

MARGUERITE YOURCENAR'S PREFACES: GENESIS AS SELF-EFFACEMENT

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Depuis qu'il existe des préfaces, vous en avez vu faire de toutes les manières: il y a celles qui ne servent à rien parce qu'elles ne disent rien; celles qui ne servent à rien parce qu'elles disent tout; et celles qui servent à tout parce qu'elles disent autre chose.

Jean-Jacques Gautier

In a letter to Zola expressing his immense admiration for *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871), Flaubert includes this reservation: "I find fault only with the preface. In my opinion, it spoils your book, which is so impartial and so lofty. *You give away your secret*: that is carrying candor too far; and you express your opinion, which in my poetics a novelist hasn't the right to do."¹ In contrast, Gide implies in a short mock-preface that the author conceals no secret: "Before explaining my book to others, I have to wait for others to explain it to me . . . for if we know what we meant to say, we don't know if we only said that."² These two condemnations of the authorial preface are based on two opposing views of its usefulness: it explains either too much or too little. But both writers indicate clearly that for them the preface is foreign to literature and even dangerous, in that the author's explanation threatens the "loftiness" of the novel or limits the richness of its meaning.

Since Antiquity authors' prefaces have also been criticized for being condescending to the reader, self-serving for the author, in

short, poor rhetorical practice. This practice flourishes, however, in periods of intense debate about literary genres, forms and subjects, as well as about the truth, utility or morality of literature.

Contemporary novelists do not generally preface their own works. They may have heeded the lesson of their elders or they may have found other media through which to express their opinions. Most likely, the present discredit of the preface reflects the transformation of the novel itself, of its theory, and of the relation between the two.³ Meanwhile, since 1959 Marguerite Yourcenar, indifferent to the passage of literary fashions, goes on adding prefaces and postfaces to her novels and plays as new editions of these works are published. This is one reason why her prefaces deserve attention.

Although there are only four prefaces that she actually calls by that name—those to *Alexis*, *Coup de Grâce*, *Fires*, and *A Coin In Nine Hands*—her other “paratextes”⁴ (“Postfaces,” “Postscriptum,” “Avant-Propos,” “Notes” or “Examens”), bearing sometimes elaborate titles such as “Aspects of a Legend and History of a Play,” have many characteristics in common with the prefaces. For example, the “Author’s Note” following each of her historical novels (*Memoirs of Hadrian* and *The Abyss*) exceeds the limits of the bibliographical note, which it pretends to be, and turns into a mini-essay. *Memoirs of Hadrian* is followed by fragments of a literary diary called “carnet de notes” (notebook).⁵ To complicate matters further, those addenda are themselves at times footnoted. It seems as if the desire to support the text of the fiction with contextual evidence could not be satisfied by “prefaces” alone, and instead generated a proliferation of supplementary writings; as if the task of setting the central text in its final version required almost endless clarifications and justifications. The reader is thus faced with a complex network of supplements which combine the form of the traditional preface, the erudition of the scholarly note, and autobiographical information.

Such an insistence on using and transforming a discredited practice is all the more intriguing since Yourcenar’s novels and plays, when compared to modernist literature, are neither esoteric nor technically subversive. Her prefaces, while they adopt certain aspects of the defensive rhetoric that is the trademark of this pseudo-genre, do not reflect the actual literary controversies of their time. Taking her models from the past and addressing her future readers, she seems to bypass the present, to ignore the current heated debates on the redefinition of genres and on the legitimization of women’s writing.

For instance, she situates herself in the filiation of Racine, both for his conception of tragedy and his practice of introducing his plays with *examens*. She also perpetuates beyond its time a type of Lansonian *explication de textes* concerned with the scrupulous and methodical establishment of dates, sources and influences, and with the identification of stylistic elements:

My purpose is to make available this type of clarification, which I often wished for concerning works I either found pleasing or disconcerting, to those rare readers who might want them. Where do these characters and incidents come from, chosen as they all are from the endless series of possible characters and incidents? What rules of the game did the author adopt or break? To what semantics, personal or not, does the language which he wanted to use or had to use, pertain? And finally, since it is a play that is under consideration, how did the private show that the author staged for himself unfold?⁶

The polemical accents that characterize many modern prefaces, from Balzac and George Sand to Barrès and Montherlant, are almost totally absent from Yourcenar's presentations. Instead, we find in them a tone of remembrance and introspection alternating with passages of factual information and literary analysis. On only a few occasions does she reproach her readers for their naive or crude interpretations.

In her prefaces, therefore, Yourcenar turns toward us the face of the benevolent author willing to share her first-hand knowledge of sources and her meditations on writing. Her desire to make her creation transparent for her readers could be interpreted as a reaction against the cult of hermeticism she condemns in contemporary literature. But is her benevolent persona, adopting the language of paternalistic authority, consistent with the traditional notion of author, as simple as it seems? Polemical or not, prefaces are obviously a gesture of self-protection. Yourcenar herself admits that authors write them "to avoid saying more than they have to." My intention is to question the image projected by some of her pronouncements, and to see how internal and intertextual tensions work in her prefaces to problematize the mastery of origin and development she seems to assume. But before analyzing the problems posed by the reading of these texts, I would like to examine the profile of her unusual career in

order to see how its characteristic "patrician apartness," noted by George Steiner among many others, is translated in the shaping of the author's public figure. I propose therefore to consider the other face of the author, or as Michel Foucault says, "the author-function . . . characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation and functioning of certain discourses in society."⁷

The name Marguerite Yourcenar appeared almost suddenly on the literary scene in 1980 when she became the first woman elected to the Académie Française. She was made into a new literary star, although she had been writing and publishing in prestigious presses for half a century. She became visible through magazine and television interviews; she acquired a face, a biography—however sketchy—and she gained many new readers. The distinction bestowed upon her was in a way nothing more than the belated consecration of a long literary career or, as she said herself, a "fortuitous honor." If such an event deserves a moment of critical attention, it is not just because it shows how the literary institution and the media can promote an authorial persona by playing on the public's curiosity for biographical details. It also illustrates how strongly the two entities "author" and "work" are still associated, so that the second is not usually taken into consideration if the first is not comfortably identified and situated.⁸ The author's name, loaded with extra-textual significations, then plays the role of a preface to the written work. Yourcenar's sudden celebrity provided such a context for her work—a highly problematic context—since questions concerning the relationships between her texts, their author and the world were explicitly formulated with the added complication (or stimulus) that she, the author, was a woman.

