

## MARGUERITE YOURCENAR AND THE PHALLACY OF INDIFFERENCE

LINDA K. STILLMAN  
*Georgetown University*

There has been much talk about "phallacies." Beginning with a decidedly acidic pH, phallacies distort the reading of sexual difference, often entirely misreading the consequences of female sexuality. Phallacies occur most often in men's readings of men's texts. To a large extent, they inspire women's rereadings of both men's readings and men's writing, especially addressing a reinterpretation of men's heroines. Phallacies surface too in readings of women's heroines. Scant attention, if any, has been paid by women or men to women's heroes—an inattention perhaps inherent in their rarity, and least attended to seem to be texts by women, such as Yourcenar, who create homosexual heroes.

And yet, this Immortelle, the first female member of the more than three-centuries-old French Academy, argues insistently for indifference to sexual difference. Her foremost claim for "sexual indifference" denies the existence of feminine discourse or writing, as opposed to masculine, that is, for her, normative, universal writing. Her own writing often denies singularity and difference, especially of a sexual nature, by disguising them in the universal. The narratological and ideological functions of the countless maxims that checker Yourcenar's interviews and fiction dissimulate inadmissible personal experience and, above all, as we shall see, that of being different. After fighting in vain to deny his homosexuality, and deciding to leave his wife, the hero of *Alexis ou le traité du vain combat*, for example, sends a letter to his wife in which he requests that she understand his particular experience, but insists throughout that "suffering is the same for everyone."<sup>1</sup> Speaking of his "first time" with a male in terms of his "error" or "flaw," he nevertheless reassures Monique, saying "all happiness is innocent" (*Alexis*, p. 55), apparently oblivious to the duplicity of his assertion. Such textual strategies repeatedly encode sexual tragedies.

To the often-posed question of *why* her heroes are homosexual,

she invariably responds that first, they are above all bisexual, and second, that sexuality must be a domain of liberty. Nevertheless, while Yourcenar's male characters (such as Dr. Sarte, Volkmar, and Henri-Maximilien) *do* now and then engage in heterosexuality, almost every male protagonist prefers men. In the novelist's view, the homosexual experience only represents a minor part of her work anyway, and she comments that an author surveying the whole of his or her work is "often surprised, and even perplexed, to see which themes have occupied an important place for the reader."<sup>2</sup> Despite the author's perplexity, the reader would be wise to heed D. H. Lawrence's advice: never trust the author, trust the tale. Like the dog that captured Sherlock Holmes's attention because it did not bark, feminine discourse in Yourcenar's texts becomes most conspicuous by its very unreadability and by the novelist's failure to acknowledge it.

Triangulation structures the erotics of Yourcenar's fiction, but rather than a typical ménage à trois, men sacrifice loving women to the greater and more natural glory of a pederastic relationship. Children, when mentioned at all, are either abandoned along with their mothers, born crippled and wished dead, or potentially feared by a rape victim. Always, we witness a victim, the suffering female, her love associated with torture, abandonment, and death; and a victor, the male, his homosexual love valorized. These narratives devalue female sexuality, depicted as dependent on ruse, fancy, and artifice, and always infelicitous. Yourcenar and her heroes have a lot to say about women. It is usually in the form of maxims and is rarely nice. Woman's artificial love springs from a difference that must be neutralized; as Hadrian declares, she cannot be at once lover and matron. Yet "the problem of indifference," states Vincent Descombes in *L'Inconscient malgré lui*, "is nothing other than that of the impossibility of saying what one wants, of enunciating one's desire."<sup>3</sup> Yourcenar banishes from her writings her own experiences, her milieu, her desires, and replaces them, especially in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, by the controlling male who speaks with the unalterable authority of history and in whose hands women fare at best (with the exception of Plotine) poorly.

By donning two masks, that of detached masculine authority and that of a different name, Yourcenar engages in the alchemical experiment her literary machine sets in motion. However, like her characters who fail to escape their natures, and like the alchemist who fails to

transform base metals into gold, the novelist fails to free herself from herself. In terms of a Leclairian alphabet of desire,<sup>4</sup> that is, an alphabet of letters of the unconscious, Yourcenar's choice of a pseudonym is sexually and literarily signal. Names are important to this consummate woman of letters who tried to fashion at least a dozen signatures of the hero she calls her constant companion and whom she loves like a brother, that alchemist and healer whose name combines the "zero" and the "no"—in other words, lack of difference and denial. This onomastic obsession determined her response to finishing *L'Oeuvre au noir*: she said aloud, hundreds of times, the name "Zénon." When Zénon returns to his native Bruges after his years of wandering and heretical writing, he does so wisely under the cover of an alias. Coming home with a false name, he is said to burrow into the earth (*se terrer*) or to go underground. The earth (*la terre*) is a signifier frequently attached to Yourcenar's women. And she repeatedly mentions that name and origin are identical for Trier, the basset hound who accompanied her parents on all their trips and was, in her estimation, really more their child than she.<sup>5</sup> Neither Zénon nor Hadrian (for obvious historical reasons) is known by a family name and Zénon is, moreover, the illegitimate son of a priest.

