which the depressive denies.”\(^{363}\) Lechte adds that “[t]he melancholic’s denial of dénégation […] results in signs not having the force either of bringing the [object of loss] back, or of expressing the pain of loss.”\(^{364}\) Yourcenar’s writing is therefore emblematic of these theories whereby her persistent denials of either her spectres or her literary intentions destabilise her acceptance of herself and her ultimate liberation from the aspects of her past which continue to imprison her.

Kristeva alludes at length to the writings of Marguerite Duras, whose work she describes as a “fusion with the state of female malaise and melancholia”, deeming her literature to be “non-cathartic [and] embodying what Nietzsche calls the nihilism of contemporary thought.”\(^{365}\) We have noted elsewhere the many affinities between the bodies of work produced by the two Marguerites; Kristeva’s summation of Duras’ writing as “non-cathartic” is therefore instructive and supports our estimation of Yourcenar’s œuvre. Framed by alienation and absence, Duras’ depictions of women as either maternal archetypes or as detestable figures are mirrored by Yourcenar’s idealistic portrayal of Jeanne de Vietinghoff and of her accursed grandmother, Noémi, respectively, underlining the polarised emotions of the authors. Whilst female homosexuality finds reference in Duras, Yourcenar patently finds this degree of personal exposure unnecessary, preferring to allude with educated sensitivity to the sexuality of Alexis and Hadrian — portrayals which subtly allow “le lecteur à considérer le personnage comme l’incarnation même de l’auteur et la synthèse de tous ses moi [the reader to consider the character as the incarnation itself of the author and the synthesis of all his selves].”\(^{366}\)

\(^{362}\) Ibid., p. 80.
\(^{363}\) Kristeva, cited by Lechte, p. 34f. Lechte, in n. 26, explains that Kristeva’s choice of the term dénégation, which has been left in the French to “mark its difference from both negation […] and disavowal, […] connotes a negation which is also an implicit affirmation.”
\(^{364}\) Ibid., p. 35.
This observation appears to fit comfortably with Lejeune’s instruction that there must be “identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist”—a crucial qualification of his definition of autobiography which we have noted above as a:

retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focussing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.\(^{367}\)

We have reasoned above that, in its strictest application, this definition of autobiography cannot be applied to Yourcenar’s writing which, whilst it is generally retrospective, produced by a real person and may be said to focus on the development of her personality, must not be confused with a prose narrative specifically concerning her own existence or focussing on her individual life. With these genre definitions providing us with significant difficulty in classifying Yourcenar’s writing, a problem to which we have already alluded, Nancy K. Miller’s assertion that a way of thinking is necessary which is “flexible enough to accommodate styles of self-production that cross the lines of the models we have established” seems timely.\(^{368}\) In this, she is joined by Susanna Egan who indicts “contemporary theory for its failure to address autobiography as ‘an interactive genre even at the very simple level of what one might call ‘interpersonal relations’.”\(^{369}\)

In her observations on Rousseau’s esteemed autobiography to which we have earlier referred, Anderson’s quote from Rousseau better approximates our assessment of Yourcenar:

I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights, and to contrive that none of its movements shall escape his notice, so that he may judge for himself of the principle which has produced them.\(^{370}\)

May cites Rousseau’s further confession: “Je sais bien que le lecteur n’a pas grand besoin de savoir tout cela; mais j’ai besoin, moi, de le lui dire [I well know that the reader has no great need to know all this, but it is I who needs to tell him].”\(^{371}\) It cannot be denied that Yourcenar bears her soul in her writing, allowing that no aspect of her past escapes the reader’s notice. We

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\(^{371}\) Rousseau, Pléiade, p. 21, cited by May, p. 49.
have argued that, despite this intended transparency for the reader, her intentions were personally unrecognised yet, at the very least, we should consider whether Rousseau’s admission of intent suggests that we might have misjudged Yourcenar. Her persistent re-writing and reviewing of her work, together with préfaces and postfaces, lead us to believe that she intended the reader to be in no doubt of her purpose, and vehemently eschewed the potential of being misread. Yet, her relentless denials that she was indeed confessing her deeply masked emotions concerning the absences in her life and their influences on her writing point to an affirmation of our earlier arguments. If we consider the relevance in relation to Youcenar’s œuvre of the conclusion formed by the editors of *Soi disant; Life Writing in French* that “[t]he writing of a fictional text that sounds autobiographical depths can be read as an act of revenge,” it goes without saying that Marguerite Yourcenar was a most complex individual!

As a psychoanalyst practised in studying such personalities, Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the past and its role as evolutionary and developmental as a means of explaining the present is paramount for our purpose. He concluded that:

[t]he past creates the foundation for the present and future and illuminates the flaws and diversions as well as the normal pattern for individual growth. Yet childhood and neurotic symptoms [...] also [belong] to the adult’s prehistory, a distant region which [remains] repressed or unconscious and which thus [exists] outside the normal processes of time and history. The past in this sense can enter the present only as repetition or intrusive memory, disrupting linearity and giving rise to a more complex temporality [...] and can only be known belatedly, restructuring in the present what had previously been thought of as past [...] History is never definitive or finally known, therefore, but is capable of constant alteration as more is remembered or released into consciousness, causing the subject to think both the past and the present differently.”

Anderson accordingly views Freud’s conclusion that “the present can retroactively alter the past” as one of his major insights. Yourcenar, therefore, sits neatly within Freud’s analysis as we contend that it was her authorial purpose to draw on her past and, by infusing it into her writing, make sense of her present and, having dealt with her past, returning her memories to

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373 Freud, cited by Anderson, p. 61.
374 Ibid.
antiquity. The effect of such memory retrieval can best be summarised by Charlotte Delbo, a survivor of Auschwitz: “It takes days for everything to return to normal, for everything to get shoved back inside memory, and for the skin of memory to mend again.” For Marguerite Yourcenar, this process appears to have exhausted her lifetime.

When considering what, if any, genre best describes Yourcenar’s literary output, it is appropriate to include the words of Amélie Nothomb, who admits to conceiving her notion of autobiography in the manner of André Gide:

Il n’y a pas plus dissimulateur que l’autobiographie! Je pense que je me révèle avec beaucoup plus de vérité dans mes romans non-autobiographiques que dans mes romans autobiographiques, ce qui ne signifie pas nécessairement que je mens.

There is nothing more misleading than autobiography! I think that I reveal myself with more honesty in my non-autobiographical novels than in my autobiographical novels, which doesn’t necessarily signify that I am lying.

Jaccard also contends that, in the view of Nothomb, autobiography can have the allure of a novel — as we see with Yourcenar’s Labyrinthe du monde, though the three parts are strictly biographical novels — and autobiographical traits are not excluded from novels, as we have taken pains to demonstrate with reference to Yourcenar’s corpus. According to Jaccard: “L’ennemi de l’hyper-narratrice racontant son hyper-personnage dans une hyper-autobiographie, c’est, avant toute chose, la banalité” — an adjective certainly not apposite for the writing of Marguerite Yourcenar!

We may determine Yourcenar’s œuvre in light of the definition proposed by Smith and Watson, as: “[a] pastiche of memories [...] incorporating multiple forms of self-enquiry, perhaps borrowed from such genres as the lyric sequence, fable, essay, diary, meditation or public testimony [...] Such narratives [...] often enable us to see more clearly how narrated “I”s are indeed multiple.” Never one to be ‘boxed’ or typecast into a restrictive mould, Yourcenar, created an individual, though perhaps multi-faceted, identity, initially by adopting a nom-de-

377 Ibid., p. 95.
378 Smith and Watson, p. 73.
plume and progressively, by passionately writing herself into her characters and nourishing them with her memories. This subsuming of herself into her characters has been observed by Poignault:

I personaggi sono sia sostituti dell’io dell’autrice, sia sostegni alle sue domande, in un rinnovamento del tutto personale del mitto. L’Antichità, attraverso il mito, diventa un modo indiretto di espressione dell’io: è un’Antichità viva. Per queste opera Marguerite Yourcenar, che ha una conoscenza profonda della letteratura e dell’arte antiche, ricorrerà copiosamente alla sua libertà creatrice.

The characters are as much substitutes of the author’s self, as much supports for her interrogations, in a completely personal remake of myth. Antiquity, through myth, becomes an indirect expression of self: it is a living Antiquity. For these works, Marguerite Yourcenar, who has an intimate knowledge of literature and antique art, will make full use of her creative liberty.

Whilst the very tenor of her writing, with its framework enshrouded by absence and presence, strives in an attempt to mask its apparent yet subliminal cathartic intention, we should be mindful of the cautionary words of Paul Eakin: “We never really know why writers write what they write, and this very unknowability can make any inquiry into an author’s intentions seem fruitless if not impertinent.”

Thus, whilst we cannot determine Yourcenar’s literary intent with authority, the erudite and eclectic content of her writing, together with its suggestive undertone, has invited prolific and continuous scholarship. Her corpus bears all the hallmarks of a passionate quest for deliverance from her psychological prisons which intensified with the passage of time — from relationships which were, at once, constructive and destructive. Yet, as we have contended, it is apparent that, whilst far from conforming to Lejeune’s strict definition of autobiography, Yourcenar’s corpus is “fuelled by an ensemble of passions” — the insistent intrusion of self and her memories which suffuse her texts with torment, despite the mechanism of denial at work, ensuring that any such emancipation through her writing remained a faux ami. The “pastiche of memories” which nourishes her characters throughout her œuvre is undiminished, and although masked by name, locus, or temporal association, insists that her past remains a vibrant catalyst to her creativity. As Doré recognised in the character of Cornélius Berg, so Yourcenar’s endeavours appear futile: “En

380 Eakin, p. 149.
vain, son pinceau est impuissant à masquer ce qu’il voudrait ne pas voir. The following critical analysis of Denier du rêve will allow further investigation of this hypothesis.

**Denier du rêve — a study of absence and presence**

We have examined at length the impact of Marguerite Yourcenar’s personal life on the allegorical motifs of her literary corpus, and undertaken a review of the psychological tensions created by repetitive memory citations which disclose that abandonment and alienation in her life provided an undeniable catalyst for her writing as her unconscious quest for ataraxia became apparent. In order to verify the extent to which such factors haunted the pages of her novels, an investigation of Denier du rêve will be invaluable. Chosen for its uniqueness of form within Yourcenar’s divergent corpus, and retained through its subsequent republication, the text differs not only from the epistolary style of Alexis and Mémoirs d’Hadrien, but also from the account of a relationship offered in Le Coup de grâce and Anna, soror..., the selection of short stories in Nouvelles orientales, and the unfolding of the life of the tragic character of Zeno in L’Œuvre au noir.

*Mort* (death) is the final word of the 1959 publication of Marguerite Yourcenar’s Denier du rêve, not surprising perhaps in a text which focuses, intentionally or otherwise, so resoundingly on this very terminal aspect of life which, of itself, creates an uncompromising void, an absence. A thorough analysis of this text, replete with its recurrent references to death and darkness, will expose the binaries of birth and death, absence and presence which imbue the novel with insistence and betray the author’s inexorable sense of imprisonment, initially by her presentiment of culpability inherent in the circumstances of her delivery which claimed her mother’s life, and later by the void created following the death of her father.

The first edition of this work was published in 1934 at a time when Yourcenar was leading a semi-nomadic existence in Europe, somewhat in the steps of her father, Michel, whose death five years earlier had reinforced the sense of abandonment already so persistent in her life. As

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381 Doré, p. 303f.
we have noted, the young Marguerite had been raised by Michel, following the death from puerperal fever of Marguerite’s mother just ten days after childbirth. For almost three decades until 1929, father and daughter, though not inseparable, led their lives in relative dependence on each other: she had developed a thirst for knowledge and erudition at her father’s knee; for his part, he required the occasional grounding necessitated by a life of fast living, and a self-effacement provided by parental responsibilities. They often shared moments of literary intimacy, a practice to which she refers repeatedly in her interviews with Matthieu Galey:

Nous lisions beaucoup ensemble, à haute voix. Nous nous passions de livre.

Je lisais et quand j’étais fatiguée, c’était lui qui prenait le relais. Il lisait fort bien, beaucoup mieux que moi: il extériorisait beaucoup plus

We read together a great deal, out loud. We passed the book back and forth. I would read, and when I became tired my father would spell me. He read very well, far better than I: he put much more of himself into the characters. 382

Michel was “un lettré comme on l’était autrefois, pour l’amour des livres, pas pour ‘faire des recherches’ ou même, systématiquement, pour s’instruire [a man of letters of the old school who read because he loved books, not for the sake of ‘research’ or even learning],” Yourcenar confided to Galey. Reading appears to have been one of Michel’s indulgent passions; he devoted himself not to contemporary writers, but to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chateaubriand, Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Maeterlinck amongst many, also discussing Greek philosophy with his daughter and reading to her from the writings of Marcus Aurelius. That Yourcenar chose this Roman emperor (AD161-180) as the recipient for Hadrian’s epistle in Mémoires d’Hadrien is therefore not surprising, such was Michel’s pervading influence on her life and writing, a devotion which also echoes that which existed between Hadrian and the young Marcus Aurelius.

Fond memories of a journey to Rome with her father in 1924, the only time Michel had accompanied her to that city, further strengthened both her choice of Rome for the setting of Le Denier du rêve, and her later fascination with the etchings of Piranesi. As we have noted elsewhere, her penning of Mémoires d’Hadrien was prompted by viewing a statue of the emperor at the British Museum whilst in the company of her father in 1914, and reinforced by the

discovery during their Roman sojourn of the Villa Adriana, Hadrian’s villa at Tibur (Tivoli); Hadrian and Michel would forever sit in apposition for Yourcenar.

Notwithstanding their shared experiences, she avows that Michel was “très bien, c’était à peine un père. Un monsieur plus âgé que moi [very good but hardly a father. Just a gentleman somewhat older than I was],” further adding that “[à] la verité, je n’ai à aucune époque ‘adoré’ mon père, et ce n’est que tard, me semble-t-il, que je l’ai même vraiment aimé [(t)he truth of the matter is that I never ‘adored’ my father, and it seems to me that it was not until late in life that I even truly liked him.” Despite this denial of emotional concord, she shared both an intellectual companionship with him and a participation in many of her father’s interests, especially those based in antiquity. Together they would enjoy a nomadic life, wandering through the vast

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384 For a thorough recent publication on Hadrian’s villa and the etchings of Piranesi, see MacDonald and Pinto, *Hadrian’s Villa and its Legacy*. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the renowned eighteenth century engraver, devoted the last thirty years of his life to an intense project at Hadrian’s villa which demanded both extreme physical exertion and deprivation of comfort, during which he drew and measured the site to create precise and accurate etchings and archeological plans of the villa, detailing the grandeur and palatial dimensions of the site. Their sombre and haunting detail fascinated Marguerite Yourcenar, undeniably influencing and deepening her dark appreciation of the past. For Piranesi’s influence on Yourcenar’s opus see n.446 below. So also John A. Pinto, *Speaking Ruins: Piranesi, Architects, and Antiquity in Eighteenth-Century Rome* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2012). Especially pp.157ff.


churches and museums of Europe’s great cities, drinking in the atmosphere and the history, which would later have her claim to Galey that:

[I]a vie est beaucoup plus au passé qu’au présent [...] quand on aime la vie, on aime le passé parce que c’est le présent tel qu’il a survécu dans la mémoire humaine. Ce qui ne veut pas dire que le passé soit un âge d’or: tout comme le présent, il est à la fois atroce, superbe ou brutal, ou seulement quelconque

(there is so much more of life in the past than in the present (...) When one loves life, one loves the past, because the past is present insofar as it survives in human memory. Which is not to say that the past was a golden age: like the present it was at once frightful and grand, brutal and merely ordinary.387

Whilst the death of Michel in 1929 and his subsequent absence from her life would create a certain void, it cannot be denied that this, together with her name change away from her given name of Marguerite de Crayencour, was to be the moment of her renaissance. This overt denial of her existence which betrays an attempt to expunge any culpability for her mother’s death, would also ultimately allow the birth of Marguerite Yourcenar as a literary identity.388

Initiated during an earlier visit with her father, and intensified during travels in Italy in 1932-1933 which fuelled Yourcenar’s observations of the face of Fascism in the Europe of that time, Le Denier du rêve tells the story of a failed assassination attempt on Mussolini in the Year XI (1933) of his dictatorship with representations, both realistic and symbolic, of aspects of life set in the décor of the Eternal City. The tale unfolds through the circulation of a “ten lira coin, the coin of the dream (le denier du rêve) [...] the symbol of contact between human beings each lost in his own passions and in his intrinsic solitude”.389 The coin depicts those quotidian fiscal exchanges between humans which appear superficial and without artifice, yet which mask the sometimes deep undercurrents surging through the lives of the individuals symbolised by these seemingly insignificant commercial transactions. This paradox will become increasingly evident in the

388 Though Marguerite Yourcenar had earlier had published two poetry pieces, her literary career began in earnest at this time after her name change and the death of her father. So, Hogsett, (1996). See also Stillman, (1985).
389 Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 139. See also Colvin, (2005), p. 79: “the novel’s French title is more allegorical (literally, ‘currency of dreams’) [while] the English title, A Coin in Nine Hands, neatly accounts for the artifice upon which the entire novel turns”.
development of the text as the characters each purchase “an illusion (love, health, eternal salvation, a return to an illusory utopia, [or] a prolongation of life”.

Despite the 1959 edition being half original text and half reconstruction from the years 1958-59, [...] in that reconstruction the old and the new overlap to such an extent that it is almost impossible, even for the author, to tell where one begins and the other ends. Not only have the characters, the names, the personalities, the relationships, and the settings remained the same, but the main and secondary themes of the book, its structure, the starting point of the episodes, and most often their outcome, have also not changed.

Yourcenar’s choice of characters is significant. Not only are the ancillary characters arranged around the main personae of the central episode, they are also enlaced through themselves and their stories, either by location or by identity, their seemingly disparate threads interweaving to create an intricate tapestry whilst appearing “at first glance [...] to be escapees from a commedia or rather a modern tragedia dell’arte.”