On January 22, 1981, when Marguerite Yourcenar was inducted into the Académie Française, she was greeted by Jean d'Ormesson with the following words: "I won't keep from you, Madam, that you are honored here today not because you are a woman, but because you are a great writer."⁹ Following this awkward disclaimer (technically a "denegation") disguised as homage, d'Ormesson went on to describe her as "a kind of mystery surrounded by fame, a sort of luminous obscurity." Despite his affected style, d'Ormesson's oxymoronic phrases may seem to describe quite well the paradoxical situation of Yourcenar's work in the world of letters. But it is not the work that constitutes the "mystery," it is the person. D'Ormesson insisted on the difficulty of characterizing Yourcenar by one of those

magic formulas that serve to identify a writer by blending some of his literary themes with vignettes of his life, while he could easily do so for Stendhal, Proust or Montherlant. These considerations seem hardly sufficient however to call her a "mystery." It is more likely that the word is connected with the "accident of her sex," to which d'Ormesson so often referred while striving to erase it, bringing to light through it Yourcenar's literary stature. In an article published shortly before the induction ceremony, he wrote: "The principal virtue of Marguerite Yourcenar is to have destroyed the myth of feminine literature. . . . It is not even a question of saying that Marguerite Yourcenar writes as a man does. With her, we enter into unisexual literature. After her, no one will ever attempt to distinguish feminine from masculine literature. And isn't that a good thing!"¹⁰

Without going to such extremes of arrogant candor in the expression of relief, many of Yourcenar's colleagues are eager to co-opt her into the arms of the literary institution as a "classical" writer whose work "will last as long as the French language itself."¹¹ She is sometimes placed in the literary firmament along with such indisputably stellar figures as Vigny, Rilke and Valéry, and generally praised for "her use of specific historical situations to express the universal condition of man."¹² It is not surprising, therefore, that feminist criticism has paid almost no attention to her work, since most feminist readers expect books written by women to illuminate women's condition. A few voices have expressed amazement at a contemporary woman writer who places male protagonists and narrators at the center of her fiction, and who confesses that she is unable to write the life of women because it is too domestic, too secretive, and finally non-historical. It has even been suggested that the "hostility" to women apparent in Yourcenar's fiction reveals her hostility to the woman in herself. It is clear indeed that Yourcenar's ambition is to write neither "of women" nor "as woman" but "as a writer," which would imply, for someone like Hélène Cixous, that she writes as "the other," that is to say "as man." There is another type of feminist questioning which has not yet been formulated regarding Yourcenar. It would proceed along the lines of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis of women writers in the nineteenth century: could not Yourcenar's isolation and her insistence on explaining her works be interpreted as a strategy for overcoming the specifically feminine "anxiety of authorship?"¹³ But this perspective is founded on

a psychological axiom to which I find it difficult to subscribe: "For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion" (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 17).

The juxtaposition of this feminist reaction with the traditional sexist view of literature has the effect of reducing the question of Yourcenar's work to one of two ideologies: that of a sexless literature modeled on the universality of the masculine mode, or that of a feminine writing attaching a feminine literary identity to a female signature. Are we left only with these two possibilities: accepting the self-effacement of the (woman) author as the mark of "pure" literature, or deploring it as a denial of her own sexuality?¹⁴ This schematic opposition reveals the underlying question that had never been clearly formulated until the advent of feminist criticism: how can the critic deal with the difference introduced by the feminine gender of the author? Furthermore, why is this question more embarrassing in the case of Yourcenar than of others such as George Sand, Colette, or Virginia Woolf? Is it because she apparently adopts more readily the humanist values set by the masculine tradition? Because she reveals less of herself when she does speak in her own name? Or because, as Mathieu Galey suggested to her horror, she "hides" behind male characters (*Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 289)? These questions do not have to be answered directly, but they certainly call for a rearticulation of the more traditional questions of voice and distance which are central to the reading of Yourcenar's prefaces. The study of these texts might help to revise and problematize Yourcenar's now famous "humanism." It might also suggest a way out of the trap of reading involved in the alternative between male imitation and female self-denial.

Prefaces are strange texts, not only because their content defies classification—they are neither autobiography nor fiction, yet they anticipate both—but also because of their particular interdependence with the texts they introduce. How can we judge that the preface is adequate to the text if the understanding of the text depends on the assistance of the preface? The logical and temporal order of precedence of the two texts seems impossible to determine. A radical way to resolve this difficulty would be to separate the two resolutely and to treat prefaces as material for the history of literature; or, in more modern terms, as testimonies to the transformation of ideological notions such as verisimilitude, truth and morality. Claude

Duchet, for instance, has successfully illustrated this socio-critical approach in his study of prefaces to historical novels of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ But this type of “displaced” reading is obviously inappropriate in the case of Yourcenar, if only because it requires a comparative study of several authors within a given period.