Marguerite de Crayencour replaced the name of her father with a nom-de-plume by transforming the former into a near anagram. Minus its initial, Crayencour became Yourcenar. 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 the gynecentric pen-name, what remains is an anagram of *rancoeur*, the bitterness or resentment one retains after a disappointment or an injustice. As Leclair explains, and as we shall see, anagrams are telling (*Psa*, pp. 110-17).

What does the letter *Y*, (Yourcenar's chosen monogram) signify for its proprietress? Not only is she fond of it, she finds it beautiful. For Yourcenar, it represents a tree with open arms.<sup>6</sup> To the question "why do people write?" she replies that one writes because of a profound instinct, "just like people carving their initials in trees."<sup>7</sup> Love, glyph, name, letter, origin, and tree welcoming the knife: all of these symbolic elements establish an equivalence among themselves on the level of the unconscious. (The phenomenon of the graven initial is but one example among many that associate these same elements in Yourcenar's opus.) 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 (*Psa*, p. 163). The chosen name thus functions like a mask, assuring veiling and transgression (*Psa*, p. 115), 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.

But herein lies the phallacy.

*Electra or the Masks Fall* (*Electre ou la chute des masques*) offers insights on Yourcenar and her fiction. The phallic mask and the androcentric narrative conceal a different discourse and a different message. One signature hides another like a *cache*—a mask in the photographic sense. When the masks fall, Yourcenar's discourse tells the story of a girl obsessed with imagining her mother's murder, and who commits matricide by proxy. The agent authorized to act out Electra's hypercatheted hostility toward her mother is her older brother. The doomed mother tries to survive, but offering her breast as evidence of her maternal right to live was not Clytemnestra's saving grace. As she appears in Yourcenar's drama, Electra is called a monster by the playwright, who likens her monstrosity to that of Martha, Zénon's half-sister (*LYO*, p. 231). To a critic's suggestion that Electra and Martha limn self-portraits, Yourcenar responded by a categorical denial, implying that these women could not possibly portray her precisely because they are monsters. In her preface to the play, she writes, "the mother and the daughter belong to that group of women who seek masculine satisfaction in love."<sup>8</sup> Indeed it is not surprising that the return of the repressed to the textual surface takes the form of masculine homosexuality, or in the more rare case of this play, of women seeking masculine gratification in love. The internal logic of repression requires that the overt expression concealing the very existence of the repressed continue to hide it and to deny it by expressing it not only indirectly, but—and the Yourcenar case is exemplary—in the most indirect manner possible.<sup>9</sup> The amorous discourse of pederasty masks, within the narrative universe, an amorous discourse between a mother and her daughter and the fantasm of matricide furnishes the deep structure of these texts. A necessary inversion on the level of the fantasm (and the letter of the unconscious) produces a powerful tension between signifier and signified. This signifying tension is born of the return of the repressed

and its subsequent repression by a negating energy on the formal plane.

The figures dominating Yourcenar's discourse depend on the simultaneous affirmation of the repressed and the denial of its return: prolepsis and parapraxis. Prolepsis is a figure by which objections are anticipated in order to weaken their force. In *Le Coup de grâce*, for example, Eric reasons that he would have abandoned Sophie in any case, not, as the reader might surmise, because of his love of boys, but because he prefers solitude. In a parapraxis, the truth slips out, and the slip is taken for an accident. What is significant in Eric's illustrative proleptic contemplation is not the solitude he does or does not favor over companionship. The repressed master trope in Yourcenar's oral and written discourse, is a turning away from the woman.