According to Maria Rosa Chiapparo, these Pirandellian portraits based on alienation, arise “plus du mythe que de la réalité, ils nous proposent des êtres perdus en quête d’identité” [more from myth than reality, suggesting lost souls in search of identity]. Thus, Yourcenar’s characters depict a microcosm spanning a broad social spectrum, whose internal turmoils, frequently exacerbated by absence, reflect the multifaceted pain of the author. Joan Howard’s observations on the arbitrary and fragmentary nature

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390 Ibid.
391 Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p.138. Despite the 1934 edition being almost contemporaneous to the events depicted therein, the “definitive” publication of 1959 conforms to those novels deemed historical, having been set in an earlier era. For a contradictory view of Yourcenar’s assersions on her consistency of theming, characters and structure, see Ness, p. 34: “La narration penchait dans la première texte vers le symbolique, mythique et le lyrique, mais se focalise beaucoup plus, en 1959, sur la vérité de l’histoire, masquée en 1934. Elle hésitait à révéler, à traduire directement la réalité qui s’impose à ses yeux. Plus M. Yourcenar est près de la réalité (comme elle l’était de la réalité mussolinienne en 1933) et plus elle tente de masque cette vérité, plus elle en s’éloigne [The narration leans in the first text towards the symbolical, mythical and lyrical, but focusses itself much more, in 1959, on the historical truth, masked in 1934. She hesitated to reveal, or to translate faithfully the reality which imposed itself upon her. The closer M. Yourcenar is to reality (as she was to the Mussolinian reality in 1933) and the more she tried to mask this truth, the further she distanced herself from it].”
393 Maria Rosa Chiapparo, “Denier du rêve de M. Yourcenar : lecture pirandellienne d’une critique politique des années trente,” (2008). p. 285. Luigi Pirandello, 1867 – 1936, was an Italian dramatist and novelist who, though fascinated by the cinema, derided it as alienation from reality. Initially a member of the Fascist party and benefitting greatly from Mussolini’s support, he eventually denounced the regime. So also Shurr, (1987), who anticipates, at p. 35, Chiapparo’s later observation of Yourcenar’s Pirandellian style in Le Denier du rêve, noting that “the structure of the novel generally resembles a series of cinematic frames in a moving picture. This series of frames together compose individual units of continuous related action”.
394 Unless otherwise indicated, translations in this chapter are mine.
of the relationships between the characters should also be noted: “L’apparent désordre et la discontinuité du récit de Denier du rêve pourraient aussi être lus comme une critique du principe du ‘retour à l’ordre’ sur lequel le fascisme se fondait [The apparent disorder and discontinuity of the story in Denier du rêve could also be read as a criticism of the ‘return to order’ principle on which Fascism was founded].” However, whilst Yourcenar’s stated intention was to record the political culture of the day in Italy in an allegorised and fictionalised commentary, the text clearly reflects the turmoil in her private life and the waning connectedness experienced by the author with those near to her.

As we shall discover, imprisonment by events from the past will provide a catalyst for many of the characters to evade reality in a search of an identity which will mask their present pain — a reflection of the parallel quest being undertaken by the author.

**Paolo**

Paolo Farina’s story, with which the text opens, at once enunciates a void. Immediately, it discloses the motif of abandonment which resonates throughout the author’s œuvre, exemplified by the absence of Paolo’s wife, Angiola, who has left him to follow her lover, a member of an opera troupe. Paolo’s love for her had been so intense that he had been blind to her restlessness, even in the first six months of their marriage: “Paolo, aveuglément heureux de posséder cette jeune femme, et séparé d’elle par cette épais bonheur, ne s’était pas douté qu’elle souffrait [Paolo, himself blindly happy to possess this young woman and separated from her by his dense satisfaction, had not been aware of her restlessness].” The magnitude of this absence is reinforced by the condemnation of his fellow villagers who blame not Paolo, but his wife’s Sicilian blood, their disbelief at her behaviour swollen by their knowledge of her upbringing in a Florentine convent for noble-women. Had they been aware of Angiola’s salvation by Paolo from what he called her ‘misadventure’, his neighbours’ incensed reactions might have been further inflamed, such was their compassion for the abandoned man in their midst; yet Paolo preferred to absent this detail from his own memory “par bonté envers sa jeune femme [as a kindness to his young wife].”

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Despite her aversion to the personalisation of novels, Yourcenar has woven multiple aspects of her past into this passionate account of the foresaken Paolo: persistent desertion, associated initially with the death of her mother, then frequently by her father as he pursued his peripatetic existence; the juxtaposition of birth and death implied by the later termination of Angiola’s pregnancy, which is yet to be revealed; the metaphor of Lina Chiari’s breast cancer, seen through the lens of the octopus on the beach at Scheveningen recalls both Fernande’s denial of her breast to her daughter and the idealism of Jeanne de Vietinghoff — as we have seen, and will be further expanded below; and Fernande’s death-bed suggestion concerning Marguerite’s education in a convent — all combine to recreate the image of Yourcenar’s parents.

The absence/presence binary, which becomes apparent from the beginning of the text and as we shall see will be insistently reinforced, is strengthened by further reference to Paolo’s dilemma and allusion to the mother Fernande had never been for the author:

Présente, il l’avait placidement chérie; absente, Angiola flambait de tous les feux que d’autres, évidemment, savaient allumer en elle; et il regrettait, non la femme qu’il avait perdue, mais la maîtresse qu’elle n’avait jamais été pour lui

When she was present, he had placidly cherished her; absent, Angiola shone with all the fires other men could evidently light in her; he missed not the wife he lost, but the mistress she had never been to him.\textsuperscript{398}

The fire motif, which will later be strengthened by the scene of Rosalia’s death, not only interlinks the sisters, Angiola and Rosalia, but evinces the tension between them, developed by their polarised psyches. An exegesis on the allusion to fire and its association with Yourcenar’s birth will be offered later in this chapter.

Paolo’s sense of melancholy is underlined by the author’s portrayal of his sadness in the house which “témoignait peut-être en faveur de l’absente [bore witness to the absent woman],”\textsuperscript{399} its rooms decorated by Angiola during her brief presence in his life, in an attempt to mask the mediocrity of her husband. Ironically, Paolo’s memories are ignited by the décor, yet he remains blind to its significance — an observation which might pertain equally to Yourcenar. His alienation from reality during Angiola’s presence in a marriage which bears no resemblance to a union defined by social norms is subsequently reinforced by the physical alienation from his wife, and engendered by her very absence.

\textsuperscript{398} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{399} Ibid.
During one of his increasingly frequent visits to Rome in search of news of Angiola, Paolo meets the prostitute, Lina Chiari. Despite the want of deep affection in their ironic relationship — “On n’achète pas l’amour [Love can’t be bought]”⁴⁰⁰ — there exists a welcome illusion for him, a warm and subtle presence to replace the previous void created by Angiola’s absence: “mais on achète du rêve [but dreams can be bought].”⁴⁰¹ The reader might perceive this as a veiled reference by the author, not uniquely to her mother, but also to her father, whose gambling habits appeared to escalate following the death of Yourcenar’s mother, Fernande, frequent visits to casinos allowing him to ‘buy’ a degree of distance from the reality of his life.

Falling into the pattern of so many for whom the presence of an unwelcome demon is refused acknowledgement, Yourcenar eschewed the reality of her anguish just as Lina had for months denied the existence of her breast cancer. Yet, many phrases denote the inevitable invasion of her fear: “Le tocsin de l’épouvante la réveillait trop tard [The alarm signal of terror had awakened her too late],”⁴⁰² “son corps investi déjà par l’ennemi [her body already beleaguered by the enemy],”⁴⁰³ “surpris par la mort [surprised by death],”⁴⁰⁴ “sa chair recelait peut-être un mortel danger [her flesh might harbour a mortal danger].”⁴⁰⁵

Finally, she appears to acknowledge the presence of “une tumeur maligne qui peu à peu l’empoisonnait [a malignant tumour slowly poisoning her]”⁴⁰⁶ and seeks a medical consultation. Immediately, allusions to death — white marble, cold atmosphere, patients who “auraient aussi bien pu mourir [might as well be dead],”⁴⁰⁷ consideration of appropriate burial clothes and a sense of relief that had Massimo, her closest friend, really loved her, “elle aurait eu plus de peine à mourir [it would have been harder for her to die]”⁴⁰⁸ — resonate through the text. The absence motif is heightened by the advised removal of her breast during a scheduled mastectomy which would, for Lina, cast a pall over her ‘profession’: “les poitrines mutilées ne plaisent que sur les

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⁴⁰¹ Ibid.
⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.
⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.
statues de marbre qu’admirent les touristes au musée du Vatican [mutilated chests were appealing only on the marble statues tourists go to see in the Vatican Museum].

Such allusions to the lifelessness of statuary cannot be disregarded; not only does this impregnation of the past into the present signify both Michel’s fascination with antiquity and heighten the void engendered by his death, the absence/presence paradox is strongly reinforced by the very existence of the oxymoron created by reference to the inanimate stone replica of life, and the implication of Lina’s mortality. Similarly, the diagnosis of her cancer elicits Lina’s emotional recollection of a dramatic childhood event — the fastening of an octopus onto her flesh, “ce hideux poids vivant [this hideous living burden]” — now re-imagined in the present as the tentacles of her cancer invade her body. The evocation of the octopus, a creature from the sea (mer), is undeniably a jeu de mot by the author for mother (mère) and the torment of the past, recognised in modern scholarship by Carole Allamand amongst others.

In Rendre à César, Yourcenar’s play published in Théâtre 1 in 1971, and based on Le Denier du rêve, the author reinforces this pain, which surfaces as a nightmare in which a crab attaches itself under Lina’s left breast, rendering her flesh torn and bleeding. Whilst the 1959 publication was silent on the location of the octopus’ fastening on Lina’s body, Yourcenar’s later specification of the breast closest to the heart should be seen as a significant signpost to the author’s deep-seated anguish. Doré asserts that these phobic images, associated with the Medusa and castration, occur in Yourcenar’s corpus each time that feminine sexuality is at stake. By means of intertextual reinforcement of this theory, she references Eric’s horror in Le Coup de grâce, attached to a childhood memory of a starfish, forced into his hand by his mother — a maternal act which induced convulsions in the young boy. The image surfaces painfully at the very moment of his one and only embrace with Sophie — a moment which becomes one of both attraction and repulsion for Eric:

Je ne sais à quel moment le délice tourna à l’horreur, déclanchant en moi le souvenir de cette étoile de mer que maman, jadis, avait mis de force dans ma main,

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412 Doré, p.149ff. A more extensive study of her observations on Yourcenar’s persistent inclusion of “l’image phobique” is offered below.  
413 Yourcenar reuses the image of the starfish intertextually in To Each his Minotaur (1943), at p. 141, with reference to Phaedra who usurps her sister Ariadne in Theseus’ affections, the starfish thereby connoting both pleasure and pain, and conforming to conflicting aspects of the author’s sexuality at the time.
sur la plage de Scheveningue, provoquant ainsi chez moi une crise de convulsions

[...] Je m’arrachais à Sophie avec une sauvagerie qui dut paraître cruelle à ce corps
que le bonheur rendait sans défense

I hardly know at what moment ecstasy changed into horror, releasing in me the
memory of that starfish that Mother once forced into my hand on the beach at
Scheveningen, almost provoking convulsions in me [...] I wrenched myself from
Sophie with a violence that must have seemed cruel to a body robbed of defence by
felicity itself.\textsuperscript{414}

The paradox of Eric’s anguish which surfaces at this moment of pleasure echoes
Yourcenar’s plight; the setting for Eric’s agonising memory of maternal torment is identified as the
beach at Sheveningen which recalls for the author childhood escapades highlighting pleasurable
images of the ideal Jeanne, the ‘intimate’ schoolfriend of Fernande and ultimately her cherished
replacement for both husband and daughter, subconsciously juxtaposed with painful images of
this mother who abandoned her. Thus, these images situated \textit{au bord de la mer} (at the seaside)
enliven Yourcenar’s \textit{mal de mère}, Jeanne’s relationship with both Fernande and Michel infusing
the past with phantoms which surface unwilled for the author. Lina’s memory/nightmare,
enlivened now by her cancer, is emblematic of this struggle.

Lina’s prescience of her death is palpable. She imagines herself, already on the path to
her absence: “entrée dans ces régions méticuleusement propres, stérilisées, impregnées de
formol et de chloroforme, qui servent de froides frontières à la mort [entered (into) those
meticulously clean and sterilized zones, those zones impregnated with formaldehyde and
chloroform which are the cold borders of death].”\textsuperscript{415} Applying a mask of make-up however, she
assumes the semblance of health: “Les joues pales redevinrent roses; la bouche reprit cet
incarnate qui fait songer à la chair secrète ou à la fleur d’une poitrine saine [Her pale cheeks
became pink again; her mouth took on that rosiness that evokes the secret flesh and the flower of

dilutes the revulsion conveyed by the author. See also Doré, at p. 160, who notes this unique appearance of
the word “Maman” in Yourcenar’s corpus, linking Eric’s phobic image of the starfish placed in his hand by
his mother, a scene she juxtaposes with Yourcenar’s memory of Jeanne, the ideal mother, taking the hand of
the young Marguerite on the same beach. This unique usage is discussed by Josette Person in \textit{Le Fangeux et
le Tellurique ou les impensés de Marguerite Yourcenar}, Th. Litt. française, Paris VIII, 1987, cited by Doré at
n. 128.

In this way, Lina evaporates, if only fleetingly, her future ‘ghosts’. Her face, flushed by make-up — a mask motif which is continually developed throughout Yourcenar’s corpus — allows Lina an illusory confidence in her presence and masks her presentiment of death, when “la squelette à son tour dût tomber en poussière pour ne laisser subsister que ce néant qu’est presque toujours l’âme humaine [the skeleton would crumble into dust, leaving behind it the nothingness the human soul too often is].”

The absence/presence paradox is presented in stark apposition in the portrait of a single character, the author’s melancholy and pessimism personified in this evaluation. Despite insistent denials by Yourcenar that she was affected by her mother’s absence, and the author’s assertion of a certain ‘distance’ from her father, we are reminded in the portrayal of Lina of the constant allusion to these ‘ghosts’. The author’s abnegation of any sensitivity surrounding her birth is reflected in Lina’s makeup, applied to mask the reality of her situation. The presence of a cancer in her breast not only inhibits her potential for future breastfeeding, but unmistakably implies her death. Negation is a constant. The nature of Lina’s profession denies fecundity, a refusal ardently practiced by the author who chose in her private life gay and lesbian consorts in order to remove any possibility of replaying the circumstances surrounding her own birth.

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**Rosalia and Giulio**

Rosalía de Credo, the sister of Angiola, sells candles in a neighbourhood church in Rome. Whilst nursing her own anguish at the absence of her beloved sister, whose whereabouts is unknown to her: “[e]lle rôdait aux abords des hôtels garnis ou dans le quartier de la gare, dévisageant les inconnues assez belles ou assez tristes pour être Angiola [(s)he began to prowl around furnished apartment buildings and train-station neighbourhoods, staring at women beautiful or sad enough to have been Angiola].” She comforts Giulio Lovisi, weighed down not by his own grief.

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416 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 176; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 20. The juxtaposition of ‘mouth’, ‘secret flesh’ and ‘healthy bosom’ evoke for the reader a double sense of both a sexual encounter and a reference to breastfeeding, that very life-giving sustenance denied to her daughter by Fernande. For her assertions of make-up as a mask, see Stillman, (1985), p. 269f: “make-up disguises or denies reality rather than simply embellishing or enhancing it, and clearly assigns to woman the role of dissimulator”.


only by the presence in his life of a shrewish wife, and a daughter and invalid grand-daughter under his roof, but now also by the paradox of his increased responsibility following the absence of his son-in-law, Carlo, incarcerated on an island near Sicily, whose presence in their lives continually “les inquiétait comme une fantôme [haunted them like a ghost].”\textsuperscript{419} Utilising this ghostly imagery, Yourcenar reinforces the persistent imprint of the character whose absence has not obliterated unsettling memories of his presence for the family — a patent allusion to her own spectres. Contrasting descriptions of the daily vexations of the innocent women with the perceived boredom of the guilty absent party facilitate the juxtaposition of presence and absence. Rosalia’s repeated invocations to the “Holy Virgin” and “The Holy Mother”,\textsuperscript{420} echoed by the devotions of the priest to the “Queen of Martyrs”, “Queen of Heaven...Regina Cœli”,\textsuperscript{421} “Mystical Rose...Chosen Vessel”, “Consolation of the Afflicted...Queen of Virgins”,\textsuperscript{422} highlight a unique example of integration within the absence/presence dichotomy, and suggest again the idealised mother, a repeated intertextual motif for the author. These static but carefully chosen epithets demonstrate an author in crisis; her psyche, broken by maternal absence, is reflected powerfully in a staccato and choked presentation. Fernande is undeniably the “Queen of Martyrs”, “Queen of Heaven” and “Chosen Vessel” having carried and borne her daughter to her own peril. The author’s ironic identification of “Regina Cœli” as a prison, together with its textual juxtaposition to the above references, highlights the extent to which Yourcenar feels relentlessly imprisoned by both the physical absence and psychological presence of her mother, martyred in order that her daughter might exist.

The mention of Sicily provides Rosalia, herself a martyr to her family, with an “écho poignant d’une joie perdue [echo of a lost joy],”\textsuperscript{423} which had re-presented itself from her past, a sensation contrasting starkly with her current persona, one of a woman “déportée du bonheur [exiled from happiness].”\textsuperscript{424} Almost identical phrasing — “une vibration du passé [an echo from the past]”\textsuperscript{425} — is used by the author to describe the sensations experienced by the parishioners as they sit receptively, allowing such evocations from the words of the litany to awaken individual

\textsuperscript{420} Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 29.
\textsuperscript{421} Ibid., p. 30.
\textsuperscript{422} Ibid., p. 31.
\textsuperscript{424} Ibid.
absent memories, and to imply the echoes of her own past which continue to haunt and ensure that her happiness remains elusive.

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**Marcella**

Meanwhile, Marcella, one of the text’s protagonists, enters the church, a black shawl anticipating a symbolic shroud wrapped “sur sa poitrine, dissimulant sous l’étoffe noire l’objet dangereux [across her bosom, hiding under it the dangerous object].” The juxtaposition of the gun, which Marcella will later employ in her attempt to extinguish the life of the Dictator, against the life-giving breast is both a powerful and ironic oxymoron; it is further reinforced by a reference to standing by the “piste cavalière avec un enfant [bridal path, a child in hand]” — a wistful notion, contrasted by Marcella’s repeated reference to the prison, ‘Regina coeli,’ and her desperate imploration to an absent power: “Faites, mon Dieu, que je meure tout de suite. Faites que ma mort ne soit pas inutile. Faites que ma main ne tremble pas, faites qu’il meure [Dear God, see to it that I die right away. See to it at my death is not useless. See to it that my hand is steady, see to it that he dies].” Death, both hers and that of her intended quarry, become an insurmountable desire; through his elimination, hers will be necessitated, their linked absence from the world seen by Marcella as a small price to pay for the Realisation of her objective. The life/death binary is subtly framed by the irony of Marcella’s plea for instant death whilst surrounded by those beseeching eternal life.