Yourcenar’s prefaces invite rather the more traditional attitude toward an author’s self-critical comments that consists in accepting them as *prima facie* evidence of the basic design and meaning of the work. She encourages this approach by making the preface appear as the reproduction of a reflective pause in writing, which is inscribed in the topology of the book and dictates in turn a pause in reading: “There is an interval, usually quite short, between completing a book and starting a new project, when the author perceives with relative clarity the manner in which the last work took shape. I would like to dwell on that beneficial moment” (*Rendre à César*, p. 10). The preface retraces both the creation of the work and the formation of her own theory. For Yourcenar, interpretation and genesis coincide. She goes even further in proposing to her readers the temporal structure of her creation, for her prefaces announce the end of her rewriting. She also indicates that previous versions are obsolete, that drafts will be unavailable to future scholars, thus preempting any genetic criticism other than her own.¹⁶ It seems therefore that the end of the preface should coincide with the end of commentary: “There is nothing else to say about Nathanaël.”¹⁷ This forbidding conclusion is consistent with her repeated definition of the preface as the “frame” of the fiction. While she intends the word *cadre* to designate simply the historical and biographical background of the story, she also completes the enclosing gesture with a plea for critical restraint. The following conclusion clearly leads the interpreter toward a paraphrastic reading of the frame: “It is for its value as a human document (if indeed it has such value), and not as a political one, that *Coup de Grâce* was written, and it should be judged accordingly” (p. 83).

But this precise enclosure of the text by another text that claims the privilege of the final word is undermined by the logic of its metaphor. For the image of framing entails the same paradoxes as the notion of limit, similarly enjoying, or suffering from, an undecidable place. The preface splits the book in two parts, remaining outside the formal structure of the text, yet inside its semantic structure by announcing its meaning. It makes the text appear, in advance, as finished-unfinished, since something about its conception has to be

said in order to complete a meaning that is already contained elsewhere. To treat prefaces simply as a special kind of criticism is to grant them the privilege of exteriority, ignoring both their coexistence with the "literary" text within the space of the book and the "opacity" of their own writing. At the same time, critics who use the content of the preface reinforce their authority with whatever interiority the author's discourse possesses, erasing the textual problematics of the preface to construct their own framing of the text.¹⁸ It is perhaps impossible to escape entirely this logic of the frame, but there always remains the uneasy feeling that there is something left after the informative value of a preface has been exhausted. Jacques Derrida has played with these contradictions most vividly in his problematic preface to *Dissemination*, where he shows that any "classical," i.e. expository, preface is engaged in a vain attempt to merge meaning and its anticipation, or to turn a recapitulation of past intentions into a propedeutic of meaning: "Preceding what ought to be able to present itself on its own, it falls like an empty husk, a piece of formal refuse, a moment of dryness or loquacity, sometimes both at once."¹⁹ It is not a question, Derrida continues, of raising the preface from that condition, but of "questioning it otherwise," responding with an exercise in double reading to the writer's gesture of doubling a text with another text.

It is not simply a question of finding out *why* Yourcenar writes prefaces, but of understanding how the self-assertion necessarily involved in writing such texts is constantly undermined by the very problematics of its textual support. Yourcenar's prefaces strive toward clarity and functionality. Yet they constantly display their double mark of necessity and superfluousness, of functionality and dysfunction. On the one hand, they express an intention of revealing, for the good of the reader, the underside of creation. On the other hand, they are imbued with a desire for self-effacement—"As such, the book does not require any commentary" (*Fires*, p. 1043)—and by the "regret of having to say what should go without saying" (*Coup de Grâce*, p. 83). Their function is not dictated by the nature of the book, but by its condition as object in the world, offered to outside judgement. The recognition that, after all, books are read, but not often "well read," accounts for the strict composition of the prefaces, for their controlled didacticism, and for the decision to impose them, in the final bibliography of the Pléiade edition as "definitive" and "now inseparable" from the novel (p. 1219 ff.). But while they are, by

the author's *diktat*, joined to a text which does not essentially need them, they contain many details that are not absolutely necessary to their didactic purpose, revealing also the pleasure taken in writing these details. In the preface to *Fires*, for instance, Yourcenar, after reaching the point where further analysis would yield only what she calls "biographical residues," indulges nevertheless in two pages of personal memories: "It may be important only to me that 'Sappho, or the Suicide' came from seeing a variety show in Pera, and that the phrase was written on the deck of a cargo ship . . ." (p. 1046).

By setting those vignettes of her life within the frame of the critical language of the preface, Yourcenar calls into question the authority of the autobiographical voice with regard to the elucidation of the literary text. At least, that is the effect produced by this passage if we read the preface only in relation to its novel. But this manifestation of the "loquacity" of the preface inevitably loosens the connection between the two parts of the book and points to other paratexts in which a similar phenomenon occurs.

We are led then to read the prefaces in their "double-jointedness," since they echo and repeat each other in addition to referring each to a single pre-text. At the same time, this dual articulation constantly reminds us that the prefaces do not form a unified textual body, just as each one of them cannot be subsumed in the text it accompanies. Autobiographical digressions in particular must be viewed within the structural repetitions and variations of the different paratexts and within their own variations as well. In the later postfaces written at about the same time as her family chronicles—*Souvenirs Pieux* and *Archives du Nord*—Yourcenar appears less defensive about the writing of "residues." She gives freer rein to personal memories, and probes further into the mystery of writing which, in the earlier prefaces, was almost overshadowed by the voice of the author posing as model reader. But we should not infer from this change in her prefatory style an evolution in her attitude toward her readers, since her prefaces do not have a history of their own, independent from the history of the texts to which they refer. What is apparent, however, is that the historical drama of confrontation between writer and reader and the inner drama of writing alternately hide and reveal each other.²⁰

As a way of breaking into this circularity, I will try first to identify the didactic theme or themes that sustain the repeated interventions of the author. Her need for clarification seems indeed difficult to under-

stand at first. Although her novels are subtle and complex and often dazzlingly erudite, they do not subvert classical temporality and characterization.²¹ Rather, what seems to disconcert readers, judging from questions interspersed in critical articles and interviews, and from allusions made by Yourcenar herself, is her choice of themes, situations and "heroes." With varying degrees of subtlety, readers still tend to look for a key to the motivation of the story in the life of the author, particularly when the passions described are extreme or when the situations border on the "scandalous": a homosexual husband pleading for the understanding of his wife in *Alexis*, a soldier of fortune—an aristocratic mercenary—confessing how he came to kill the woman who loved him and for whom he had ambivalent feelings in *Coup de Grâce*, the story of Anna's lifelong passion for her brother Miguel in "Anna Soror . . ." Even Yourcenar's two great cultural heroes, Hadrian and Zeno (from *The Abyss*), often cited as paradigms of lucid humanism, transgress the limits of "normality" by being bisexual.

While the very fact of writing prefaces that purport to expose the genesis of her work promises an elucidation of the relation between life and art, Yourcenar expresses instead her impatience with those readers who transfer their questions from the universe of the novel to the author's life:

The utter crudeness of those who say to you: "By 'Hadrian' you mean yourself!" ["Hadrien c'est vous"] (p. 536)

But why this choice of the theme of incest? Let us begin by pushing aside the naive hypothesis of those who always believe that any work is born from a personal anecdote. ("Anna Soror . . .," p. 1029)

Yet Yourcenar does not start her prefaces by refuting psychobiographical interpretations. Instead, she scrupulously describes her literary creation as an evolutive complex of craft, personal memories, and historical knowledge. She shapes the proper perspective on the book so that, when the "crude" question is formulated or suggested, it can simply be dismissed. The main thrust of her argumentation is familiar, at least since Flaubert, whose "Madame Bovary, c'est moi" raised more questions than it answered. She asserts that the *source* of her story is authentic—be it history, a confession received from a friend, or a personal love experience—and that art is not mimetic.

What is of particular interest is the series of displacements by which the texts turn the attention of the reader away from the "naive" psychological interpretation both of her books and of the act of writing. Although Yourcenar often resorts to the lexicon of the traditional psychology of creation, using terms such as "intention," "goal," "choice," etc., she frames the question of the writing subject in a historical and rhetorical perspective which problematizes the subjective foundation of writing and perhaps calls into question the very authority of the writer's voice.

The chronological perspective that Yourcenar sets in her opening lines (which are strikingly similar in all her prefaces) has the immediate effect of absorbing personal history into literary and general history:

Alexis appeared in 1929; it belongs to a certain period of literature. (p. 3)

Coup de Grâce, that short novel situated in the wake of the war of 1914-1918 and of the Russian revolution, was written in Sorrente in 1938. (p. 79)

A first, somewhat shorter version of *Denier du rêve* (*A Coin in Nine Hands*) appeared in 1934. (p. 161)

Fires is not, properly speaking, a book of my youth: it was written in 1935; I was thirty-two. (p. 1043)

These very simple beginnings show that a text is in fact a complex entity. It is an event, noted in the past tense, a permanent object referred to in the present—but an object that always "bears the stamp of its age, as it should" (*Fires*, p. 1044). It is also a human creation, and as such it has to be related to a subject ("I was thirty two"). However, the emergence of the text as event takes precedence over its subjective source. In all the prefaces, the intervention of the first person is delayed, so as to separate it from the initial production. Yourcenar notes the appearance of the book in the same manner she mentions her own birth in the opening sentence of *Souvenirs pieux*, avoiding in both cases the standard phrases "I wrote this book" or "I was born": "The being I call 'me' came into the world on a Monday, the eighth of June 1903, around eight in the morning, in Brussels."²²

"L'être que j'appelle moi . . .": This play with personal pronouns literally disseminates the identity of the self, and also indicates that self-identity is not given with the appearance of being, but rather

becomes the only possible way of naming the experience of the world and its temporal development. "That this child is me, I could not doubt it without doubting everything else" (*SP*, p. 11). Similarly the books are called "my works," but there remains "a feeling of unreality" in this identification. If time provides a means of reappropriation of experience through memory, it is also experienced as division and distancing within the subject, so that for Yourcenar memory and history must work with the same methods.

Following this sort of birth certificate of the book, the stages of its life are mentioned similarly as impersonal events:

Some chapters have been entirely rewritten. . . . Rereading the new parts of the book as if someone else had written them. . . . (*A Coin*, pp. 161, 74)

Read and reread several times in 1979, this nebulous text, one of my first writings, proved totally unusable. ("Un Homme obscur," p. 1032)

Only through rereading, and sometimes through correcting until the old and the new overlap "to such an extent that it is almost impossible, even for the author, to tell when one begins and the other ends" (*A Coin*, p. 161), can the book be called "mine," and be given a second seal of approval.

We are far from the triumphant assurance of Balzac who embraces in the present of his writing the historical moment, the past of his original conception and the future of his entire work: "I write under the light of two eternal truths—Religion and Monarchy: two necessities, as they are shown to be by contemporary events, towards which every writer of sound sense ought to try to guide the country back."²³ Nor does Yourcenar express, like George Sand, a feeling of rebirth through writing, or like Simone de Beauvoir, the impression of having "crossed a threshold."²⁴ On the contrary, her prefaces disperse the moments of writing in a personal history which can never be totally subsumed under the authority of a subject, either transcendental or feminine. What is revealed instead in the apparent blending of successive rewritings is only a unity of purpose made visible after the fact. "I write" can only be attached to a rewriting dependent on reading, which alone allows the recapturing of an intentional continuity in the mirror constituted by the written books. Not only is the subject who writes in the present of the preface distant from

the past writer, but it is always divided between reader and writer. In spite of the firmness of her discourse, Yourcenar insists on presenting herself as "an unreachable and floating self, that entity which even *I* have at times contested, and which I feel actually defined only by the few books I happened to write" (*Discours*, p. 10).

Yourcenar asked "Where do these characters and incidents come from?" only to reframe the question and dispel the mystique of origin. Not only does she establish immediately the temporal dispersion of the writing subject, but she also fragments the notion of origin into various terms of beginning, all of which allude to an accidental convergence of chances: "point of departure," "occurrence," "appearance," and even "product." It is by pure chance also that some of her early versions appeared and some others did not. Some of her early fragments, outside events, chance encounters with documents or monuments can play equally well the role of "point of departure." Following the analogy with birth established earlier, we could say then that the book is the inheritor of multiple genealogical lines:

Thus any literary work is made of a mixture of vision, memory and action, of notions and informations received during a lifetime either through speech or books, and of the residues of our own existence. ("Un Homme obscur," p. 1036)

In an interview, she commented on her progressive acquaintance and fascination with Hadrian through her discovery of the remains of his villa and Piranesi's drawings of them by saying: "It is already no longer history, it is almost geology" (*Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 52). "Genesis," as Yourcenar illustrates it in her prefaces, is closer to the Nietzschean "genealogy" than to the usage of the term either in traditional *explications de texte* or psychology. It excludes the rediscovery of an unified self as well as of the true story behind the story.