Rosalia, the pathetic candle vendor, innocently takes advantage of a congregation’s custom of lighting candles, surrounding as they had for centuries their “images saintes d’une garde d’honneur de petites flammes, comme s’ils prêtaient aux dieux leur peur instinctif de la nuit [holy relics with an honor guard of tiny flames, as they projected on their gods their own instinctive fear of the dark].” The custom of those present in the church simulates the practice of those long absent “enfouis plus bas encore sous l’entassement des âges [buried even deeper in the accumulations of time],” who offered honey cakes to Venus, only to succumb involuntarily to permanent absence, life’s only certainty, “le don sombre qui annule tous les autres dons [the

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427 Ibid.
428 Ibid.
429 Ibid.
431 Ibid.
dark gift that obliterates all others]. In an analogy which cannot fail to allude to the truncated life of her own mother, the author equates the brevity of human life with the extinguishing of a briefly flickering candle. Her use of the phrase “comme s’il se réfugiait dans un coin de son enfance [as if taking refuge in a corner of his childhood]’’ lends strength to this view, and reinforces the extent to which the circumstances of the author’s birth pervade her writing.

The image of Giulio’s invalid grand-daughter, “souriante sur ses blancs oreillers [smiling on white pillows],” was, for Giulio, nothing more than idyllic imagination, a picture which provokes the dual imagery of both Mimi’s purity and of Fernande’s death. Despite Yourcenar’s assertion that Giulio “ne pensait guère à tant de morts [was not thinking of the dead],” death remains a constant motif throughout this text, each character being defined to some extent by the spectre of death. This persistent emphasis, even when denied by Giulio, ensures the reader of the author’s obsession with the absence of life, and her sense of an unabating yet unadmitted imprisonment by the notion of loss, so insistent in her text.

Mentally distancing himself from the living death inferred by his marriage, Giulio romanticises about a paradoxical life with Miss Jones, the young English sales-assistant, banished in a fit of pique by Giulio’s wife, Giuseppa. For Giulio, such an idyllic release from his marital imprisonment is only achieved by imagining himself committing “autant de crimes qu’un assassin célèbre [as many crimes as a renowned murderer].” The resultant elimination not only of the avalanche of his quotidian family problems but also the weakness of his character, which perpetually permitted their acceptance, would have freed Giulio to lead a different life, albeit one incompatible with social norms. Yet, “cette transformation eût équivalu à une mort plus totale que ne le serait la sienne. Car la sienne, ou celle de sa femme [...] s’insérerait dans le tissu de banales misères qui composaient leur vie [such a transformation would have meant a more

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432 Ibid.
434 Savigneau, (1993). See photo (#2) of Fernande on her death bed.
435 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 188; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 33. The English translation carries the sense of complete negation, yet the French phrase suggests that Giulio rarely or infrequently thought of the dead. This original phraseology better suits our hypothesis and provides a more credible assessment of both Giulio’s and the author’s psyche. See also Savigneau, (1990), p. 40; Savigneau, (1993), p. 30, who cites an interview between Bernard Pivot and Marguerite Yourcenar in his television programme “Apostrophes”, 7th December, 1979. The author asserts that “il est impossible, à moins d’avoir un caractère extrêmement romanesque, de s’éprendre, de s’émouvoir d’une personne qu’on n’a jamais vue [it is impossible, unless you have an extremely romantic character, to be enamoured of, or moved by, a person you have never seen].” Denial became a way of life for the author, both to herself and her readers.
absolute death than the one that awaited him. For his death, or his wife’s death (...) was woven into the banal pattern of small miseries that made up their lives].” As it was for the author, the spectre of death and absence was woven so completely through Giulo’s life that it was no longer unfamiliar, but an accepted eventuality. Giulo’s morbid thoughts extend exponentially to imagining the manner in which Giuseppa would impart the news of his death to the neighbours, and how many would come to his funeral, should he pre-decease her, death and imagination combining to eliminate his pain.

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Rosalia

Whilst Giulio mourns his misfortune in those present in his miserable daily existence, Rosalia’s life has been impregnated by absences. This patent example of the presence/absence dichotomy, evident throughout this text, demonstrates the extent to which both aspects have immeasurably confronted the author and are reflected in her characters, having wrought the only outcome possible for all — melancholia. Rosalia’s youthful beauty was now long gone, eroded by a lifetime of sadness and unfulfilled dreams. Her father had been sent off to the poorhouse without a word from Rosalia, whilst she nursed her invalid mother. Fragments of the author’s life seed this scenario; though the nursing of Fernande had been a brief interlude between the birth of her baby and her death, it nevertheless forms part of her story. For Yourcenar, as for Rosalia, “son père, et non sa mère, avait été la grande passion de son enfance [her father, not her mother, had been the great love of her childhood].” Fernande’s death had robbed Marguerite of other than a hypothetical relationship with her absent mother, yet the influence of her father, alternately absent and present during her early years, provides a pervading undercurrent to the author’s literary creativity. With a view perhaps to complete domination over his daughter — an intention not supported by Savigneau — Michel not only coloured Yourcenar’s reading experience with his own antiquarian partiality, ensuring her reliance upon him, he also denied his daughter details of her mother, withholding photos of Fernande from Marguerite, which the author did not see until she was aged thirty-five. Given the patent content of her writing with its multi-dimensional references to motherhood, and the forensic intelligence of the writer, her absence of curiosity surrounding her mother’s existence is a challenge to reason. The reader

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437 Ibid.
must then assume that Yourcenar perpetually found this topic too painful to traverse and subsequently denied all interest, both to herself and to her inquisitors.

The void engendered by the deaths of Fernande and Michel finds regular allusion: lifeless beings in the form of statues punctuate the pages of Le Denier du rêve\textsuperscript{440}, as do references to a somewhat idealised notion of convent upbringing,\textsuperscript{441} echoes of Fernande’s proposal to her husband on her death-bed regarding the question of her daughter’s future education, and concerning which, we are told, Yourcenar had subsequently been appraised, not by Michel or Fernande’s sister, Jeanne, who had both been present at Fernande’s death, but by Fräulein Margareta, Yourcenar’s German governess in her youth.\textsuperscript{442} Though Michel would not act on this proposal, reference to convent education is a persistent intertextual motif, implying both a notion of abandonment by, and an alienation from, the real world.

This is highlighted by the absence of life at Gemara, Rosalia’s family home in Sicily. The ravages of time have created a “maison décrépite [a decrepit house],”\textsuperscript{443} marked by collapsed overhanging ledges and crumbling rockworks in the vineyards, where “la Mafia, les troubles agraires, et surtout l’incurie avaient appauvri la terre et tari les sources [the Mafia, agrarian problems, and, most of all, neglect had depleted the ground and dried up the springs].”\textsuperscript{444} This metaphor in which the region is no longer capable of supporting life is powerfully evocative and may be read on several levels: firstly, it implies the void in the author’s life created by the loss of both mother and father, and the subsequent rejection of her amorous advances by her publisher, André Fraigneau. Secondly, Yourcenar’s oblique reference to her own fragile physical state of health at this time, and her unspoken yet apparent decision to go to great lengths to prevent childbearing should also not be overlooked here. The sense of absence and elimination is further strengthened by the description of “[l]es bosquets giboyeux mentionnés dans les cartulaires avaient vite succombé à la passion de l’homme pour tuer les bêtes et pour couper les arbres [(t)he woods, once listed in royal grants as well stocked with wild game, had been devastated by

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), pp. 19, 26, 36, 38, 50.}
\footnote{Ibid., pp. 11, 13, 39.}
\footnote{Savigneau, (1990), p. 27; Savigneau, (1993), p. 17. Yourcenar evinced no affection towards this governess after whom she had been named.}
\footnote{Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 191; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 37. According to Farrell and Farrell, p. 40f, “Of all the symbolic mirrors in Denier, the most notable, and the most fully developed, is Gemara. The ancient stone property is an outward sign of an inner realization of home, cemented by generations of the Di Credo family, reflecting changes wrought by the elements.”}
\end{footnotes}
the human passion to kill animals and to cut down trees].”

This is underscored by “un perron ne menait nulle part; le képi d’un oncle mort au siege de Gaète pendait dans un salon où n’entrait personne [A flight of stairs led nowhere; the military cap of an uncle killed in the siege of Gaeta hung in a room no-one entered].” Absence of purpose, death and a pronounced void provide undeniable testament to Yourcenar’s recent losses, and recall Fernande’s premature death following her confinement.

Don Ruggero, father of Angiola and Rosalia, dreamt of “statues de chair [statues of flesh],” implying not only the author’s lifeless and unattainable memories, but also Michel’s passion for antiquity. Such imagery replete with graphic oxymorons acknowledges Yourcenar’s conviction of the paradoxical nature of the absence and presence of life, the former reinforced by reference to the barren nature of the “arbres, non taillés, non greffés, [qui] souffrissent de ne pas

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Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 190f; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 37. Yourcenar’s passion for animals and abhorrence of animal cruelty may be noted often throughout this text. Though this motif is less instructive than others in the opus and beyond the scope of this thesis, it provides evidence for the author’s persistent insertion of her passions into her writing.


donner de fruits [trees, unpruned, ungrafted (which) suffered because they couldn’t bear fruit].” This metaphor is a demonstrable self-reference by Yourcenar and infers the author’s maturation without evident direction and nurture and who, as a result of having been so confronted by circumstances from her life’s outset, has apparently determined not to ‘bear fruit’. The author’s use of ‘le passé simple’ of the verb ‘souffrir’ is informative: it implies that suffering is past, yet the author’s regular and multi-faceted allusions to this decision, whilst often oblique, testify to her obsessional yet unadmitted determination to prevent her own fertility. At sixty years of age Don Ruggero, who “avait prit l’aspect d’un sorcier musulman dans la Sicile du Moyen Age [resembled a Moslem sorcerer in Mediaeval Sicily],” was only a “miroir fêlé où se reflétaient vaguement les revenants de la race […] d’une vingtaine d’hommes échelonnés derrière lui dans la mort [cracked mirror vaguely reflecting racial ghosts (…) of the two dozen men lined up behind him in death].” The mirror simulates an infinite mise-en-abyme effect which accentuates the depiction of death and emptiness, the past emphatically being reflected to invade the present.

Yourcenar’s childhood education, having been marked by the influence of successive governesses, finds echo in the sisters, Rosalia and Angiola, who, like Yourcenar, had not experienced customary convent instruction; rather, they had been edified by “chansons maternelles […] et les brochures d’hygiène sexuelle volées […] dans le tiroir d’une servante, les bouts de vers grecs enseignés par don Ruggero [maternal songs (…) and pamphlets on sexual hygiene lifted from a servant’s drawer, and fragments of Greek verse taught by Don Ruggero].” Whilst these and others suggest the magical experiences which provide “the remembrances that make up childhood”, we understand the bitter-sweet content of this passage for Yourcenar: the

449 For further discussion of the author’s use of tense see Camiel van Woerkum, "Marguerite Yourcenar et ses alter-egos stylistiques: une lecture psychocritique de l'oeuvre yourcenarienne," (2008). p. 187f. Van Woerkum notes Yourcenar’s employment of the present tense to reinforce the perpetuity of emotions which continue to confront her. He details examples of her use of the present tense when tormented by an unconscious anxiety which appears to have provided lifelong vexation.
451 Ibid. For a comprehensive study of Yourcenar’s employment of mirrors in Denier du rêve, see Farrell and Farrell, p. 29 ff: Yourcenar employs “complex mirror effects by means of which the reader sees each character as he presents himself (his mask), perceives himself (his inner reality), and himself serves as a mirror reflecting those around him,” also “the mirror — that profoundly ambivalent image which both reflects the real world and serves as a door to the magic one beyond.” Further examples of Yourcenar’s frequently applied mirror motif include eyes (Alessandro and Marcella), fountains (Lina and Paolo, Clément Roux), photographs (Massimo recognizes Clément Roux and Vanna from their photos), the gaze of others (Miss Jones), a store window (Lina), dreams (Rosalia), wine glass (Oreste), statues (Don Ruggero) and, perhaps the most fully developed symbolic mirror, Gemara (the Di Credo family).
absence of maternal songs is countered by the pleasure of her father’s literary encouragement. Memories which include “la mort d’une chouette et [...] les premiers soubresauts du cœur [the death of an owl and the first throbblings of the heart]”\textsuperscript{453} demonstrate the proximate relationship between death and passion, deftly juxtaposed by the author — a further reminder of the tragic culmination of her parents’ passion and her vow not to replicate this potential in her life.

Death and general calamity make a series of further impacts on the Credo family’s precarious existence, the repetition of misfortune intensifying the image:

La meilleure jument d’un Richard du pays à qui don Ruggero avait tenté vainement d’emprunter encore quelques milliers de lires était tombée raide morte sur une terre des Credo. Ce malheur n’arrivait pas seul; la femme de ce paysan s’en allait d’une fluxion de poitrine et, quelques jours plus tôt, leur fourrage avait brûlé

A rich country man who had refused to lend Don Ruggero some few thousand lira had his best mare drop dead on Credo land. Misfortunes never come singly; this same peasant’s wife died of pneumonia, and a few days earlier, their haystacks had burned down.\textsuperscript{454}

Intensifying the recurrent motif, other unsolved absences are blamed on Don Ruggero by the village mob who attack on a night when “il était facile de tuer, facile de mourir [it would have been easy to kill, easy to die].”\textsuperscript{455}

«Crève d’un coup de sang! vociféraient les vieilles femmes.
-Tuez le maudit! Saignez le Diable!» râlait le curé qui se croyait mourant

‘Break your neck! Drop dead of a stroke!’ screeched the old women.

‘Kill the Evil One! Bleed the Devil!’ gasped the priest, thinking he was dying.\textsuperscript{456}

The bloodied scene portraying a wounded priest, shot by Don Ruggero, and Rosalia, with blood streaming from her face after being cut by broken glass, signals the end of Don Ruggero’s reign and the beginning of his incarceration. Yourcenar’s apposition of a blood drenched scene and the resultant imprisonment of the perpetrator reinforces for the reader the profound

\textsuperscript{455} Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 195; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 42. The use of the imperfect tense in the original French intensifies the facility of living and dying and reinforces the inexorable nexus between them, whereas the English translation suggests merely the hypothesis of an action which had not eventuated. See also n. 530 for tense change in translation.
psychological impression on the author by the circumstances of her birth. Further amplifying this analogy, Rosalia’s bandage and her worn black dress, which render her with the appearance of a nun, reinforce the convent references above and symbolise the beginnings of her cloistered life, especially since she bears “un de ces cœurs que dévouent à la famille, au foyer, les rites d’une religion qui s’ignore, et d’un amour qui ne sait pas son nom [one of those hearts that are devoted to family and home in the rites of an unconscious religion and of an undefinable love].” In describing Rosalia, Yourcenar bares her own soul with gentle pathos: apparently devoted to a mother she never knew and to a father she confessed barely to know, she would always cherish the notion of family and home, and follow her own credo of beliefs.

Yourcenar’s self-identification with Rosalia expands to include Fernande, allowing a ‘trinity’ embodied in one: “Rosalia continua de veiller à leur place comme si elle était leur âme [Rosalia watched over them as if she was their spirit]” — a patent allusion to the absent Fernande — allowing the family (to) “se reposer sur elle de tout le soin de leur vie, elle devenait pour eux une sorte de servante qu’ils employaient à souffrir [to rest all the burdens of their lives on her for so long that she had become like a servant who suffered for them].” Religious overtones are implicit in this apparent allusion to Christ, as is the concept of maternal protection provided by the shawl of her mother, Donna Rachele, as Rosalia hastily gathers a few possessions for her future comfort.

“Separations [...] qui déchirent [Separations that rend the heart]” form a recurrent theme throughout the text reinforcing both the alienation motif and the absence/presence dichotomy. The departure of Angiola to attend a boarding school in Florence is treated as a temporary separation by Rosalia, who perceives in her sister’s absence not only a physical parting, but a shedding of the real psyche of her sister. After a brief re-appearance from the convent, Angiola continues what will become a lifelong sequence of absences, the magnitude of which will increase with each episode. Whilst working as a companion to the Princess of Trapani, Angiola disappears. Devoid of news, and fearing that Angiola has taken her life, Rosalia, “toujours vêtue de noir, prit l’aspect endeuillé sous lequel ses voisins se souvinrent plus tard de ce fantôme [took

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on the ghostly aspect of mourning by which her neighbours would later remember her]."\(^{462}\) The necessity for mourning attire, intensified following both the death of her mother and her father’s committal to a mental asylum, is ironically appropriate here when the reason for Angiola’s sudden absence becomes apparent later in the text — her unfulfilled pregnancy to the son of the Princess. Clarification at this time is denied, both to Rosalia and to the reader by the author, a masking symptomatic of Yourcenar’s pain and aversion surrounding this state. Rosalia remains pathetically alone in the apartment, until Angiola’s surprise return. Her presence and her appearance evaporate Rosalia’s grief and desire for answers, forgiveness being her sole response: “Sans les connaître, elle lui pardonna ses fautes [Without knowing what the transgressions were, Rosalia forgave her].”\(^{463}\) Such phraseology intensifies the religious motif above.

Angiola soon weds Paolo Farina, the character whose depiction opens this text, providing evidence of an important and resonating motif: the intersecting of the characters symbolised by the circulation between them of the round coin, which is itself a metaphor for the relentless anguish of the writer. Rosalia takes great delight in sending her new brother-in-law to Sicily on family business, an act which strengthens both her renewed propinquity with her sister and ensures Paolo’s alienation from his wife. Angiola subsequently flees Paolo to follow a tenor in an opera troupe, abandoning both sister and husband, the presence of the latter only serving to reinforce and reactivate the misery of the former. Paolo blames Gemara, his wife’s family estate, for her desertion, whilst Rosalia trawls through neighbourhood streets and venues, desperate in the quest for her absent sister, an act echoed later by Angiola herself in search of her former life. Seeing Paolo outside a restaurant in the presence of another woman reinforces for Rosalia his role in her sister’s absence, this motif strengthening the recurrent paradox in the text and facilitating an insight into Yourcenar’s psyche. Yourcenar layers the notion of the absence of Angiola with the sensory withdrawal of her paternal presence. Though the original publication dates from 1934, some five years after the death of Michel, this intensification of the ‘absence’ motif is an undeniable admission by the author that his absence continues to impassion her on every level. Her re-working of the original text and its subsequent re-publication in 1959 support our hypothesis that the author continually pulls the past into the present in her unadmitted struggle for catharsis.