In this perspective, we understand why writing may become an interminable rewriting, why the otherness of the first writing calls for infinite reappropriation, and why the authoritative gesture of the preface, while imposing an end to the proliferation of readings, has to be presented also as arbitrary and superfluous. Time is both infinite and limited by death. To label a work "definitive" is to accept the necessity of the unpredictable moment when the *last* version will become the definitive one. It is transforming the definitive by chance

into *definitive by decision*, preparing one's posthumous edition in advance. The last sentence of the "Foreword" to the Pléiade edition is unequivocal: "Finally the phrases 'definitive edition' or 'definitive version' affixed on some of these novels—whether they had been considerably reshaped (as *A Coin in Nine Hands*) or slightly corrected at the time of their successive publications—have disappeared here from the title page, any text published in the Pléiade collection being, by definition, a definitive text" (p. xi). This final sentence carries a definitive sentence in the judicial sense of the term.²⁵

When the prefaces are reread in the new setting provided by the Pléiade edition, and preceded by the new supplement I quoted above, some of their remarks cease to appear as routine justifications: "Indications of this nature, I realize, can be unpleasant coming from the author herself, and *during her lifetime*. I have decided to offer them, nevertheless, for the few readers who might be interested in the genesis of the book" (*Abyss*, p. 838). Genesis has to be exposed for the education of readers, particularly those who assume a simplistic causal correspondence between life and art. But genesis becomes also the text that will replace the biography of the author for those educated readers.

This last conclusion, however, is a somewhat premature closing of the frame. I have been led to it by the parallel that Yourcenar strongly suggests between the finality of her work at the moment she presents it and the finitude of her own existence. The notion of *end* congruent with what might be called her deconstruction of the subjective origin of writing can only be that of an arbitrary temporal end. But when she undertakes her "thematic and stylistic" analyses, which occupy a large part of her prefaces, she has to resort to a teleological presentation. As she explains her choice of rhetorical tools and the reasons why she finally accepted to (re)publish her books, the writing *I* inevitably becomes prominent. Considerations of aesthetic necessity tend to impose the final form of the book as the best one, while her rule of doing "the best one can" demands, on the contrary, infinite corrections. Through the exposition of a "method," the writer of the preface identifies with the writer of the book. Still the pattern of fragmentation of the subject, established by Yourcenar's temporal perspective, pervades her rhetorical presentations. Most of her "Prefaces" allude to a personal emotion or passion only to pass immediately and without transition to the consideration of formal

characteristics, in a movement implying that the artistic process supersedes the original experience:

The anecdote touched me, as I hope it will touch the reader. Moreover, from a strictly literary point of view, it seemed to me that it contained all the elements of the tragic style; consequently it appeared to fit admirably within the frame of the traditional French narrative, which has retained certain characteristics of tragedy. (*Coup de Grâce*, p. 79)

The product of a love crisis, *Fires* is in the form of a collection of love poems, or, rather, is like a sequence of lyrical prose pieces connected by a notion of love. (p. 1043)

The preface to *Fires* deserves special attention, since in this book of "quasi-public confessions" Yourcenar speaks of, and out of, the love-crisis in her own life. But when she tries to go through the exercise of resurrecting concrete circumstances of her past—"biographical residues"—she admits that "these people, who then represented contemporary reality, now seem to me more removed and abolished by time than the myths and obscure legends that personify them" (p. 1047). What remains is the love poems. While love itself, even mad love, is but "a common experience and one of the most hackneyed themes of literature" (p. 1043), the question for Yourcenar is to understand how passion can become the source of a book in which life is suffused with the poetic vision and language inherited and transformed by each poet. She describes the characteristic violence of tone and the preciousness of images in her mythical narratives as reflecting in large part the complicated play of literary influences. After paying homage to Paul Valéry, "the admirable Paul," and to Jean Cocteau, she adds: "I don't think I would have dared these verbal overloads . . . if poets of my time, and not just of the past, had not set an example for me" (p. 1045).

This remark should not however be hastily construed as a proof of the dependence of the woman writer on her male models. The narratives are indeed separated in the book by fragments lifted from a private diary in which she expresses directly, "if rather cryptically," the torments of absolute love and physical desire. It is in these aphoristic fragments that the first person appears. In one of her most direct statements about her past intentions, Yourcenar explains the "arrogant frankness of the person speaking in *Fires*" as a defense

against certain compromises of literature, alluding specifically to Cocteau. The real daring act was therefore saying "I"—a feminine "I"—in her own name.²⁶ But this "tuning of one's instrument before the concert," as she later called her only effort at direct expression (*Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 96), is left in its discontinuous form. Even in a preface that recites the eulogy of form, she refers to those fragments as "a notion of love," apparently unable to find a satisfactory formal term to characterize them.

At the point when she seems to have completed her analysis of the mytho-poetic style of *Fires*, Yourcenar reiterates the justification of her silence about the true story in a long and moving coda to her preface:

No matter how often I say that a collection of love poems does not require commentary (which is true in principle), I know that I seem to be avoiding the issue in dealing at such great length with thematic and stylistic characteristics, *after all secondary*, while keeping quiet about the love experience that inspired the book. (p. 1048)

Could there be a lingering regret at not being able to tell more, although the memory is obviously still poignant, or is it necessary to justify further the displacement of memories by form? A key to the entire final passage may be found in the following sentence:

In *Fires*, where I thought I was only glorifying and perhaps exorcising a very concrete love, the worshipping of the person loved is very clearly associated with more *abstract* but no less intense *passions*, and these passions sometimes prevail over the carnal and sentimental obsession. (p. 1049)²⁷

The opposition between the past and present tenses, between what she thought she did ("je croyais") and what the book actually accomplishes, along with the other opposition between "concrete love" and "abstract passions," underlines the illusion involved in direct expression of feelings. To write a real passion in such a way that the book can pass the test of time is to inscribe it in a language that transcends the anecdote, the stylized language of myth, history and poetry, in the language of others. Trying to reveal *now* the original story as it was experienced would be like erasing the book, or

embarking perhaps in the writing of another book, the impossible auto-biography. The moment of revelation has already happened: "For me, this masked ball was only a stage of awareness" (p. 1049). The integrity of the book has to be protected not only from the reader's indiscrete questions, but even from her own telling. No self-restoration will take place. No past motivation will be further investigated in the "Prefaces."

Each of the other "Prefaces" is a variation on this pattern of displacement of the original story by the story of its rhetorical composition. But none perhaps is more intriguing than the preface to *Coup de Grâce*. Here, Yourcenar's study of the tragic style she immediately perceived as the necessary form of the story allows her to establish that the "truth" of her characters resides in their intrinsic nobility. The formal constraints of the tragic narrative appear all-powerful in shaping retrospectively the psychology and the diegesis of the novel. They become the active motivation for writing.²⁸ The first motivation mentioned, "the anecdote moved me," is therefore obscured in the writing of the preface. Instead of form being only one possible treatment of a subject (as it seems to be the case for *Alexis*), here it is the content of the original story which appears as a field of interchangeable possibilities:

When Eric and Sophie meet again at the end of the book I tried to show, through the very few words worth exchanging at that moment, this intimacy or similarity stronger than the conflicts of carnal passion or political allegiances, stronger even than the resentments of frustrated desire or wounded pride, this tight fraternal bond which unites them whatever they do, and which explains the very depth of their suffering. At the point they have reached, it does not matter which one of the two gives or receives death. It does not even matter whether they hated or loved each other. (p. 82)

Are the various possibilities really equivalent? Is it of so little importance that it was Sophie, sentenced to death along with her defeated Bolshevik comrades, who requested that Eric be her executioner, thereby leaving him a legacy of remorse which was in turn to become his motivation for telling the story? If Eric and Sophie could have exchanged places, the importance of the authentic source would be considerably reduced. It seems that considerations of style, of

generic and aesthetic congruence, play as equalizers of differences, particularly sexual difference.

There are very few indications in the prefaces that might allow us to pursue directly this line of questioning. Curiously, Yourcenar alludes to the idea of the interchangeability of genders in the course of justifying her choice of male narrators (Alexis, Eric, Hadrian). She says, for instance, that she was at one point tempted to tell the story of *Alexis* from the point of view of his wife Monique. Yet she did not, and she finally admits that she could not have chosen women's voices because "women's lives are much too limited, or else too secret" (p. 526). On the one hand, form supersedes the content provided by history, and should allow either sex to assume the task of telling the story; on the other hand history, as ultimate provider of stories, denies this possibility to the writer. A detour through a study of Yourcenar's methods is needed, not in order to resolve this contradiction, but to situate it in the genesis of writing presented in the prefaces, and also figured by their own chronology.

One of Yourcenar's most frequently quoted phrases concerns her method of working with "one foot in erudition, one foot in magic" (p. 526). She has herself mentioned several times her "méthodes de délire," as if to correct her image as an exacting and rigorous historical researcher, insisting at the same time that she is not repeating the Romantic opposition between imagination and reason. How can this affirmation of a dual method be read in the light of her supplementary texts, particularly in view of the difference between her "Prefaces" and "Postfaces"? The distinction between these two groups of texts is suggested by Yourcenar herself when she insists on the difference between the books of her youth and her subsequent works.

The "Prefaces" belong to novels planned and first published between 1928 and 1939, a period that Yourcenar characterizes as being one of experimentation with literary forms. They tell the relatively smooth story of texts that have almost immediately found their system. When she evokes that moment, she shows how the creative power of form works on two levels. As in *Coup de Grâce* or *Fires*, the vision of the appropriate form, suggested by texts already written or stories already told (Racine's tragedies or old myths and legends), gives a readable shape to the theme. The logic of the structured theme then guides the search for details. It is this precise crafting of the story,

described as a second stage, that achieves the reappropriation of theme and form:

The place I called Kratovitsy could not be simply the "vestibule" of tragedy, nor could these gory episodes of civil war be only a vague red background for a love story. . . . As a result, this subject chosen for its almost pure conflict between individual passions and wills forced me to open military maps, to collect details given by other eye witnesses, and to search for old illustrated magazines, in order to catch the least echo or the faintest reflection which might have reached Western Europe while those obscure military operations were taking place on the frontier of a distant land. (p. 80)

In her "Postfaces," and in the "notes" to her historical novels as well, Yourcenar refers to works that had a much more complicated and hazardous development. The initial versions were "conceived"—as she says of Hadrian—and written between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, before she had the benefit of "human experience" and, most importantly, of "professional experience" ("l'expérience artisanale," *A Coin*, p. 163). When she later rereads these texts, "often awkward, but spontaneous and quasi-obsessive" ("Anna Soror . . .," p. 1024), she may be ashamed of the audacity of her attempt or surprised by the precociousness of her insights, but she criticizes them with the same effort toward objectivity, and rewrites them in the same manner as the novels of her "maturity." For a text to pass the test of time, that is to say the test of the mature author's judgement, it has to reach a point where theme, form and precise details all contribute to the creation of "a *topical* reality, closely related to time and space, which is for me the only convincing reality" ("Anna Soror . . .," p. 1031). In this respect, the "Prefaces" may serve as a methodological introduction to Yourcenar's aesthetics and to her "Postfaces."