\(^{463}\) Ibid.
Michel de Crayencour in 1890, at the age of thirty-seven

With two wives prematurely deceased and living an unsettled existence, albeit with parental responsibilities, life had also stolen Michel’s dreams, just as it had for Don Ruggero, father to the two unfortunate sisters who, though still clinging to the mortal world, “devenait inaccessible comme les morts et comme les dieux [was becoming as inaccessible as the dead or the gods].”464 His love for life and family having abandoned him, he sits like an empty shell, his insanity masking failure as he hovers in a void between presence and absence: “humilié par la vie, qui l’un après l’autre avait soufflé ses rêves, il mettait la démence entre sa défaite et lui [humiliated by a life that had stolen his dreams one after the other, he hid from failure behind his insanity].”465

Unconvinced of Angiola’s disappearance, he remains as assured of her presence as of the statues, for him a personification of life, which he has had exhumed “du ventre de la terre [out of the earth’s womb],”466 a complicated metaphor for life and death, combining the tenets of both still-birth and salvation. The notion of the exhumed statues rising to come to him supports the prevailing religious theme, together with the motif of presence following absence, whilst the metaphor of statues removed from the earth’s womb provides further evidence of Yourcenar’s persistent apposition of birth and the absence of life. The marble statues, effigies of life, amplifying the author’s embodiment of lifelessness and death and a sustained reference to Michel through antiquity as we have seen, are enlivened by Don Ruggero’s imagination to come to him as a flow of female admirers, his wicker chair also personified as a marble throne which “il ne se lassait pas de caresser [he never tired of caressing]”467 enhancing this motif. By comparison,

467 Ibid.
however, Rosalia’s real presence irritates her father, and she abandons him, unrecognised and unaware of her father’s departure from reality.

The authorial detail of Don Ruggero’s financial ineptitude which leads to his loss of the family estate further identifies him with Michel, the sale of Gemara mirroring that of Mont Noir, Yourcenar’s childhood home, as a result of Michel’s mounting financial debts, mentioned above. The sale, enabled by the death of Michel’s mother who had occupied the house, heralded a new beginning for father and daughter as they escaped memories and family conventions, a quest which would become life-long for Yourcenar.

Paolo’s letter on its black and white paper announcing the forced sale of Gemara evokes somewhat prophetically to Rosalia “l’effet de son propre faire-part [the official announcement of her own death].” The black-rimmed stationery further intensifies this association, not only with Michel, but also with Fernande. Following the birth of his daughter and subsequent death of his wife, Michel had sent two announcements: the first of Marguerite’s birth was almost immediately followed by that of Fernande’s death, the original of the latter included in the author’s archives in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. The continuum between birth and death, absence and presence had thus been forged early in the life of the author.

Recollections of statuary and symbols from ancient cultures discovered during shared experiences and travels with Michel provided repeated inspiration for Yourcenar. The picture of the neighbour’s arms covered with the wings of the pigeons she is feeding elicits for Rosalia the angelic image of a clay idol found under the family garden in Sicily — a scene which also conjures for the author a youthful memory of the beach at Scheveningue where the white skirt and scarf of Jeanne, both friend to her mother and father alike, and maternal ideal for the author, are blowing

like wings in the wind. Memories of her childhood home provide Rosalia with a rare anchor in a life without her deceased mother, her beloved sister and her father, missing in body and spirit respectively. The coin placed by Rosalia in a basket to pay for requested embers evokes “l’obole à Caron [the obol for Charon]” as Rosalia prepares for what will ironically become her final journey. Text (present) and ancient sources (past), the two dynamically interwoven throughout this opus, reinforce the intensity of the presence/absence binary, and the inherent nexus between life and death for the author: “des pommes de pin prises aux forêts vivantes venaient d’allumer le charbon des forêts mortes [coals from dead forests were just lit by pine cones from living ones].”

The following pages are burgeoning with the images of death: the analogy of the bed to a funeral pyre is powerful, the image eliciting for Yourcenar, Fernande’s bed — at once a place of genesis and loss. Rosalia mentally transports herself to her childhood home, memories recalled from the past allowing her escape from the pain of the present as the flames lick at Rosalia’s clothes and eventually her bedding. Rosalia’s immolation is symbolic of Yourcenar’s conviction of Fernande’s sacrifice in order to give her daughter life, the flames suggestive of the passion of the author’s personal and guilt-ridden image of a life extinguished on a birthing bed. The flame imagery recalls the destruction by fire of Yourcenar’s placenta, which we are told was burnt in the hearth following her delivery, flames linking the tenets of both birth and death for the author.

Whilst Rosalia’s past allows her escape, Yourcenar’s memories ensure her imprisonment.

Just as Don Ruggero “refusa d’ouvrir à ces étrangers galonné[s] [had refused to open to these strangers in uniform]” during the attack on Gemara, Rosalia “ne voulait pas ouvrir à ces paysans incendiaires [did not want to open to these torch-bearing peasants]” — the neighbours

469 The ten lira coin which passes through nine pairs of hands, and from which the title of the book is taken.
472 For evidence of the placental burning, see Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in EM, (1991), p. 722; Yourcenar, DD, (1991), p. 22. Rosalia’s death heightens Yourcenar’s earlier depiction of Sophie in Le Coup de grâce, whose character reflecting warmth, passion and the generosity of life, according to Kajsa Andersson, p. 70, also burns with a destructive flame which builds relentlessly to an “obstination à mourir [obstinate will to die],” uniting “les deux faces du symbole du feu, la vie et la mort [the two faces of the symbol of fire, life and death].” See also Stillman who notes at p. 268 that “the texts disconcert by the number of fevers, burns, fires, flames, crucibles and furnaces that inform them”.
attempting their futile rescue. The author deftly juxtaposes past and present to convey Rosalia’s escape from her troubled life, overwhelmed by absence:

Tranquille, couchée sur sa courte-pointe roussie comme le cadavre de ses ancêtres sur le bûcher des funérailles, les yeux grands ouverts, Rosalia di Credo venait d’aborder au pied d’un monstrueux Gemara nocturne où l’attendait Angiola.

Peaceful, lying like the corpses of her ancestors on funeral pyres on her charred bedspread, eyes wide open, Rosalia di Credo had just reached the foot of a nocturnal, monstrous Gemara; Angiola was waiting for her.\(^{475}\)

Her own departure will eventually bring about the desired *rapprochement* with her beloved Angiola, already present in the darkened mass of Gemara, Rosalia’s death opening the possibility of an elusive reunion. Yourcenar’s subconscious desire for such a reunion with her parents must be understood in this analogy — a state of *ataraxia* enabled only by the author’s death.

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**Marcella**

The imagery of death is further enhanced in the account of a woman attired exclusively in black: gloves, handbag, coat and “écharpe pareille au crêpe des veuves [scarf like a widow’s veil]”\(^{476}\) giving her the appearance of “[u]ne petite-bourgeoise en deuil [a little bourgeois woman in mourning].”\(^{477}\) Her entry into a darkened room further strengthens the sombre weight of the image, as does the atmosphere: “Rien ne manquait pour l’évocation d’un fantôme, ni la pénombre, ni la fumée […] ni leurs mains posées sur la table comme dans les séances spirites [Everything was arranged as if to evoke a ghost: the half-light, the smoke (…) their hands placed on the table as if for a séance].”\(^{478}\) The text is replete with ghost imagery; Michel and Fernande continue to provide the motor for Yourcenar’s fiction, driving the narrative with allusion and metaphor in the author’s apparent quest for catharsis. That this pursuit is unadmitted by Yourcenar only serves to amplify its ghostly connotation. Whilst she continued to deny her abiding guilt associated with Fernande and the extent of her attachment to Michel’s memory, her texts are heavily impregnated with their ghostly images and we are obliged to read her differently.


\(^{477}\) Ibid.

By reference to Carlo “comme d’un mort [as if he were dead],” this allusion is heightened. For each of those present, the memory of the absent Carlo is revived uniquely, their physical union juxtaposed by their spiritual disjunction with one another: “chacun des trois ignoret ou dédaignait le fantôme qui hantait les autres, et s’absorbait silencieusement dans la contemplation du sien [each of the three ignored or scorned the ghost that haunted the other; each was absorbed in his own silent contemplation].” Unsurprisingly, allusions to Marcella Ardeati’s mother are tinged with irony; she is introduced into the text as having been a midwife, yet has been condemned for procuring abortions. Whilst each of these two roles may appear the antithesis of the other, they conform eloquently to the absence/presence, birth/death binary theory, and exemplify the significant employment of oxymorons throughout the text.

The author’s earlier depiction of Vanna, dressed entirely in black, is echoed by Marcella’s attire: “ses seins à l’abandon sous son châle de laine noire [her breasts unconstrained under her black wool shawl].” Reference to Marcella’s breasts perpetuates the life-giving motif alluded to earlier, yet also implies the breast milk denied to Yourcenar by Fernande, for whom the freedom conveyed by unconstrained breasts was undoubtedly anathema. The positivity of Marcella’s physical image provides marked contrast with the negativity surrounding the absent Carlo’s health problems and fears for his death: “Vous ne vous souvenez pas qu’il crachait le sang? Qui sait si à l’heure où je parle il est encore de ce monde, le pauvre! [Don’t you remember that he was spitting blood? Who knows if at this very moment he is still among us, poor man!]”

The scene is one of apposition and lurching emotions. Fuelled individually and passionately by the significance of Carlo’s earlier presence in their lives, and now lamenting his absence, the two women face one another like beasts in battle: “Symboles presque grossiers du destin de l’homme qui sans espoir s’était débattu entre elles [like coarse fatal symbols of Carlo’s fate, he had struggled between them in vain].” Marcella’s thoughts vacillate between memories of life-saving operations in which she assisted her doctor-husband as his nurse to revive bullet-ridden patients, and the desire to extinguish Vanna’s life: “tirer sur cette brute, l’abattre,

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481 So also ‘statues of flesh’; for the author’s employment of such oxymorons, see n. 447 and n. 466.
483 Ibid.
trouer ce sac plein de sang [Shoot this thing, destroy it, make a hole in this bag full of blood].”

Yourcenar’s de-personalisation of Vanna in this outburst conveys both her difficulty with this imagery and her anger; reference to death is juxtaposed with the allusion to a life-sustaining placenta (implied by the bag of blood), hers having been burnt in the hearth following its elimination from Fernade’s body, as earlier noted. The birth/death nexus is again reinforced by paradox as the author pulls memories from Marcella’s past, placing them in apposition as she draws the modern text back into the past, the circular motif later strengthened by the arrival of Dr Alessandro Sarte, identified as both Marcella’s husband and the doctor who examined the ailing Lina Chiari earlier in the text.

Vanna, having similarly tended in the past to the ailing Carlo, agonises over his current predicament: “Je sais qu’il est faible et qu’il a peur (tous les hommes sont lâches) et qu’il craint de mourir [I know that he is weak – all men are cowards – and he’s afraid of death].” This sentimentality for the psychological well-being of her husband sits in sharp contrast with her maternally uncharacteristic musings about her invalid daughter, whom she feels unable to love, an echo of Fernande’s rejection of her daughter immediately following the birth. Vanna at times experiences “l’envie folle, lancinante, affreuse, d’étouffer l’enfant sous un oreiller, puis de mourir [a desperate, sharp, horrible desire to stifle the child under a pillow, and then kill herself].” This disjunction from societal norms alienates the character from life’s mainstream, and creates a sequence of destruction. Describing the atmosphere as “cette atmosphere de catacombes [catacomb-like],” the author reinforces the aura of universal death.

Alessandro’s comment: “J’arrive en pleine crise…C’est le bon moment pour un médecin [I’ve arrived right in the middle of a crisis...Perfect timing for a doctor]” provides an undeniable and ironic reference to the author’s confinement scene: Alessandro’s virtuosity juxtaposed with the doctor attending Fernande who was dismissed by Michel as a ‘butcher’. The doctor is depicted as the wearer of many masks, a device contrived to dissimulate the actual and provide a false presence. Yet, on the occasions when these disguises were absent “on voyait s’ébaucher sa...

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489 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 216; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 64. A further example of change of tense in translation, evinced at n. 455 above. The use here of the present tense by the author to convey a pervading tension in her life is lost in the translation. See also n. 449 for van Woerkum’s study on the author’s use of tenses.
figure véritable, le visage dur, amer et froidement désolé qu’il dissimulait dans la vie et qu’il aurait sans doute dans la mort [his real face appeared, a hard face with a bitter, cold, distressed look he concealed in life but would probably wear in death].”

Marcella, alluding to past concerns about her safety with Alessandro, asserts that “[j]e ne veux pas me suicider pour rien [I don’t want to kill myself for nothing].” The use of the present tense not only pulls her memory of past fears into the present but also heightens the drama of the moment, wherein her political convictions will soon facilitate her demise. Referring to Marcella’s voice, Alessandro notes: “J’y retrouve l’influence des poètes du XIXe siècle, ces profonds imbéciles, qui encombraient le cerveau et la bibliothèque de votre père [I can hear the influence of nineteenth-century poets, those profound imbeciles that cluttered up your father’s mind and library].” Whilst the tone here is somewhat disparaging, the reference is almost certainly to the influence of Michel whose literary tastes coloured her childhood and formed the architecture of Yourcenar’s writing. The bitterness of Alessandro’s outburst reveals that memories which recall the influence of the author’s absent father were not always welcome, reviving too lucidly the void she often experienced during her youth. Yet, the apparent fervour of their relationship had its beginnings early in the life of Marguerite Yourcenar: her nephew, George, asserts that she and her father “lived in some kind of passion ‘staring into each other’s eyes,’ troubled by the slightest moments of presence or absence.” Michel, therefore, constitutes a valid entry within the trope of the presence/absence binary.

Though absent from the gathering in the ‘catacomb-like’ apartment, the influence of Carlo Stevo on those present is a defining factor. Yet it is Alessandro, his friend though the least seduced by his cause, who announces Carlo’s death to Marcella: “Personne n’est plus qualifié que moi pour faire ce soir son oraison funèbre [...] Carlo Stevo est décédé [...] il y a environ vingt-quatre heures [...] une forme de suicide [No-one is more qualified than I to deliver his funeral oration this night (...) Carlo Stevo died (...) about twenty-four hours ago (...) a form of suicide].”

491 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 217f; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 66. An extension of this analogy to include a death mask may also be made; the brilliance of Antinoüs’ gold death mask conceals the putrefaction beneath.


493 See also n. 449 and n. 489 above. Here, the present tense has been faithfully translated.


495 Savigneau, (1990), p. 35; Savigneau, (1993), p. 24. Georges de Crayencour is the son of Marguerite Yourcenar’s half-brother, Michel-Joseph. Given the mutual lack of affection between Yourcenar’s father and his son, an assessment by Georges of the nature of the relationship between father and daughter may have developed legendary status over the years.

The scene in which Marcella and Alessandro resume discussion of the man, at once political martyr to one and friend to the other, whose death has occasioned such a void for them both, is heavily impregnated with death in all its guises. Whilst Marcella regrets “la faiblesses d’un homme qui meurt [the lapse of a dying man],”\(^{497}\) Alessandro, attempting to wrench her back to the present, beseeches her not to bury herself amongst the ghosts of the dead, already dressed as she is somewhat appropriately in a thin black dress: “Tu ne vas pas continuer à t’enterrer parmi ces larves?”\(^{498}\) The discovery of a gun hidden under the pillow alerts them both to the imperatives of the present, the author again strengthening the association between the bed and the implication of death. Alessandro disdains Marcella’s apparent suicidal intentions: “vous condamniez pompeusement le suicide [you used to pompously condemn suicide].”\(^{499}\) When Marcella avows that “il est vrai qu’il y a de meilleurs moyens de mourir [it’s true that there are better ways of dying],”\(^{500}\) Alessandro comprehends instead her planned political assassination of the Dictator. Confronting her with the reality of her actions, Alessandro outlines the futility of her plan: “Etes-vous tellement à finir tuée à bout portant par un garde ou assommée, rouée de coups au poste de police?[Are you so set on being shot, point blank by a guard, or knocked senseless, or beaten to death in a police station?]”\(^{501}\) “Ramifications of the planned assassination and the prescience of death overwhelm the conversation: “Si je le tue, je te dois sa mort [If I kill him, I will owe you his death];”\(^{502}\) “il n’y a pas de foi pour laquelle il vaille la peine de tuer, encore bien moins de mourir [there is no faith worth killing for, even less dying for];”\(^{503}\) “Souviens-toi que tu condamnais le suicide…C’en est un. Tu n’as pas une chance [Remember that you condemned suicide…This is suicide. You don’t stand a chance];”\(^{504}\) “Ma vie ne vaut pas plus [My life is not worth more than that];”\(^{505}\) “La mort de Carlo n’y est presque pour rien non plus [Carlo’s death has almost no part in it].”\(^{506}\)

\(^{500}\) Ibid.  
\(^{504}\) Ibid.  
\(^{505}\) Ibid.  
The act of Marcella’s sponging herself with cold water was “comme si l’eau froide purifiait aussi son sang et son cœur [as though the cold water also purified her blood and her heart].” The analogy clearly evokes the ritual in ancient societies of cleansing a body after death by immersing it in sea water, an act also emulated by those who have been tainted by physical contact with the deceased. Whilst this serves as a further example of the past invading the present, religious overtones of Marcella’s ultimate absolution from her intended actions are also implied. The funereal atmosphere continues with Marcella entering a room which was “complètement noire [almost completely dark],” exuding “cette odeur banalement funèbre, évoquant des rangements qui suivent un départ [et qui] mettait dans cette chambre dénudée une allusion à Carlo [this banal funeral odour, smacking of the kind of straightening out that follows a departure, (which) introduced a reference to Carlo’s ghost into this stark room].” The presence of the odour and atmosphere conjure both the absence of life and the ghostly presence of the deceased Carlo in the darkened room — an undeniable allusion to the preparations following Fernande’s death.