Since the "Postfaces" refer to a larger span of time (1925-1980), extending both before and after the period of writing to which the "Prefaces" refer, they give a more complete view of Yourcenar's writing experience. The discussion of the texts "of her youth" leads her to face the question of her initial choices of themes and characters, a question which, in her "Prefaces," was displaced by the

analysis of the treatment of the theme. In this perspective, the "Postfaces" may be read as a frame for her "Prefaces."

These two groups of paratexts therefore cannot be added to each other in a linear manner, but they exchange their significance in a circular pattern of communication. Such a reading reopens several questions, particularly that of the foundations of her historical realism. In the "notebook" for *Memoirs of Hadrian*, she makes clear that the life of a historical character is no more distant to her than her own past, thus placing in a new light the exercise in self-distancing she presents in the "Prefaces." The past does not come to "haunt" us, as the common cliché would have it, but we haunt the past. This haunting has both active and contemplative aspects. The method described for *Coup de Grâce* shows how the historical research is determined by aesthetic imperatives. The writer then embarks on an adventurous voyage through faint traces of the past. In the "Postfaces," the wandering aspect of the research is developed, dramatized, and extended in time so as to become almost coextensive with her life. From libraries to ruins to museums scattered on several continents, the author is not so much systematically researching a subject as she seems to be following a mysterious Ariadne thread which allows chance encounters with apparently irrelevant material to become echoes of an initial encounter. From the necessity of reading (*lire*) to her delirious methods (*délire*), and her obligation "to read everything" (*tout lire*), the opposition is not as clear as it would first seem.

The postface to "Anna Soror . . ." gives precious indications of a possible origin of her journey through the labyrinth. They are, however, not to be found in her answer to the straight question, "but why this choice of the theme of incest?" (as in the "Prefaces" she deflects the possibility of a psychological explanation), but rather, in a moment when she succeeds in haunting her past: "During those few weeks . . . I lived constantly within these two bodies and these two souls, slipping from Anna into Miguel and from Miguel into Anna with this indifference to sex which is, I believe that of all artists" ("celle de tous les créateurs," p. 1028). Not satisfied with this generalization, she wonders how such a "participation," capable of eliminating all differences, was possible for a young woman who then knew nothing of passion:

The answer is undoubtedly quite simple: everything has

already been lived and relived thousands of times by the dead we carry in our own fibers, just as we carry in us the thousands of beings which will exist some day. The only recurring question is why, among these innumerable particules *floating* in each of us, some rather than others come to the surface. Since I was then freer from emotions and cares, I was perhaps more able than today to *dissolve* myself entirely in the characters I thought I invented." ("Anna Soror . . .," p. 1029) [My emphasis.]

Metaphors of flow and continuity were totally absent from the "Prefaces." In her more recent supplementary texts, Yourcenar returns however to her initial intuition of "the ocean of time" and concurrently uses images of "seeds," "torrent," and "spring" to describe literary creation. Not only does history resemble geology because monuments and documents are eroded by time and scattered all over the earth, but human beings also become part of an organic and indifferentiated continuity. This intuition of participating in a cosmic becoming seems to be for her a "transcendental" experience in the Kantian sense, the experience that precedes and founds all concrete experiences.

One might be tempted to subsume Yourcenar's thinking and art under this philosophical "truth" which seems to efface the pattern of discontinuity established in the "Prefaces." When she says for instance, both about Alexis and about Hadrian, that she wanted to do the "portrait of a voice," could not this "correspondence" be interpreted, in the light of the Derridean rapprochement between voice and metaphysical presence, as a desire to translate the original truth of the past into words? But this would be to forget entirely the extraordinary detour through historical erudition she has to accomplish in order to become that voice, as well as the drama of her own writing. When she describes herself destroying manuscripts, dismembering and re-membering them, burning in the morning what she wrote furiously during the night, then her writing work mimics the haphazard and violent thrust of history more than the germinating of seeds or the flow of water.

It is equally impossible to erase the fragmented itinerary of her paratextuality. The very form she has chosen to retrace the "genesis" of her books undermines the possibility of unifying her history of writing, while the attempt at writing this genesis in turn exposes the illusion of the preface. The moment of participation that she evokes is

only one point of departure among others. It does not allow a retrospective totalization of the experience of writing. On the contrary, this moment of fusion with otherness could not have been spoken if the fallacy of a subjective origin of writing had not been exposed.

It is interesting to note that Yourcenar, quite independently of the development of modern theories, accomplishes a kind of deconstructive movement through the fragmentation and layering of her supplementary texts. Recognizing this movement affects considerably our identification of the author's voice. If, for a woman, writing demands that she renounce the historical marginality of women and reposition that marginality at the center of her fiction, then Yourcenar does not write as a woman. But if woman is, as Cixous argues in *La Jeune Née*, more capable than man of accepting otherness within the self, because she is closer to her own bisexuality,²⁹ then Yourcenar's writing is the writing of a woman. While indeed her fiction imposes men's voices, and accepts women's secondary place as it is given to us by history, the complex questioning of her own voice throughout her prefaces invites us to continue the game of inversions. Her choice of a male voice speaking in the first person guarantees the distancing from herself that is an essential principle of her aesthetics. But in doing this, does she not somehow equate the woman's voice with her own? Or, since the man's voice can be heard only through the mediation of her own, isn't there in it something of the woman's voice, of that woman capable of being "traversed by otherness" (*La Jeune Née*, p. 158)? Yourcenar's heroes are indeed strikingly different from the male heroes of the humanist tradition. Their conquests are fragile—even those of the great emperor Hadrian—their sexuality is never based on the domination of women, and their lucidity echoes Yourcenar's vision of the self as divided and dispersed. If she does not participate in the revision of the "image" of women in history, Yourcenar certainly transforms the image of men in a way that cannot leave "humanism" untouched. Her work might be a preface to a chapter of feminism which is possibly being written elsewhere.

NOTES

1. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1857-1880*, tr. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 188. My emphasis.
2. André Gide, *Paludes*, in *Romans* (Paris: NRF, 1958), p. 89.
3. Contemporary fiction has explored all the possible ways, it would seem, of turning the text of the novel into a reflection on its production, thereby eradicating the need for genetic prefaces. But as novelists come back to—or remain interested in—historical subjects and referential narration, there are signs of a possible revival of the practice of the preface. For instance, a recent issue of the *New York Times Book Review* (October 14, 1984) published excerpts of Umberto Eco's "Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*" and of Arthur Miller's "Introduction" for a new edition of his novel *Focus*.
4. I borrow this expression from Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).
5. Marguerite Yourcenar's novels have all been translated into English: *Alexis ou le Traité du vain combat* as *Alexis*, tr. Walter Kaiser with the author (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984); *Le Coup de grâce* as *Coup de Grâce*, tr. Grace Frick with the author (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981) [previous English editions do not include the "definitive" preface]; *Feux* as *Fires*, tr. Dori Katz with the author (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981); *Denier du rêve* as *A Coin in Nine Hands*, tr. Dori Katz with the author (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982); *Mémoires d'Hadrien* as *Memoirs of Hadrian*, tr. Grace Frick with the author (New York: Modern Library, 1984) [among the numerous previous editions, several do not contain a translation of the "carnet de notes": "Reflections on the Composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*"; *L'Oeuvre au noir* as *The Abyss*, tr. Grace Frick with the author (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976). Only two of her *Nouvelles orientales* have appeared in English: "The Man Who Loved the Nereids" and "The Milk of Death," tr. David Freeman, in *National and English Review* (Dec. 1937 and Sept. 1939). *Comme l'eau qui coule*, including "Anna Soror. . .," "Un homme obscur" and "Une belle matinée," has not yet been published in English.
6. "Histoire et examen d'une pièce," *Rendre à César in Théâtre I* (Paris: NRF, 1971), p. 10. This play is the dramatized version of *A Coin in Nine Hands*.
7. Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 148.
8. Foucault, "Since literary anonymity is not tolerable, we can accept it only in the guise of an enigma," *Textual Strategies*, p. 150.

9. *Discours de reception de Mme Marguerite Yourcenar à l'Academie française et réponse de M. Jean d'Ormesson* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 57.

10. "Yourcenar ou la rigueur dans l'art," *Magazine Littéraire*, 153 (Oct. 1979), p. 20.

11. Quoted by Marguerite Yourcenar in *Les Yeux ouverts, entretiens avec Matthieu Galev* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1980), p. 132.

12. Quoted in Deborah Trutsman, "France's First Woman 'Immortal,'" *The New York Times Magazine* (Jan. 18, 1981), p. 19.

13. Gilbert and Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 73 ff.

14. "Though writers do use masks and disguises in most of their work . . . the continual use of male models inevitably involves the female artist in a dangerous form of self-denial that goes far beyond the metaphysical self-lessness that Keats was contemplating." Gilbert and Gubar, p. 69.

15. Claude Duchet, "L'illusion historique. L'Enseignement des préfaces (1815-1832)," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 75, Nos. 2-3 (1975), 245-67.

16. For the present revival of genetic criticism, see *Essais de critique génétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), and particularly Raymonde Debray-Genette, "Génétique et poétique: le cas Flaubert," pp. 23-67. Debray-Genette indicates new avenues for a type of criticism based on the study of "avant-textes" (projects, drafts, manuscripts). Instead of retracing an evolution defined in terms of progress, genetic studies should rid themselves of the "fetishism of the final text." She calls for a poetics of the "avant-texte" which would illustrate genesis in terms of differences, and give a place to chance in artistic production. Contrary to many contemporary authors who collaborate with geneticists by providing their manuscripts (Francis Ponge, Louis Aragon for instance), Yourcenar clearly marks her preference for an aesthetic of the perfected text by giving her readers only a filtered and almost negative knowledge of her "avant-textes."

17. Postface to "Un homme obscur," *Comme l'eau qui coule in Oeuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1982), p. 1037. All quotations from Yourcenar's novels and prefaces are my translation and the page number following them from now on refers to the Pléiade edition.

18. Lukács offers an interesting example of two contradictory treatments of prefaces. In the case of Balzac, he dissociates the royalist convictions expressed in the *Avant-propos* from the signification of the *Comédie Humaine*, asserting that Balzac in fact "worked for the Republic." On the other hand he condemns Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* on the basis of the deterministic theory found in the *Experimental Novel*, which functions as a sort of preface to Zola's work.

19. Tr. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 9.

20. Yourcenar's analysis of writing could provide an illustration for these lines of Maurice Blanchot: "L'oeuvre est elle-même communication, intimité en lutte entre

l'exigence de lire et l'exigence d'écrire, entre la mesure de l'oeuvre qui se fait pouvoir et la démesure de l'oeuvre qui tend à l'impossibilité, entre la forme où elle se saisit et l'illimité où elle se refuse, entre la décision qui est l'être du commencement et l'indécision qui est l'être du recommencement." *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 265.

21. With the exception of *Fires*, they seem closer to poetry than to novelistic narration.

22. *Souvenirs pieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 11. Future references will be made in the text, with the designation *SP*.

23. "Introduction," *The Comedie Humaine*, tr. Ellen Marriage (Philadelphia: The Gebbie Publishing Co., 1897), p. xlvii.

24. Quoted by Nancy Miller. "Reading Women Writing," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 266.

25. The French "définitif," meaning "which ends something," is strongly related to its legal usage. "En définitive" is the short form for "en sentence définitive," which introduces a judgment deciding on the substance of a case. That judgment cannot be appealed.

26. It is noticeable that Yourcenar does not mention female authors among her literary influences. Sappho, transfigured into a modern acrobat, becomes the subject of one of her mythical narratives.

27. In these two quotations, the emphasis is mine. I was surprised to note that in the English translation, supervised by the author, the expression "after all secondary" is simply omitted, and "passions" becomes "notions."

28. See Gérard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 96, for a discussion of the formalist notion of motivation.

29. Hélène Cixous et Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: UGE, 1975), p. 158.