“C’est dur, n’est-ce pas [...] la mort de quelqu’un? [It’s hard, isn’t it (…) the death of someone?]” understates the sense of loss plaguing both Yourcenar and Marcella, though her greater regret is that “il ait flanché avant de mourir [he gave in before dying],” the frailty of his health destroying his strength of conviction. No such frailty for Marcella, who resolves to discharge her determination to assassinate the Dictator, her steadfast intentions reinforced by repetitive references to killing:

On rêve qu’on tue, ou qu’on est tué; on tire et c’est sur soi-même. Le bruit de la détonation te Reveille: c’est ça, la mort. Nous réveiller, c’est sa façon de nous atteindre…Est-ce que tu te réveilleras, dans une heure? Comprendras-tu qu’on ne peut pas tuer, qu’on ne peut pas mourir?

One dreams of killing or of being killed, one shoots but shoots oneself. The noise of the explosion wakes one up; that’s what death is like. Waking up is death’s way of

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510 Ibid.
512 Ibid. The author’s personal melancholy finds expression in the words of her character.
reaching us...Are you going to be wakened in an hour? Will you understand that killing is impossible, that dying is impossible?513

Massimo attempts to persuade Marcella that death is not the answer, that her desire to eradicate her ‘monster’ will not ensure her peaceful presence, rather will precipitate her own demise:

tuer, mettre au monde, vous vous y entendez, vous, les femmes: toutes les operations sanglantes...Et ton sacrifice ne sauve personne, au contraire. Tuer, c’est seulement ton moyen de mourir

killing, giving birth, you’re all good at that, you women: at all the operations that involve blood...And your sacrifice will save no one; on the contrary. Killing is only your way of dying.514

This excerpt accentuates Yourcenar’s relentless juxtaposition of birth and death, the two inextricably interwoven for her. The emphasis on death is understood by its primary position in the sentence, and is followed immediately by birth. The qualifying phrase “all the operations that involve blood” is surely intended to convey her birth scene and its association with the death of her mother.

The futility of Marcella’s intent is conveyed by Massimo’s citation of the ineffective actions of certain women in ancient times:

jadis, des révoltées allaient dans les temples briser les faux dieux, crachaient dessus pour être plus sûres de mourir...Et l’ordre public était défendu, comme tu penses bien: on les supprimait, et puis on bâtissait sur leurs tombes des églises qui ressemblent à des temples...Cet homme, ce faux dieu, tu ne le tueras pas. Bien plus, s’il meurt, il triomphe: sa mort, c’est l’apothéose de César

long ago, some women, rebelling, went to the temples to break the idols: they would spit on them to be sure to be killed...And public law and order was preserved, as you can well imagine: these women were wiped out, then chapels that looked like temples were built on their tombs...This man, this false god, you won’t kill him. Moreover, if he dies, he triumphs: his death is Caesar’s apotheosis.515

514 Ibid.
515 Ibid.
The past is continually pulled into the present by Yourcenar. The author has built a virtual ‘temple’ to the memory of her parents and, despite her attempts to deny the magnitude of their influence, her writing perpetuates their authority, the presence of the shattered idols highlighting the fragility of the author. The ‘long ago’ is regularly enlivened; the chapels of the present preserve the deification of the past; the ‘temples built on their tombs’ are a metaphor for texts enriched by the memories which are repeatedly rebuilt by her writing. The Dictator, if assassinated, will be enhanced in his absence by his elevation to a seemingly god-like presence, just as Julius Caesar’s assassination ensured his apotheosis; Michel’s influence is continually apparent.

Questions fill the void until the time arrives for her departure, and the ultimate extinction of her life, a premonition of which Massimo is so convinced. He reminisces on his childhood and his continuing to play “avec la vie et la mort [with life and death].” “Je voudrais que tu vives [I want you to live]” he declares — a patent reflection of the author’s subconscious wishes, fitted neatly into text. Yet, in the half-light of the moon, her presence already seems lifeless, “son visage baigné aussi d’une blancheur de [..] marbre [a face that was also bathed in marble whiteness].” This potent metaphor portrays both the mask of death and the lifelessness of statuary — a portent of the inevitable and a further example of the apposition between the present (text) and the past (statuary).

The sombre atmosphere is intensified by the author’s description of the darkened street as “une rivière de nuit [a river of the night],” an implication of death by drowning. In avowing “J’embrasse une morte [I’m kissing a dead woman],” Massimo confirms his earlier fears for “l’agonisante [[t]he woman about to die]” hastening with “longs pas silencieux, comme si elle adoptait déjà sa démarche d’ombre [long, silent steps as if she were already a ghost],” her presence moving relentlessly towards absence. This scene of disembodiment is strengthened as Marcella joins the crowd of “spectres vains, bulles sans consistance [vain spectres, empty

516 The author’s adroit use of the metaphor tu[er] le temps, “to kill time”, intensifies the insistent motif of this emotional episode.
518 Ibid.
521 Ibid.
523 Ibid.
Mussolini’s appearance, not in uniform as expected, but as an ordinary man in evening clothes belying the heroic myth promulgated by the regime, momentarily disarms Marcella. The absence of the ‘insignia’ — the mask of his role as dictator — pares away the public persona and transforms him into a far less threatening presence, requiring Marcella to rise above her sudden misgivings: “Elle s’agrippa à l’idée de meurtre comme un naufragé au seul point fixe de son universe qui sombre, leva le bras, tira, et manqua son coup [She clung to the idea of the murder like a shipwrecked sailor hanging on to the only solid part of his sinking universe; she raised her arm, fired — and missed].”

Angiola

The story of Angiola intensifies the darkness and impending doom of Marcella’s narrative. The tale begins in a darkened theatre, where the seated Angiola removes her coat and her long gloves (the author’s mask of denial), which “pendirent à ses côtés comme deux mains mortes [hang from her sides like two dead hands]” as she prepares to “jouir davantage de l’intimité de ce fantôme [better enjoy the feeling of intimacy with this ghost],” (accept the presence of her spectres). The storm which blinded Marcella also overwhelms Angiola as “[d]es gouttes de pluie coulèrent sur la nuque d’Angiola, chaudes comme les larmes d’une enfant qui ne serait pas consolé [(r)aindrops ran down Angiola’s neck, drops as warm as the tears of a child not yet consoled].”

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524 Ibid.
525 Ibid.
529 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 239; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 89. The sexual expectation of this phrase is heightened by the use of ‘jouir’. That this verb has been selected advisedly by the author is undeniable and conveys her explicit and complicated relationship with her spectres — Fernande and Michel — to which we have alluded earlier.
530 Ibid. The French phrase is in the conditional and suggests ‘would not be consoled’. The original sense is more negative and emphatic than the English translation implies and suggests an enduring, perhaps lifetime,
This descriptive analogy is poignant and suggests an out-pouring from the pen of one who had experienced such emotion in her youth. Whilst this scene may evoke the moments from the author’s motherless childhood, her subsequent avowal that she had never cried for her mother whose absence did not weigh heavily upon her would tend to refute this.\footnote{Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 14; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p. 1.} Circumstances and the texts themselves suggest that she was probably more affected by her father’s absence during her childhood, yet Yourcenar insists that this void was adequately filled by many others, resulting in a declaration of extraordinary emotional self-sufficiency in the young Marguerite. Yet, the choice of a theatre for this scene is instructive. As we have seen, Marguerite was taken to the theatre by Barbe, her governess, who left the child in the ‘security’ of the darkened theatre, a practice which reputedly cost Barbe her livelihood with the family, yet Goslar’s suggestion of Barbe’s pregnancy to Michel has also been noted.\footnote{See n.102 above.} Memories of these abandonments remain acutely painful, according to Camiel van Woerkum who proffers as evidence the author’s choice of the present tense in Quoi? L’Eternité to describe this scenario in which “Barbe […] me quitte dès que l’obscurité se fait [Barbe (...) leaves me as soon as darkness falls],”\footnote{Yourcenar, Q?E, (1988), in EM, (1991), p.1342. So van Woerkum, p.190ff. See also n. 449, n. 489 and n. 493 above for reference to present tense usage.} the lieux de mémoire which wound still with a pain too acute to render as past, the trauma of that time rekindling to forge Yourcenar’s present identity.

Marguerite Yourcenar with her nurse, Barbe, in 1904

depth of misery which may or may not have been consciously acknowledged by the author. By contrast, the translation promises hope and positivity, neither of which can be reconciled with the text’s motifs of death and darkness. See also n. 455 and n. 489 above detailing tense change in translation.


\footnote{See n.102 above.}


The description of the cashier at the theatre as one who “sert d’entremetteuse entre les ombres et nous [serves as intermediary between us and the shadows]” underscores the phantom imagery discussed above and reinforces its unwelcome presence in the darkness. Yourcenar, herself, is the intermediary who sits in the intertextual divide — the entre deux — between the spectres from antiquity and the modernity of the present, intensifying rather than diluting the impact of either. In this guise, she belies one of the ‘myths of modernity’ posed by David Harvey in *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, which he defines as constituting “a radical break with the past” where the break makes it:

possible to see the world as a tabula rasa, upon which the new can be inscribed without reference to the past — or, if the past gets in the way, through its obliteration. Modernity is, therefore, always about ‘creative destruction’.  

Whilst Harvey agrees that this notion “has a certain persuasive and pervasive power,” he reinforces the theory of Saint-Simon, also endorsed by Marx, that “no social order can achieve changes that are not already latent within its existing condition.” Though Yourcenar is a confessed seeker of change and elimination of her phantoms, she is undeniably, though unconsciously, intent on retention of the very seeds of her being. By insistently spanning this divide between antiquity and modernity, Yourcenar explodes the myth and confronts it further in her relentless quest for rectification of the past. This assertion is enhanced by the atmosphere in the theatre which is so filled by spectres from the past that the present can find no substance, the author again utilising the mise-en-abyme effect to heighten allusive intensity: “des vents soufflèrent, sans apporter pourtant une bouffée d’air dans la caverne pleine de spectres, car ce n’était eux-mêmes que des fantômes de vents [winds blew yet did not bring a breath of air into this cave full of spectres, because they themselves were the ghosts of winds].”

The powerful and ubiquitous presence of ghostly images in this text as we have already observed, is noted throughout the entire œuvre of Marguerite Yourcenar by Stillman who proffers the following as a reason for their presence:

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537 Miller, (2012), p. 1. For an expansive analysis of Miller’s article with particular reference to Yourcenar’s “reframing of the present by engaging with the specificity of the past”, p. 276f, see the previous chapter of this thesis.
the image of a dead mother traverses the texts as a ‘phantom’, a word occurring with disturbing frequency [and ] is a metaphor of revenge and sacrifice. The desire to avoid or eradicate motherhood in order to undo her mother’s death leads Yourcenar to the (literary) denial of her own existence and thereby the responsibility of that death.\textsuperscript{539}

Put more simply, the \textit{fantômes}, \textit{spectres}, and \textit{ombres} which pervade the text seem to conjure the insistent presence of the dead Fernande in the author’s life, and suggest an unfailing and irredeemable guilt on behalf of the author for her mother’s death, a guilt which has imprisoned her subconscious, informing her life choices and, as we have seen, resonating throughout her corpus. The author’s anagrammatic name change from Crayencour to Yourcenar is indicative of a “literary’ denial of her own existence”, and a desire to distance herself from any culpability for Fernande’s death.

Watching herself on the screen was, for Angiola, like watching a ghost: “elle n’apercevait qu’une morte [she was watching a dead woman].”\textsuperscript{540} Though Angiola’s presence in the darkened theatre was a reality, the reflection before her was merely a ghost who no longer existed. “La chambre magique, grossière reproduction de la mémoire humaine, ne pourrait jamais la lui restituer que passée [The magic room, crude reproduction of human memory, could only bring her back as she no longer was].”\textsuperscript{541} Yourcenar’s imagery magnifies not only the mirroring of the past and the present, antiquity and modernity, but also absence of parental identity and presence of the living text.

The pallid lifelessness of the screen image is enhanced by Yourcenar’s evocation of a vampire, sucking the life-blood from the character to leave a void:

\textsuperscript{540} Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 240; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 90. Again, the English translation is a poor mirror of the focus implied by the French. Yourcenar suggests that Angiola sees “une morte”, a symbol of the past who no longer exists, but whose presence transfixes her completely. The translation omits the word “only” and so denies the emphasis on this motif – Angiola’s complete fixation on the past - intended by the author. That the “morte (dead woman)” represents Fernande for Yourcenar merits consideration as she represents her sole focus in this scene.
\textsuperscript{541} Ibid. Here we see a further reference to resurrection. Throughout this text and others, notably \textit{L’Œuvre au noir} and \textit{Alexis ou la traité du vain combat}, Yourcenar makes frequent reference to religion – its scruples, manifestations of sacred rites, religious hope and fervour, and a strong sense of mysticism also embodied in myth. Though not an adherent of a particular faith, she held to her death a belief in “humanity’s constant closeness to the eternal” as confessed to Galey: Yourcenar, LYO, (1980), p. 36f; Yourcenar, WOE, (1984), p.19. See also n. 459 above. Although an intensive examination of the religious motif is beyond the scope of this thesis, its repeated inclusion in the text should be noted.
elle avait devant elle un vampire: ce pâle monstre avait bu tout le sang d’Angiola, sans pourtant réussir à s’envelopper de chair. Elle avait tout sacrifié à ce fantôme doué d’ubiquité, gratifié par l’appareil de prise de vues d’une immortalité factice qui n’excluait pas la mort.

She was facing a vampire: this pale monster had drunk Angiola’s blood yet had not succeeded in becoming flesh. She had sacrificed everything to this ubiquitous ghost whom the camera granted a factitious immortality, not immune, however, from death.542

Devoid of a sense of fulfilment in her earlier life, Angiola had created her alter-ego whose very existence consumed all Angiola’s energies and desires, even to the point of emulating death: “En mourant, elle tâcherait d’imiter une des morts d’Angiola Fidès [When she died, she would try to imitate one of Angiola’s deaths].”543 Like a ghost, however, this screen image was capable of existence or perception only in the shadows, its reflection devoid of reality or substance: “des désirs soulevés dans l’ombre vers cette femme vraiment fatale qui ne pouvait vivre au soleil [...] elle se cherchait vainement dans le reflet d’Angiola Fidès [desires aroused in the dark by this femme fatale who could not live in sunlight (...) she looked for herself in Angiola Fides’s reflection in vain].”544 As the young Marguerite de Crayencour had abandoned her birth identity to give rise to the new persona of Marguerite Yourcenar, Angiola’s story resonates with that of her creator: “Angiola n’était que le corps de cette ombre gigantesque projeté sur le mur blanc du monde [Angiola herself was only the body of this gigantic shadow projected on the white wall of the world].”545 Her muscles, bones and flesh were mere shadows of a void, projected larger than life onto the screen of this theatre, a metaphor for a world devoid of reality. Unable to deal with the present, Angiola seeks to recapture the past, her screen persona ‘real’ and unalterable providing a fixed point as a focus for her memorialisation and quest for identity as she attempts to pull the past into the present.

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542 Ibid.
544 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 241; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 91. The author’s use of ‘vraiment fatale’ adds a literal dimension to the phrase and emphasises the malevolent intent of the image: the blood-sucking vampire who destroyed life but could only exist in the darkened cavern of the theatre. Reality (vraiment) is therefore juxtaposed with the nebulous and illusory vampire to add ironic emphasis. The author also uses ‘vraiment fatale’ in L’Homme qui a aimé les Néréides, in OR, (1982), p.1180: “ces fées vraiment fatales sont belles” maintaining the paradox between their deadly nature and their beauty.
545 Ibid.
Yourcenar’s sense of void following Michel’s death is characterised textually by the suicidal drowning of the father of Angiola’s on-screen character, an event juxtaposed by the somewhat hollow existence of her actual father incarcerated in an asylum, and the empty life led by her sister, Rosalia. The reference to Angiola’s education in the detested Catholic boarding school in Florence, a metaphor for separation from the real world, is a repeated echo of the author’s early existence as we have seen above, and the haunting reference to her mother’s death-bed proposal. The darkness of the theatre exaggerates the images on the screen. Alessandro, having entered the theatre in order to escape both the ravages of the storm and events unfolding in the present, transmits his mental pre-occupations to the projected events. He awaits the anticipated gunshots intended to assassinate the Dictator only to realise that, a priori, the screened newsreel portrays not reality, but past events invading the present and “on ne tire pas les fantômes [one doesn’t shoot ghosts].” The metaphor of the newsreel is further evidence of the antiquity/modernity interconnection and Yourcenar’s ‘ubiquitous ghosts’ which remain immortal and continually provide the undercurrent to her corpus. The author’s insistence on reinserting the past into the present strengthens our conviction of Yourcenar’s imprisonment by unrelenting forces.

Alessandro’s deepening sensation of void and absence is further enhanced by the darkness which accentuates his clarity of memory, “le film de sa vie tournait à l’envers [the film of his life was running backwards].” The scene in the theatre, ironically named ‘Mondo’ though paradoxically remote from worldly reality, provides for Angiola and Alessandro a confusion of screened portrayals with reality, as the author creates the past in flashback to a rendition of former time, in film for one and newsreel for the other as they face their ghosts. Chiapparo defines this observation:

L’introduction du cinéma, avec sa prétention de véridicité, a contribué à la dégradation du concept de vrai. Il constitue une puissante illusion qui perturbe l’homme et fausse sa perception du monde […] l’effet de réel propre au cinéma empêche de voir, de distinguer et définir le monde vrai de la fiction, entraînant aliénation et confusion

The introduction of the cinema, with its pretention of reality, has contributed to the degradation of the concept of truth. It constitutes a powerful illusion which

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547 Ibid.
548 Chiapparo, p. 277.
perturbs mankind and falsifies his perception of the world [...] the effect of reality unique to the cinema prevents one from seeing, from distinguishing and defining the real world of fiction, resulting in alienation and confusion. Chiapparo’s observations are perceptive and serve to underline the author’s intentions to distinguish between the actual reality provided by the modern, living text and the perceived reality as portrayed in film and recalled in memories. The discerning reader should be troubled by Yourcenar’s assertions and may negotiate with difficulty the layers which constitute her textual reality.

As Angiola struggles to find her real identity, both earlier wandering through the neighbourhood of a previous life and now in the theatre, she gazes at her screen self, Angiola Fidès, who is portraying the on-screen character of Algenib, creating an infinite mirroring or mise-en-abyme, a metaphor for Yourcenar’s search for an identity by regaining the immeasurable parts which contribute to her whole. As we have seen, Yourcenar continues to reach back into the past through her text to recapture those elements which, for her, either evoke pleasure or pain. The theatre in this text provides the ideal leitmotif for the Pirandellian flashback alluded to by Shurr and Chiapparo, furnishing a “mosaïque narrative” in which the author offers glimpses of each of the fractured characters, who individually evade reality as they interact briefly throughout this one day in time, traversing Rome to personify the journey of the coin.

The author’s stated anathema towards the Fascist regime of the day must not be underestimated in this text, represented as it is by this fragmentation of reality and the attempt of political forces to mask reality by duping the populace as to their genuine political intent. The dichotomy of Mussolini as both a caring and protective human being, whilst also projecting the image of an all-powerful Caesar, heightens this duplicity. Yourcenar cynically contrasts the ignorance of the populace with their remarkable perspicacity in the theatre, as art mimics life with an on-screen assassination: “L’héroïne tuait son ennemi d’un coup de revolver: le sang qui coulait était de l’hémoglobine. Entre ce film et la vie, la seule différence, c’est que les spectateurs, ici,...

549 For reference to memory recall, see also A.S. Byatt, The Children's Book (London: Vintage Books, 2010). p. 299. “A family, and a human being inside a family, put together a picture of their past in voluntary and involuntary ways, carefully constructed, arbitrarily dictated.” The author suggests that these memories morph and change with age “and perhaps never at any of those points [represent] precisely anything that really happened. Odd things persist for inexplicable reasons […] There are things, also, that are memories as essential and structural as bones in fingers and toes.” These essential, though painful memories meaningful only to her, are those which, consciously or otherwise, inform the writing of Marguerite Yourcenar. On the subject of sets of loci evoking different memories over time, see Yates, p. 7 (discussed at n. 253 in the chapter entitled ‘Memory as Autobiography’ in this thesis).

550 Chiapparo, p. 278.
savaient qu’on les trompait [The heroine shot her enemy dead: the blood flowing was haemoglobin. The only difference between this movie and life was that here the public knew it was being deceived].

“Tout n’était que duperie [The whole thing was nothing but two-dimensional deception]” encapsulates Yourcenar’s perception of Fascism, whilst alluding to the theatricality of the regime, aspects of which will be expanded upon later in this chapter. This absence of reality is enhanced by the author’s addition of “mensongère, puisque insaisissable [false, since she was impalpable]” and her assertion that “[i]l n’y a pas de morts, mais des ombres d’acteurs.” Yet, the sense of life flickers with a vapid glow, “faiblement éclairée du dedans par le soleil secret du sang [faintly lit from the inside by the secret sun of blood].” The apposition of life and death, regularly suggested by ghost imagery, is reinforced by “l’épaule vivante d’une jeune femme, cachant en partie l’écran, était le seul rampart qui séparait Alessandro Sarte de tant de fantômes [the living shoulder of a young woman blocking part of the screen was the only protecting wall between Alessandro Sarte and all these ghosts].” The darkness of the theatre shrouds the living audience with anonymity: “L’épaule lavée de nuit [The shoulder bathed in night],” permitting Alessandro to supplant the absent Marcella with the attendant Angiola. Whilst the following phrase refers to Alessandro’s attentions towards Angiola, the reader might infer the author’s confessions of dalliances with numerous un-named women, as recorded by Savigneau, as she balances both her anger and guilt towards her mother: “Près de cette anonyme, il se vengeait d’une absente [With this anonymous woman, he was taking revenge on an absent one].”

Facilitated by a marine metaphor likening this unexpected but overwhelming wave of passion to the force of the sea, the author depicts the annihilating moment of climax, reflected by the screen:

552 Ibid.
553 Ibid.
554 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 245. This important phrase, omitted from the English publication, may be translated as “There are no dead people, just the shades of actors,” a sentiment which evokes concurrently both a presence and an absence.
556 Ibid.
557 Ibid.
558 Ibid.
La pirogue sombrait sur un Pacifique qui ressemblait la Méditerranée: les fugitifs mouraient ensemble. La grande vague de plaisir s’apaisa, retomba, laissant remonter à la surface les deux noyés de la chair

The pirogue sank on a Pacific that looked like the Mediterranean; the fugitives died together. The great pleasure wave was spent, rose again, bringing the two drowned lovers to the surface.\textsuperscript{559}

The scenario, which also implies the duplicity being carried out by the Fascist regime, and the certain fate of those who opposed it, is replete with sexual innuendo, and climaxes with Alessandro’s desire (to) “rejoindre Marcella dans l’orgasme de mourir [join Marcella in the culmination of death]”\textsuperscript{560} — the apposition of implications of the sexual act and resultant death providing patent reference to the absent Fernande. The drowning allusion is continued by the author, illustrating the recurrent overwhelming sensations wrought by her ghosts: “L’image des eaux calmées s’étala sur l’écran, bientôt noyée par une onde de nuit [The image of calmed waters spread over the screen being slowly swallowed by a wave of darkness].”\textsuperscript{561} There can be no doubt that Yourcenar’s moments of calm and liberation from her ghosts were merely transitory, and frequently submerged by the darkness she implies.

Alessandro’s observation that “elle faisait de son mieux pour ressembler à Angiola Fidès [she did her best to look like Angiola Fidès]\textsuperscript{562} echoes the words chosen by Michel de Crayencour for the souvenirs pieux to commemorate the life of his wife: “Elle a toujours essayé de faire de son mieux [She always tried to do her best].”\textsuperscript{563} Yourcenar’s choice of this phrase for Alessandro to describe Angiola should not be read as accidental, but as a patent reminder of Michel’s domination, even in death. The phrase is re-employed intertextually in Quoi? L’éternité, as Jeanne despairs over her husband, Egon’s attitude towards her. Fearing that he’s trying to crush their past, she muses that “elle a essayé de faire de son mieux.”\textsuperscript{564} The insertion of this emotive phrase and its reference to Jeanne not only links both Fernande and Michel to the ideal Jeanne, as discussed earlier, but it also provides further evidence of the author’s anguish concerning her

\textsuperscript{559} Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 246; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 96. The author portrays death resulting from sexual passion, a conclusion derived from her analysis of the circumstances of her birth. This situation, she determined to avoid in her own life by forming relationships within the safety of the homosexual community. Birth and its inherent risk of death were therefore averted.

\textsuperscript{560} Ibid. Again, the translation fails to convey the passion of the original text.

\textsuperscript{561} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{562} Ibid.


past, and her resultant obsessional insertion of the past into the present; the text in all its paradoxical hybridity.

References to Angiola’s heavy make-up and her insistence on re-applying her lipstick after her ‘sexual’ encounter in the theatre provide a metaphor for the masking of her persona, perhaps even her denial of reality, an oft-favoured theme of the author, echoing the actions of Lina Chiari above, who purchases lipstick to mask her appearance and its betrayal of her ill-health. Such obfuscation of reality was an ancient technique utilised for millennia in theatres to portray characters who were not as they seemed. Angiola not only fabricates her false persona on screen, achieving “sa gloire d’actrice de théâtre d’ombres [her shadow-theatre-actress fame],”\textsuperscript{565} she intends to perpetuate this mask in life by marrying money and title to provide her with a semblance of class and influence. This duplicity, intensified by the author’s repeated use of the verb singe [to ape or feign] will belie the reality of her hollow life, tainted by the absence of lasting love: “les amours de son existence véritable avortent l’un après l’autre comme son unique enfant [in real life, her loves are aborted one after the other, like her only child].”\textsuperscript{566}

As we have shown, the birth/death, presence/absence binaries are continually evoked by Yourcenar and are here reinforced by Angiola’s image following her abortion as “[p]âle encore de sa perte de sang [(s)til pale from loss of blood]\textsuperscript{567} — a scene which patently mirrors the lifeless image of Fernande, pale on her birthing- and death-bed following her accouchement\textsuperscript{568} — antiquity again evoked into the modern text. Moreover, this image is intensified by the repetition of singe, a verb which betrays the author’s masking of her own emotions by continually denying parental attachment.

Darkness, descending again outside the theatre, is intensified with the appearance of “une demi-douzaine de licteurs en chemises sombres [half a dozen lictors (…) dressed in dark shirts].”\textsuperscript{569} The presentiment of death is accentuated by “une impitoyable lumière blanche [qui] coule sans interruption d’une ampoule électrique, comme l’eau froide d’un robinet de morgue, [où] deux formes couchées sont étendues l’une près de l’autre [a pitiless white light flow(ing) uninterruptedly from an electric bulb like the cold water flowing from the faucet of the morgue,

\textsuperscript{566} Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 248; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p.97f. Whilst there is no clarification in the text as to whether Angiola’s abortion was spontaneous or planned, her sense of loss is apparent.
\textsuperscript{568} See photo on p. 163.
The mutilated body of a young boy, felled by one of Marcella’s stray bullets lies beside the body of the failed assassin, his youthful features already overcome by “la dure douceur du marbre [the hard smoothness of marble],” perpetuating the trope incorporating death, lifelessness and absence juxtaposed with presence and perpetuity, embodied in this allusion to ancient statuary, and symbolised so effectively by the image of the morgue with its attendant void of life, whilst inferring a resurrection through memory. Marcella, “une femme assommée [a woman beaten to death] personifies the brutality of death.

Ces deux victimes de dieux différents se font contre-poids dans la mort. Une robe noire, trempée de pluie, colle au corp de la meurtrière, donnant à cette morte l’apparence d’une noyée

These two victims of different gods are counter-balanced in death. A black dress soaked with rain clings to the body of the murderess, giving the corpse the appearance of drowning.

The maritime metaphor, utilised above to great effect, is continued here to reinforce the extent of Marcella’s fate. Overcome by her ideals and her passion, she has been drowned by her desire to extinguish the life of the Dictator. Ironically, ignorant of such intentions, the latter lives on but it is Marcella whose life has become an abyss, drained of its vital source. Marcella, the “Méduse morte [dead Medusa],” her eyes wide open as in life, but blind, is left (to) “[plonger] dans ce néant qui pour elle est tout l’avenir [contemplate the void which is now her whole future].” The irony of Yourcenar’s description of Marcella as ‘the dead Medusa’ is compelling. Her blindness in death sits in apposition with the Medusa’s blinding gaze in life, which will haunt Massimo: “ce regard de Marcella, je ne l’oublierai pas [Marcella’s look, I’ll never forget it].” Eric suffers an identical fate of emasculation after his execution of Sophie: “[le premier coup] m’empêchera

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571 Ibid. The author reinforces the oxymoron of both the lifelessness and perpetuity evoked by marble statuary. See also n. 447 and n. 466 above.
572 Ibid.
573 Ibid.
574 Ibid. Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, was pregnant when beheaded by Perseus, a mythological reference which enhances the birth/death dichotomy. So, also Howe and Harrer, A Handbook of Classical Mythology. p. 161: Medusa, once a beautiful maiden, was turned into a hideous monster by Athena for claiming to be the equal of the goddess in beauty. Her hair was changed to writhing serpents and her face became so horrible that all who looked upon her were turned to stone.
575 Ibid.
I shall never know (and it haunts me still) what expression Sophie would have had in death," an allusion which intensifies Eric’s earlier observation of Sophie’s hair which gave her the appearance of “une Méduse coiffée de serpents [Medusa, serpent-crowned].” As we have seen, Doré asserts that references to the Medusa are employed by the author when feminine sexuality comes into play and metaphoric castration of the male other is the outcome. This is particularly evident in Eric’s prosaic lamentation. Moreover, as we might expect from Yourcenar, her allusion here to the Medusa is multi-faceted, her blinding gaze also deftly recalling Fernande’s sightless expression on her death bed, and providing the link between antiquity and myth so often engaged by the author.

Doré reinforces her hypothesis by contending that the image of the Medusa is also transformed by the author from its mythological genesis into various animal guises which intensify the tenacious role of feminine sexuality and become an ‘image phobique.’ Starfish, octopus, snake, scorpion and crab are included in this bestiary which, according to Doré, masks feminine sexuality with a protective veil. The proliferation of these images throughout Yourcenar’s corpus provides evidence for this contention, and for our assertion of both the author’s torment by and apparent disdain for the feminine gender, as she either portrays female characters as humiliated, belittled, eliminated or simply relegated as a shade to the background (Sophie, Lina, Rosalia or the nameless wife of Ling in Comme Wang-Fô fut sauvé) or as detestable images of maternal rejection (Noémi, Sabina or la Mère Dida).

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La Mère Dida

Roses purchased for Angiola by Alessandro have seen the coin pass into the hands of la mère Dida, a hardened old flower seller whose “enfants morts pourrissaient au cimetière comme des feuilles de novembre [dead children rotted in the cemetery like autumn leaves].” Despite the darkness and cynicism surrounding her destiny, her faith has remained strong, reinforced by the evidence of God’s existence made manifest in the extraordinary but brief life of Jesus:

580. For Gorman’s support of Farrell and Farrell’s counter view on this hypothesis, see n.26 above.
Le petit bout de Jésus naissait au temps de Noël, faible et frais comme une primevère; à Pâques, déjà tout grandi, laissant pendre comme une fruit sa tête barbue couronnée d'épines, il expirait sur l’arbre de la Croix.

Little bud Jesus was born at Christmas, fresh and fragile as a primrose: at Easter time, already full grown, letting his bearded head crowned with thorns hang like fruit, he expired on the tree of the Cross.  

The remarkable scenario, laced with irony, appears to laud the unique achievement of Mary who “l’avait fait toute seule [made him all by herself],” a miraculous event which further reinforced for Dida the evidence of God’s existence. Whilst this adulation of Mary might appear to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek, such exaltation of the role of the mother is not atypical in Yourcenar’s œuvre. A pertinent example of such idealisation is found in Le Lait de la mort, as we have seen, where the young mother continues to breast-feed her infant son after her death, thereby giving the last of her life-force to provide him with the nutrition to survive. The haunting awareness of Fernande’s abrogation of this role resurfaces into that text nearly thirty years after her original penning of Denier du rêve.

We become aware of the author’s style subtly repositioning to openly reflect her political views of the Fascist government which “fait tuer le monde en temps de guerre [(has) people killed in times of war].” Dida’s reflections extend to the locations where her existing children are to be found, a world in which she, Mother Dida of Ponte Porzio, is the hub. Accentuating the above theme of maternal idealisation, Yourcenar enunciates Dida’s history of acting in loco parentis for her innumerable siblings following the untimely death of their mother, then later as the mother of her own tribe of “peut-être huit, ou neuf peut-être [eight, maybe nine]” children, some of whom also arrived in or left the world prematurely. These existed still for her as “de petits anges

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582 Ibid. ‘Le petit bout de Jésus is echoed by Marguerite Yourcenar in Souvenirs Pieux, when describing herself as a baby: “ce bout de chair rose pleurant dans un berceau bleu.” Yourcenar, SP, (1974), in EM, (1991), p. 707. Yourcenar’s choice of “tree” in lieu of “wood” allows the juxtaposition of life, as intended by the living tree, and the death implied by the crucifixion. The choice also permits reference to the author’s adoption of the anagrammatical ‘Yourcenar’ from her birth name of ‘Crayencour’, the capital Y claimed by the author to represent the outstretched arms of a tree. The proximal positioning of ‘tree’ and ‘Cross’ reminds the reader of the psychological burdens carried throughout life by the author.

583 Ibid.

584 Yourcenar, NO, (1963); Yourcenar, OT, (1992).


586 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 252; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 103. Given the number of children he fathered, we may surmise the author’s adoption of a cheeky play on words for her selection of Fruttuoso as the name of mother Dida’s ‘fruitful’ husband, frutto being Italian for fruit.
[little angels], present always in her reminiscences, though absent from life. This pattern of perfection replete with religious and mythological overtones is extended and amplified by allusions to her relationship with her plant ‘family’: “Pour des générations de créatures végétales, elle avait été la Bonne Mère et l’impitoyable Parque [To generations of plant creatures, she had been the Good Mother and ruthless Fate],” uniquely responsible for both the giving and taking of life — a contradiction in roles which reinforces the earlier noted oxymoron in the reference to the occupation of Marcella’s mother as both midwife and condemned abortionist, reflected intertextually in the character of Mme Loew in Le Coup de grâce:

[L]a mère Loew exerçait la […] profession de sage-femme […] Je n’ignorais pas qu[e Sophie] avait consulté la mère Loew à l’époque où elle s’était crue menacée d’une maladie ou d’une grossesse, à la suite de ce viol qui avait été son premier malheur Loew’s mother practiced the lucrative (…) profession of (…) midwife (…) I knew too that she had consulted Mother Loew at the time that she thought herself threatened with disease or with pregnancy after that rape, her first disaster.

Death overwhelms Mother Dida’s history insistently when:

à un passage à niveau, l’express se jeta comme un loup sur l’homme et l’attelage, écrasant leur bruit de sonnailles. On envoya le petit cheval à l’équarrisseur, et Fruttuoso alla dormer au cimetière sous une couronne en fil de laiton qui durait plus […] que de vraies fleurs

at a level train crossing, the express threw itself like a wolf on the man and harness, crushing their cattle-bell sound. The little horse was sent to the knacker, and Fruttuoso to the cemetery, where he slept under a wreath made of brass wire, which lasted longer (than) fresh flowers.

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587 Ibid.
588 Yourcenar, DR, (1971), in OR, (1982), p. 255; Yourcenar, CNH, (1984), p. 106. So, Morford and Lenardon, Classical Mythology, p. 84. The Three Fates, daughters of Zeus and Themis, were originally birth spirits, but came to be depicted as three old women responsible for the destiny of every individual. Clotho (Spinner) spins out the thread of life which carries with it the fate of each human being from birth. Lachesis (Apportioner) measures the thread; and Atropos (Inflexible) cuts it off and brings life to an end. See also Howe and Harrer, p. 171. They were looked upon as the goddesses of birth and death, since birth and death were the two defining moments of fate in life.
The birth/death nexus is enhanced when it is revealed that “son ainé avait été tué à Caporetto [et e]lle avait pris un homme pour les gros ouvrages; au bout de dix mois, elle fêtait un nouveau baptême [her eldest son was killed in Caporetto (and) she hired a man to do the heavy work; after ten months, they had another christening].” After being ejected from Mother Dida’s home by her sons on account of his laziness, this Luca soon found warmth and employment with another widow, the author continuing to underpin her anecdote with the shadow of death.

Dida’s life is insistently cursed by absence as, one by one, her children leave home, the void in her life emphasised by Dida’s having entered “son second veuvage [her second widowhood].” She attempts to ensure her son, Ilario’s, continued presence by her side, yet, she had been a user of men:

Elle n’avait jamais cessé d’exploiter ses hommes dans le plaisir et le travail; ils avaient été ses outils. Elle avait geint et mugi sur ses absents et ses morts, puis les avait oubliés comme une bête oublie ses compagnons d’étable disparus et la portée qu’on lui a prise

She had always exploited her men in pleasure and in work; they had been her tools. She had groaned and moaned for her departed and her dead, then forgot them the way animals forget vanished stable companions or their young ones taken from them.

Whilst this quote may be intended to reinforce Yourcenar’s repeated denials concerning any emotional attachment to her dead parents, their continual inclusion in her texts, enriched by metaphor, allusion and recurrent motifs which resonate with their presence, refutes her passionate assertions. Yourcenar was ambitious — an authorial trait reflected in Dida’s exploitation of the men in her life. Yourcenar, too, manipulated them as tools for her pleasure and to augment her professional reputation (witness her relationship with her sundry editors and male literary colleagues); the author subtly inserts another personal anecdote into her text.

Though Dida’s recurrent pilgrimage to Rome was no longer a necessity, she was comforted by familiarity with her clientele: “Elle savait qui achetait sa marchandise pour l’hôpital, ou pour le cimetière, ou pour les parents [She knew who bought flowers to take to the hospital or to the cemetery, or to relatives],” each demographic representing a transitional stage in the

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591 Ibid.
cycle of life. Yet, a combination of meanness and her obsession for control ensured her daily presence on “la marche de marbre à l’entrée du vieux palais Conti, entre le cinéma [...] et le café Impero [the marble steps of the entrance to the Conti Palace, between the movie theatre [...] and the Café Impero].” 595 This scene is replete with allusion for Yourcenar. As we have seen, the marble steps recall statuary, the lifelessness and antiquity of which enliven memories of Michel, whilst the theatre conveys memories of Barbe and the ghostly imagery of past invading present. Marble also implies the slab at the morgue, indicative of both Fernande’s absence and the death Dida so keenly fears:

son gendre Marinunzi la saignerait un de ces jours, ou Luca bien sûr, l’assom-merait un soir sur la route, ou même Ilario qu’on avait vu rôder avec une corde lui ferait son affaire [...] et Dida rêvait assassins comme les vieux arbres rêvent peut-être bûcherons

one of these days her son-in-law Marinunzi would cut her throat, or one night on the road Luca would do her in, or even Ilario, who had been seen prowling around with a rope, would strangle her (...) and Dida dreamed of murderers like an old tree dreaming of the woodcutter. 596

The old priest bemoans Dida’s miserliness, his remarks anticipating the translated title of her future text, Souvenirs pieux (Dear Departed): “Vous ne m’avez jamais lâché la pièce pour une messe à l’intention de vos bons morts [You’ve never let drop a coin for a mass for your dear departed].” 597

The birth/death continuum persists with Dida’s musings on taking shelter with her daughter, Attilia, “qui attendait son quatrième [who was expecting her fourth],” 598 and the revelation of Marcella’s assassination attempt: “On a tiré sur Lui [someone tried to shoot him],” 599 followed by an assumption of Marcella’s fate: “Bien sûr qu’elle est morte [She’s dead, of course].” 600 The quantity of Marcella’s blood spilt at the entrance to the sacred site which evinces her death to onlookers, again echoes the blood lost during confinement from Fernande’s sacred orifice, the mother martyring herself to give life to her child: “il y a du sang par terre à l’entrée de Saint-Jean-Martyr…Une mare de sang [There’s blood on the ground at the entrance to Santo

599 Ibid.
Giovanni Martire...a puddle of blood.” Yourcenar’s description is stark and emotive, and should not be interpreted innocently. Her use of “mare” suggests a more copious outpouring of blood than the translated ‘puddle’ and betrays the author’s heightened emotions relating to this event. The presence of blood and regular reference to the colours red and black form a repeated intertextual motif in Yourcenar’s corpus, as we have shown, inferring the stain left by her genesis which she finds impossible to erase from her psyche, the emphasis on black or darkness connoting the impact of memory and culpability.

The piazza, absent of its recent political followers, is now dark and empty with Dida seated among her bouquets — a scene reminiscent of a cemetery, populated only by the reliquiae of life. Channelling Yourcenar, her thoughts turn to those whose death has so affected her: the King, and more personally, her husband, Fruttuoso, who disappeared the same year, and now so latterly, this woman who has left such a bloody stain as evidence of her existence. She makes a sign of the cross, both for the deceased and for herself, fearing that “la Mort [qui] a passé par là [Death (who) had passed by there]” may be lingering in search of further victims.

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Clément Roux

The coin passes to an elderly man whom Dida has mistakenly taken for destitute in the darkness of the evening, his appearance masking actuality, yet his presence as another living soul she is relieved to see in this sombre arena of death. Vestiges of antiquity, scattered on paving stones throughout the site, recall Michel’s memory — his absence and penchant for gambling evoked by the allusion to “des gagnants ou des perdants qui ne reviendraient plus”:

faisait penser aux pions d’une partie terminée, abandonnés dans un désordre apparent qui cachait en réalité un ordre inéductable, oubliés sur place par des gagnants ou des perdants qui ne reviendraient plus

evoked a game that had ended, whose pawns in disarray hid an inescapable order; they seemed abandoned there by winners or losers who would never return.

The scene provides evidence of a once vibrant presence in this contemporary void, perpetually haunted by absent souls with differing fates, whose identities are obvious: ““[D]es brèches pâles,

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601 Ibid.
des corridors d’ombre ouvraient dans les points de vue célèbres des échappées sur un autre monde [(G)aps of light in shadowy passageways of celebrated sites offered glimpses of another world].”

The reference to ‘shadowy passageways’ and allusions to antiquity are undeniable links to Yourcenar’s past which she again recalls to the present, her memories returning like flashes of light allowing glimpses of her past which permit antiquity to invade the modern text.

Clément’s fears, as he looks down into Trajan’s Forum, encapsulate those of the author. The metaphorical grave of her parents, which regularly lies open to permit her scrutiny, appears as an old wound, resistant to healing, which threatens to draw her completely into its abyss. The character/author “regarde au cimetière une vieille tombe rouverte, avec pour seul sentiment la peur d’y tomber [peer(s) into an old grave reopened in the cemetery (and) fears to fall into it].”

The cats prowling through the arena recall for Clément “l’image de panthères se jouant dans l’arène sur des ossements humains [the image (...) of panthers playing with human bones in the arena],” reinforcing both the overtone of death throughout the text and the brittle remnants of the lives which continue to haunt Yourcenar. Clément’s recollection that these felines had been eradicated prior to the excavation of the site further amplifies the motifs of elimination and absence, the author’s use of ‘massacre’ strengthening the emotive overtones.

Further evidence for this juxtaposition between life and death, exemplified by reference to the animal world, is found later in the text:

C’est l’heure où dans les étables attenantes aux abattoirs, les bêtes qui demain iront finir dans les assiettes et dans les égouts de Rome [...] appuient sur le cou de leur compagnon de chaîne leur mufle ensommeillé et doux

It’s that time of night when, in stables contiguous to slaughterhouses, animals who tomorrow will wind up on dinner plates and in the sewers lean their soft sleepy muzzles on the necks of their fettered companions.

“[Q]uand la femme du gouverneur de Rome était morte tragiquement quelques semaines plus tard [when the wife of the governor of Rome died tragically a few weeks later],” her death

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605 Ibid.
607 As we have seen, Yourcenar felt strongly about cruelty to animals, a passion which was regularly invoked in her texts to denounce the unjustified slaughter of any animals, but especially elephants for their ivory, horses for glue and cows to feed mankind; not surprisingly, Yourcenar became a vegetarian. That this passion was a natural extension of her anathema towards death is entirely possible. See also n. 445 above.
was seen as reparation for the slaughter of “[c]es matous victims de l’hygiène édilitaire [qui] l’intéressent tout autant qu’un tas de Césars morts [(t)hese furry victims of municipal hygiene (which) were as interesting to him as a stack of dead Caesars].”

Yourcenar’s passion for animal preservation and their relative importance vis-à-vis mankind are eloquently personified in the character of Clément Roux. The juxtaposition of the reference to the dead Caesars demands a supposition that she shared this passion with Michel. Moreover, the preference for both Yourcenar and her father to fantasise about the past rather than to countenance present realities is undeniable.

The shadow of death pervading the darkened scene as Clément struggles to overcome the chest pain wrought by angina provides a metaphor for Yourcenar’s oppression by her losses — that of Michel being quite recent at the time of her writing the original text — which had “atteint la limite où elle devient peu à peu souffrance [reached the point where it had gradually turned into pain].”

The pain is underlined by Yourcenar’s choice of ‘avorter’ to describe the deflection of the crisis for Clément; this application of the verb utilised more commonly to describe the termination of a pregnancy should not be seen as ill-conceived by the author to evince her repeated apposition of the birth/death and presence/absence dichotomies.

Massimo, Marcella’s lover, ponders over her death: “Il y a un siècle qu’elle est morte, et il y a cinq siècles que Carlo…Morts. Evanouis [She died a hundred years ago, Carlo, five hundred. Dead. Gone].” The repetition of death is instructive in its insistence. Yet, for Massimo, Clément, the elderly and apparently unwell stranger he’s encountered, is a living beacon in this dark world which has, so recently for him, become a void, as it has for Clément with its “rues noires. Désertes [dark streets. Deserted].”

Yourcenar’s sense of desertion by those who had given her life is embodied in this metaphorical description of darkened, empty streets and the void created for Massimo by Marcella’s death. Yourcenar confesses through Massimo of beginning to feel “accoutumé à leur mort [accustomed to their death],” whilst regretting being “celui qui ne meurt pas […] L’ange des dernières heures [the one who doesn’t die (…) The angel of the last hours].” The author’s mask of acceptance of the past is immediately countered by the

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610 Ibid.
611 Ibid. Yourcenar’s employment of the present tense indicates the intensity of her unadmitted anguish as a perpetuating force, as suggested by van Woerkum at n. 449, n. 489, and n. 493 above.
615 Ibid.
reality of her patent and enduring guilt of being the survivor, especially of Fernande’s death, her bitter tone denying any catharsis.

Clément muses on his skills of portraiture, and the difficulties of that genre, concluding that his own face is a “paysage de ruines très humaines [landscape of very human ruins],” an allusion which provides not only a meeting between the present and the past, but a further reminder of Michel’s fascination with antiquity which continues to recall the past to the present. The seemingly transparent phrase “human ruins” is informative and, as we have frequently seen in Yourcenar’s corpus, must be read on several levels: it carries the added and pervading implication of her parents’ absences, and reinforces the unacknowledged guilt she carries from her role in Fernande’s death. As we have argued, Yourcenar sits between the past and the actuality of the text.

Massimo brings them brusquely to the proximate past: “Une femme a été tuée ce soir [A woman was killed tonight],” his passionate outburst creating a clear disjunction between their presence and her absence and, it might be said, conveying his repressed anguish and remorse at not having accompanied her in this suicidal foray. When it is revealed that the intended target survived without injury, Clément, predicting this luck to be short-lived, recounts the death of one who “a crevé comme un César [croaked like a Caesar],” inferring the premature death implicit in this role, and intensifying allusions to both Michel and Fernande noted above.

The conversation is heavily impregnated by the aura of death to intensify the author’s heightened passion: “Un ami mort [A dead friend];” “l’efficacité de tyrannicide [the effectiveness of political assassination];” “elle a dû me mépriser au moment de mourir [she must have despised me as she died];” “Clément Roux tombé dans la rue victime d’une crise cardiaque [Clement Roux found dead on the street of a heart attack];” “C’est mon frère qui s’est fait tuer à Craonne [My brother’s the one who got himself killed at Craonne].”

Memories recalled by Clément echo Alessandro’s and Angiola’s Pirandellian flashbacks in the theatre. His recollection of his mother’s wish for him to become a priest is an undeniable reference to Fernande’s deathbed suggestion that, should she wish, Marguerite’s desire to enter

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616 Ibid.
620 Ibid.
621 Ibid.
623 Ibid.
a convent should be facilitated. Like the mirrors into which Vanna Stevo gazes to determine her future upon learning news that her exiled husband has recanted, and into which Angiola looks whilst seeking her former self, Yourcenar’s allusion to Fernande’s advice creates a mise-en-abyme effect as the author alludes to a moment in her past where her mother is potentially doing the same.

Punctuating these memories is Clément’s exaltation of his wife: “Ma femme, une excellente femme, la meilleure des femmes...Bonne ménagère [...] le corps le plus blanc qu’on puisse imaginer: comme du lait [My wife, an excellent woman, the best of wives ... Good housekeeper (...) the whitest body imaginable; like milk].” This allusion recalls both the purity and the lifeless aspect of marble statuary discussed above, as Clément sets his wife on a metaphoric pedestal, and the intertextual idealisation of the mother in Le Lait de la mort.

Numerous references to death reinforce absence, both in this space and in the lives of the two men. Massimo mourns his singular presence in an otherwise void, an echo of the author’s lament on life in the absence of both parents: “Il n’y a finalement plus que moi qui sois son témoin [In the long run, I’m the only one left as witness],” the juxtaposition of absence and presence created by his musing on the alternative: “S’il avait vécu [Had he lived],” whilst unconsciously reciting “Tzarstvo tebe nebesnoe [...] la prière des morts en slavon d’église [Tzarstvo tebe nebesnoe (...) the prayer for the dead in ecclesiastic Old Slavonic].” Marble gods adorning the basin of a fountain in a small piazza intensify the milieu of lifelessness and strengthen the apposition of perfection. The purifying effect of the water acts as a metaphor for both the rituals of St John the Baptist, outside whose chapel pooled the bloody seepings of the dead Marcella, and the cleansing of a mother following parturition.

The water enlivens memories for Massimo of his mother and their escape by river from their native country, idealising her act which ensured his continued existence. Clément continues his reveries which ultimately turn to the polarisation of death and life: “Le Colisée [...] la grosse croûte de pierre pleine au-dedans de gladiateurs [the Coliseum (...) a thick stone crust stuffed with

624 Whilst many girls were educated at that time in convents, we must consider whether Fernande’s proposal was not tinged with a regret that, had she taken up the veil, her life would not have been so tragically curtailed as a result of this pregnancy.
626 See also n. 584 above. By repetitive but unspecified allusion to Fernande and the adoption of this perfection motif, the author highlights her melancholy.
628 Ibid.
629 Ibid.
630 The relationship between the loss of blood at both birth and death has already been made at n. 601.
gladiators inside] is compared with “les jets d’eau qui sont des obélisques vivants [the water spouts like living obelisks];” “La vie [...] ça ne commence peut-être que le lendemain de la Résurrection [Life, [...] maybe life starts only after the Resurrection].” Numerous references to bodies continue to intensify the theme of death, which is underlined by repeated allusion to death itself. The darkness of the doors and windows of the adjacent hotel appear portentous to Clément, again in the throes of an angina attack, the pain of which threatens to “l’emporte[r] [carry him off].” Before leaving the piazza by taxi and the security and reassurance of his hotel, Clement tosses a coin into the fountain.

References to darkness which begin the final chapter shroud the novel with an all-pervading gloom which suggests, not merely the self-explanatory effects of the earth’s continual rotation, but the psyche of the author at that time: “[u]ne inondation de nuit couvrait la moitié du monde [(h)alf the world was inundated with darkness].” Repetition underlines this sombre mood as each character is depicted in turn asleep in their unique setting, their repose allowing them temporary release from their despondency as “Rome, anesthésiée par la nuit, semblait sise au bord du Lethe [(a)nesthetised by the dark, Rome seemed to be situated on the banks of the river Lethe].” Important exceptions to this almost universal slumber are the wife and daughter of Giulio Lovisi: “deux femmes [qui] se tiennent dans l’obscurité [(m)other and daughter (who) talk in the dark],” an intensely intimate moment forever withheld from the author. Yourcenar, her spirit deeply overwhelmed by her ghosts, habitually identified by references to antiquity, is personified by this scene replete with death and darkness. Like Rosalia, the candle-seller haunted by her ghosts, who wishes for sleep to release her from her cares, denial appears to be the author’s sole catharsis. Only death held that power for her fragile character.

Following pages of allusions to night and its associated darkness, the author returns more specifically to reference death, forming an intense liaison between sleep and death, the rest of
the present and the absent respectively. “Lina Chiari couchait avec son cancer [Lina Chiari was in bed with her cancer]”\textsuperscript{638} and “Les morts dormaient [The dead were also asleep]”\textsuperscript{639} provide two such examples of the author’s intense preoccupations.

Yourcenar, mired in the incessant darkness created by her emotions, imagines in the museums of Rome marble statuary created by “des artisans morts depuis des millénaires [artisans, dead for thousands of years]”\textsuperscript{640} who “ont façonné leur surface à l’image de créatures d’un autre règne [fashioned their surface in the image of creatures from another realm].”\textsuperscript{641} The author again recalls antiquity into the modern text, employing the mise-en-abyme effect noted above as she imagines sculptures created thousands of years earlier which in turn represent those of a more distant antiquity, an effect which clearly identifies the source of her pain and intensifies its deeply rooted structure. The following quote provides significant evidence for this hypothesis: “Les ruines des monuments antiques font corps avec la nuit, fragments privilégiés du passé, à l’abri derrière leur grille [The ruins of ancient monuments are an integral part of the night, privileged fragments of the past safe behind their gate].”\textsuperscript{642}

The contiguity between sleep and death, as personified by Rosalia, is repositioned to reflect the continuum between death and new life, these states providing a continual and haunting nexus for Yourcenar:

\begin{quote}
de haut en bas des maisons noires, les dormeurs s’étagent comme des morts aux flancs de catacombs; les époux dorment, portant dans leurs corps moites et chauds les vivants de l’avenir
from the top to the bottom of each dark house, sleepers are stacked like the dead along the sides of catacombs; spouses sleep bearing in their damp and warm bodies the living beings of the future.\textsuperscript{643}
\end{quote}

Sleeping bodies— reflections of the dead — carry within their flesh seeds for potential fecundity, the circular pattern of life with its myriad associations — a recurrent motif in the Yourcenarian récit — represented here by the circulation between the characters of the round coin.

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\textsuperscript{638} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{641} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{642} Ibid.
Marinunzi

The coin tossed by Clément into the waters of the Piazza di Trevi is collected by a Water Works labourer, Oreste Marinunzi, the maligned son-in-law of mother Dida, sent to repair “une onde noire [qui] coulait au pied de Neptune de pierre” [a black flood (which) overran the foot of the stone Neptune].”\(^{644}\) References to lifelessness and antiquity suggested by Neptune’s statue, together with recurrent allusion to inundation by the “onde noire” of her memories, are pointedly juxtaposed by Yourcenar with the revelation of the impending arrival of Marinunzi’s fourth child. With the metaphoric ten lira coin, he could “s’acheter une cravate pour le baptême, ou une ou deux bouteilles d’Asti pour boire en famille à la santé de l’accouchée [buy himself (…) a tie for the christening, or one or two bottles of Asti for the family to drink the health of the mother of the newborn].”\(^{645}\)

Echoes of Fernande’s failing health following her confinement are suggested by Marinunzi’s fleeting disquiet which betrays an anxiety inherent in any birth where a living child is not guaranteed and the spectre of death is a feared possibility: “A supposer toutefois que tout allât bien: Oreste Marinunzi proféra en esprit quelque chose qui ressemblait à une prière aux divinités de l’enfancement [That is, if everything went well:  Oreste Marinunzi mentally proffered something like a prayer to the divinities of pregnancy].”\(^{646}\) His avowal: “A dire vrai, ni Attilia ni lui n’avaient besoin de ce quatrième [To tell the truth, neither Attilia nor he needed this fourth one]”\(^{647}\) reflects both Yourcenar’s guilt arising from her percipience of this abundance which Fernande would never experience, and the author’s determination of unwanted fertility attached to this guilt. That Oreste’s fertility is portrayed by Yourcenar as punishment for his religious scruples should not be overlooked, and provides further evidence to support our theory on Yourcenar’s relationship decisions.

Yet, the preparations for birth, excluded to men, are considered with optimism, the decision to enjoy a bottle of wine in a nearby bar infusing Marinunzi with renewed confidence, albeit cushioned by superstition:

\(^{644}\) Ibid. Yourcenar’s choice of name is undoubtedly based on Greek myth. Orestes was the brother of Electra, portrayed in the *Electra*, versions written by both Euripides and Sophocles, and the *Oresteia* by Stesichorus, in which the siblings seek to avenge the death of their father, Agamemnon, at the hands of their mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.


\(^{646}\) Ibid.

\(^{647}\) Ibid.
Les couches d’Attilia seraient faciles, parce que c’était la pleine lune. Lui, Oreste, ne donnait pas dans ces superstitions de femme, mais c’était plaisant de s’en souvenir à ces moments-là.

Attilia would have an easy time of it, because there was a full moon. He himself did not believe in these feminine superstitions, but at times like this it was reassuring to think of them.  648

Ruminations on childbirth and procreating for the good of the nation are suddenly clouded by references to death: “l’horreur des petits oiseaux massacres à la carabine par les adroits chasseurs [the horror of little birds slaughtered by the rifles of skilful hunters];”  649 “la Dida ne laisserait seulement pas à Attilia de quoi s’acheter du deuil [Dida would probably not leave Attilia enough even to buy mourning clothes with].”  650 The enormity of animal death underlines that of human murder, a nexus apparent in the original text, but lost in the translation:

parce qu’un jour de boisson, il lui était arrivé de dire qu’il serait agréable de couper le cou à la belle-mère, on le traitait d’assassin, lui, Oreste Marinunzi qui était trop doux pour saigner un veau.  [Quand-même] il s’imagina étranglant la vieille because one day, when he had too much to drink, he happened to mention that it would be nice to cut his mother-in-law’s throat, they treated him now as an assassin, him, Oreste Marinunzi, who wouldn’t hurt a fly. (Just the same) he pictured strangling the old woman.  651

The juxtaposition of life and death, presence and absence highlighted by Oreste’s ruminations on Attilia’s childbirth experience, enliven for Yourcenar memories of Fernande’s death and its nexus with the author’s delivery, her mother having been “éliminé[e] de l’univers par un acte de volonté divine [eliminated from the universe by an act of divine will].”  652 Yourcenar’s cynical political commentary and her odium towards the Fascist regime which provide the framework for this text replete with her personal spectres, are reiterated as the novel draws to a close. Mussolini is depicted by the author as a figure of some ridicule, a sentiment voiced by Maria Rosa Chiapparo who opines that Yourcenar assimilates Fascism with a state of

650 Ibid.
mystification where the population, because of a general state of inebriation, is prevented from seeing the reality of the regime. Whilst Chiapparo’s conviction of Yourcenar’s political motif is endorsed both by Shurr, and by Howard’s standpoint expressed earlier in this chapter, Colvin disavows these sentiments claiming that, as we have already seen, Yourcenar was not particularly attracted by political fervor, despite the author’s claims to anti-Fascism, and suggesting that, in fact, she was “merely ‘seduced’ by fascism’s theatricality” which she reproduced in the *commedia dell’arte* stock characters of *Le Denier du rêve*. Yourcenar later added that she felt “indignation’ towards Mussolini and his followers [and] refers to fascism elsewhere as a ‘spectacle’ that left its mark on her”. Colvin thus concludes that these remarks are “fundamentally aesthetic, though negative […], rather than ethical or moral judgments […] indicating that for Yourcenar Fascism is above all an affront to taste and simply bad acting.”

There is, however, room for both views. Yourcenar first witnessed the developing Fascist state and the march on Rome whilst visiting with her father in the 1920s and could conceivably have been attracted by the theatricality together with the conservative, yet revolutionary aspects of Fascism which extolled manly virtues in the persona of Il Duce — a leader who, for the author, was emblematic of Michel’s charisma and male authority, and who later evoked his memory when she returned to Rome following her father’s death. Yet, the more exclusive aspects of the political culture which were inherent in riots, manic control and sadism no doubt eventually appalled the sensitive and highly principled writer who observed first-hand the intoxication by the populace when faced with mass political performances. Yourcenar’s stated anti-Fascist views, therefore, appear to pivot not on political but rather on aesthetic criticism, her disappointment in the naivety and artless passion of the people resulting in a conflation of her critical views.

This conflation is personified by the inebriated Oreste who embodies public intoxication, but also identifies himself – the head of his household – with the head of state, assuming the mask of a man who lives his power and earns the respect of the people, but who is in reality a man without substance. Continued wine consumption so enriched his political convictions that:

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653 Chiapparo, p. 283.
654 Shurr, at p. 45, perceived Yourcenar’s intention as an “attempt to draw attention to the scourge of Europe, to the atmosphere of intellectual and political cowardice and compromise, to the dangerous and nihilistic effects of political systems built on foundations of demagoguery and violent passion rather than on reason”. At p. 96, she alludes to *Le Denier du rêve* as a “political allegory [conceived] to dramatise the dangers of a totalitarian regime”.
655 Colvin, p. 86. See also n. 279.
657 Ibid.
he felt obliged to rise and deliver a great speech like the one of the day before, and Oreste Marinunzi, having doubled salaries, lowered the cost of living, won a war, and earned his place in the sun forever, sat down again, happy as a king, or rather, a dictator.658

Ultimately, in his own drunken state, Marinunzi misses the chair in his attempt to sit, and rolls on the ground, “heureux comme un mort [happy as a dead man].”659

_Denier du rêve_ is, as we have seen, a text derived from a sallow perspective, replete with allusions to death, darkness and unresolved personal anxiety. Yourcenar confesses in the preface of the 1959 edition her reasons for rewriting _Denier du rêve:_

> Le sentiment que l’aventure humaine est plus tragique encore, s’il se peut, que nous ne le soupçonnions déjà il y a vingt-cinq ans, mais aussi plus complexe, plus riche, plus simple parfois, et surtout plus étrange que je n’avais déjà tenté de la dépeindre il y a un quart de siècle, a sans doute été ma plus forte raison pour refaire ce livre

The feeling that the human story is even more tragic, if that’s possible, than we suspected a quarter of a century ago, but also more complicated, richer, sometimes simpler, and especially stranger than I had tried to depict it then — this was perhaps my strongest reason for rewriting the book.660

Yet, as we have come to suspect, this rational statement, designed to direct the reader to seek no further for literary motivation, masks the underlying authorial pain apparent in the text,661 exemplified by the motifs of death and suffering prevalent in _Denier du rêve_. Her elimination of female characters (Lina, Rosalia and Marcella), echoed intertextually in _Le Coup de grâce_ (Sophie) and _L’Œuvre au noir_ (Hilzonda) and in _Alexis ou le traité du vain combat, Comme_
"Wang-Fô fut sauvé and Mémoires d’Hadrien" by the subsuming of Monique, Ling’s nameless wife and Sabina respectively to the subtext, reveals a misogynistic element which is traceable to abandonment by her mother — this abiding wound, nourished by anger, guilt and longing, which enforces mirrored psychological suffering and degradation in her characters. Like a sadistic mother with a voodoo doll, she pierces the characters she has created with metaphoric pins to endure the pain and suffering she continues to experience.

As we have seen, the novel terminates with the word which underlines its theme: mort. The repetitive juxtaposition of birth and death throughout Denier du rêve has been outlined above and with the aid of a detailed source analysis, provides unequivocal support for an absence/presence binary, suggested by the author’s repressed desire to distance herself from her albeit involuntary involvement in her mother’s death, an overwhelming culpability which would imprison her thoughts, probe her memories, challenge her actions and life choices, and continually inform her writing.

Though Marguerite Yourcenar repeatedly denied that she was affected by the early death of her mother, and later by that of her father, their absence from her life appears to have created an unconscious void which could only be remedied by writing, and rewriting — a seemingly unadmitted quest for catharsis and ultimate ataraxia. Camiel van Woerkum concludes that evidence for this hypothesis exists in the author’s autobiographical trilogy, Le Labyrinthe du Monde, yet it should be emphasised that such underlying psychoanalytical intention is evident — though determinedly unrecognised by the author — from her early writing.

In the novel Yourcenar considers to be her first real work, the author has Alexis, imprisoned in his marriage, confess: “J’ai lu souvent que les paroles trahissent la pensée, mais il me semble que les paroles écrites la trahissent encore advantage [I have often read that words falsify thought, but it seems to me that written words falsify it even more].” Her repeated recalling of antiquity into the modern text betrays the influence of the author’s father on her literary composition, while oxymorons proliferate to allow the co-existence of past and present. Her assertion to Matthieu Galey that “on aime le passé parce que c’est le présent tel qu’il a

662 Yourcenar, A, (1929), in OR, (1982), p. 9; Yourcenar, A, (1993), p. 19. Kaiser’s translation of the verb ‘trahir’ as ‘falsify’ appears loose in this context, despite or perhaps because of his collaboration with the author, and suggests inaccuracy, or even intentional mendacity on the part of Yourcenar. The more conventional translation would be ‘to betray or reveal’, a sense which is more appropriate in this récit as Alexis begins his contrite confession to Monique. Yet, given Yourcenar’s repeated denial of emotional indebtedness or guilt, her words, both written and spoken, patently falsify her subconscious thought. See p. 24 of the previous chapter for Blot’s assertion of Yourcenar’s absence from the content of her texts.
survécu dans la mémoire humaine "one loves the past, because the past is present insofar as it survives in human memory)" attests to a past which denies the author comfort and remains hauntingly present in her psyche as memories are recalled. The spectres of Fernande and Michel, and the sexual act which initiated Marguerite’s creation, are reflected in characters defined by their alienation and by the dark mood of this text, their absence from her life providing an insistent and paradoxical presence in her writing.

Conclusion

Mademoiselle de Crayencour venait, à quatre-vingt-quatre ans, de clore la vie d’un singulier personnage de roman, qui allait lui survivre, pour long-temps peut-être:
Marguerite Yourcenar

Mademoiselle de Crayencour, at eighty-four years of age, had just brought to a close the life of a singular fictional character, one who was going to survive her, by a long time perhaps: Marguerite Yourcenar.\textsuperscript{664}

So wrote Savigneau on the death of this erudite and passionate writer whose most apparent, yet most elusive character created during nearly seven decades of penmanship was her own — a multi-faceted and complex enigma. We will never know the answers to the questions she has spawned, though much ink has been spent on speculation as to her reasons for seeking her alter-ego, formulated with the encouragement of her father, Michel. Together, father and daughter were to create this new identity which would shape her corpus and allow for suspicion to flourish as to her motives for this re-birth, and to the haunting implications of the relationship with her father.

Many regard the death of her mother, and the spectre of this absent woman so evident in the author’s corpus, as the real “motor of Yourcenar’s fiction”. The portrait of the ideal mother, absent from her own life, is variously portrayed in Yourcenarian texts and juxtaposed dramatically by her pale counterparts who often play pallid and shadowy roles to their male protagonist, the author confessing in the carnet de notes which accompanied Mémoires d’Hadrien that women’s lives were too limiting and secret to consider them as a central figure. This misogynist confession, the potential for which was recognised in Henri Hell’s review following the publication of Le Coup de grâce, is widely evident in Yourcenar’s œuvre — hardly surprising for a writer bereft of maternal influence, and guided both personally and in literary choices by her father.

Michel’s influence, as we have seen, is apparent from the outset of her corpus. Her earlier poetry, written as an adolescent, is heavily based on the myth to which she was introduced by her father. In later years, Yourcenar would translate the entire corpus of the Greek poet, Constantine Cavafy, in collaboration with his friend, Constantine Dimaras — an endeavour which, given Michel’s passion for antiquity and Greek influence, must have provided Yourcenar with an enlivened affinity with her father. Undeniably, the process of compiling the erudite opus of

Mémoires d’Hadrien intensified her recall of Michel into proximate modernity, her identification of Michel with Hadrian being widely accepted. Discovery by father and daughter of a statue of the emperor whilst together in wartime London, and later of the Villa Adriana near Rome would forever entwine the two most important males in the author’s memory.

Memory, therefore, became a powerful catalyst for Yourcenar in the creation of her literary craft. Although aspects of Yourcenar’s torment and her obvious desire for a suspension of her anguish in order to attain a state of ataraxia are evident throughout her corpus, it is our contention that Denier du rêve provides succinct and verifiable confirmation for our hypothesis that this amœnus locus was unattained. Days spent together with her father in Rome provided the setting for Denier du rêve, the Pirandellian style of which, simulating cinematographic flashbacks, suggests her desire to revive from the past both her mother, Fernande, and her father, Michel. Aspects of their lives enrich the pages of the text: the white pillow-clad bed of Giulio’s invalid grand-daughter, Mimi, and Rosalia’s bed which becomes her deathly pyre recall the death-bed of Fernande, as does the juxtaposition of Attilia’s accouchement bed with the revelation of Marcella’s body on the mortuary slab. Michel’s lamentable marital experiences are reflected in the characters of both Giulio and Paolo, whilst Don Ruggero’s dreams of “statues of flesh” are a patent allusion to Michel’s fascination with antiquity, intensified by Yourcenar’s desire to animate his presence. Furthermore, the absences of both the author’s parents are encapsulated in the single and troubled character of Angiola, whose repeated absences punctuate this opus. Metaphors, oxymorons, allusion and the recurrent motifs which suggest the nexus between birth and death, presence and absence, enrich the text and refute the author’s frequent and passionate assertions that loss and longing had no place in her world.

So powerful were the spectres of both her father and mother in Yourcenar’s private life that she chose homosexual partners of both sexes in order not to replicate the events which gave rise to the tragic circumstances of her birth. The author’s repulsion by obvious fecundity in others is well documented, and evinced by her lauding of Sabina’s decision not to provide Hadrian with children, together with the preponderance of inter-textual homosexual and bi-sexual motifs. Furthermore, it appears evident that Yourcenar determined that the creation with her father of her literary persona should never be overshadowed by later liaisons, the potential outcome of which might be pregnancy. Therefore, Yourcenar chose not to fill the void left by Michel’s death with a heterosexual partner and, after a series of unsatisfactory affairs, she relocated in 1939 to
the United States where she lived with her partner, Grace Frick, until the latter’s death in 1979. Michel’s unique memory thus remained inviolate.

Despite Yourcenar’s insistence that neither her mother’s nor her father’s death had encroached upon her life or her literary production, death and darkness haunt the pages of her œuvre and reproductions of these personal phantoms are ubiquitous in diverse characters and themes. Her nettled denials of any personal echoes in her narrative or torment engendered by parental absence are encapsulated in the words of Peter Brown who, reflecting on the confessions of Augustine, noted that “as with so many clever people, such simple roots were all the stronger for being largely unconscious.” Yourcenar’s freedom is patently destabilised by her memories of Michel and Fernande who create for her the powerful antithesis of absence and presence which resonates through her corpus, their absence enlivened by her memories which allow them to exist in the present, as she sits as the intermediary in the inter-textual divide.

Just as the locus of the beach at Scheveningen provided Yourcenar with the conflicting memories of pleasure and pain, reflected in both the flutterings of Jeanne’s skirt and scarf, alluded to as birds’ wings in Denier du rêve, and in the same text juxtaposed with the haunting memory of the octopus placed into Lina’s hand, which becomes a metaphor for the cancer creeping through her body, the nexus between birth and death is recalled by Marcella Ardeati’s mother — the midwife who also procured abortions.

Whilst Yourcenar’s texts are undeniably self-reflexive, the difficulty of determining her writing as autobiographical, or even biographical, has been fully investigated in this thesis. Her attempts to revive the past by writing it down, yet to escape the past by reanimating it into the present in fictional guise, create the artistic illusion which has stimulated modern enquiry and ensure that our suspicions of her literary intent remain undiminished.

Although scholars should heed the cautionary words of Eakin, who asserts that: “[w]e never really know why writers write what they write, and this very unknowability can make any enquiry into an author’s intentions seem fruitless if not impertinent”, we remain inexhaustibly enticed by the appeal of Yourcenar’s literary sorcery. Whilst we can never determine Yourcenar’s intent with authority, by her insistent inclusion of the spectres of not only Fernande, but equally patently of Michel, manifest in the absences and presences which suffuse her corpus, Yourcenar assured that her apparent, yet insistently denied trajectory towards an amœnus locus remained perpetually elusive. The ataraxia she sought — that state of tranquillity, free from emotional

665 Brown, p. 175.
disturbance or torment wrought by memory and loss — became attainable only by her death which, just as in *Denier du rêve*, would have the last word.

[Marguerite Yourcenar’s signature, 1987]
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