Sexual difference and traces of murdering the heterosexual female hide too in the signature. For if its inventor imagines the letter *Y* to be a (phallic) tree ready for an embrace, psychiatrists interpret the design as the typical female position both for heterosexual intercourse and for giving birth.<sup>10</sup> Yourcenar's imagery belies her avowed indifference and is, after all, rooted in physiology: ten days after Marguerite de Crayencour's birth, on June 8th, 1903, her mother died of puerperal fever caused by a post partum infection. Haunted by a difficult forceps delivery and the trauma of its aftermath, the daughter constructs narrative and imagery symptomatic of severe narcissistic injury: first, its manifestations include doubles, uncanny mirror images, a craving for youth, masks, blindness, dryness, so-called feminine men and masculine women. Second, the image of a dead mother traverses the texts as a "phantom," a word occurring with disturbing frequency, seconded by near synonyms "specter" and "somnambulist," and by corresponding descriptive terms such as "pale," "bloodless," "waxy," "shadowy" and "ghastly." The phantom, as in *Hamlet* or *Notes From Underground*, 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 her 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.

Marguerite's birth and Fernande's death are disguised by signifiers that create functional isotopies in this author's intertext. It is

their tyranny in the lexical and metaphorical networks that cautions the reader to read the invisible ink. They center on the infant's object-relations, that is, primitive oneness and fusion with the mother, encompassing visual communication and nursing in its functions as oral gratification and physical contact. Complementing silhouettes of the desired Earth Mother who accepts and soothes, images of oral destructiveness signify the wish to devour and destroy the mother because of her failure to nourish and gratify, and, in general, to mediate between the child and its needs. A serious and unrepaired failure on the part of the mother leads to a poor self-image (sometimes compensated for by pseudosublimation, as is the case with Yourcenar<sup>11</sup>) and terrible guilt. A problematic of origins is evident too in Yourcenar's tremendous effort to trace her ancestry. Also part of the economy of need and anger, this deep search for connectedness counterbalances an anagrammatic repudiation of the family name: on the one hand, a leading back; on the other hand, a leading astray. She seeks simultaneously an impossible return and a necessary detour.

Negating the return of the repressed—the motor of Yourcenar's fiction—operates by a superimposition of detours, distancing, twists, wanderings and displacements. Zénon's case illustrates how this functions. The geographic displacement of the scholar (alchemist, doctor, and—not without import—writer, a writer who risks being betrayed by his writings), made necessary by the demands of the story and its telling, is a question of flight, pursuit and tracks. Turning away goes hand in hand with a desire to halt the abyssal displacement, and to fuse with the point of origin, here represented by the native city.<sup>12</sup> Returning is impossible, so Zénon goes underground, disguises himself and takes an alias. His choice, "Theus," with its connotation of creation ex-nihilo, is all the more significant because he is the illegitimate child of an abandoned mother: another instance of denial. The revelation of his true identity heralds his death, the sole narrative outcome of the detours that produce the narration of the return of the repressed (i.e., matricide). The desired return is denied and negated by the absence of the maternal body, symbolized by the ("negative") omnipresence of ghosts. A vengeful desire to abolish corporal filiation finds its apotheosis in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, where inheritance (and immortality), according to Greek history, depends upon adoption.

The metaphorical idealized image of the mother and blissful archaic narcissism are threatened throughout all of the texts. In

"Death's Milk" ("Le lait de la mort"), one of nine stories in *Nouvelles orientales*, a young woman allows herself to be walled up alive following the death of her loving husband. She wants only that her eyes and breasts remain free in order to see her child and to nurse it. After her death, her milk continues to flow. The story, like the intertextual narrative, results from a progressive derealization of the referent. But like the other ghosts that stalk Yourcenar's texts, this dead mother remains vitally present in the surviving child's life, while remorse pursues the survivor as if he were a criminal. This type of story narrates the identification between love and torture, thirst and mourning, heterosexual libido and a painful desire enclosed in a labyrinth of brick walls.

Numerous tales such as this contradict Yourcenar's proleptic comments in *Souvenirs pieux*, in which she denies that her mother's death caused her any sense of loss and claims that her father's mistresses and "near-mistresses" provided ample assurance of mother-daughter relationships (*SP*, p. 55). And as for seeing herself as a mother, she confesses she wanted to be one for a week, like all women. Typically universalizing her feelings, she speculates on the relationship she would have had with her mother had Fernande lived. Her initial love for her mother would have become "more and more mitigated by indifference, as is the case for so many adults who love their mothers" (*SP*, p. 56). Her father, in her words, became like an older brother, echoing the Orestian myth. Throughout her opus, the older brother plays a pendant role to the phantom, and Michel de Crayencour himself eventually becomes a character in her writing. She explains, "I tried to reconstitute him—as all novelists do—from my own substance, but it is an undifferentiated substance" (*LYO*, p. 224). Her imagined undifferentiated substance recalls the pregenital, especially oral, stage of infantile narcissism, when a fixation on the mother predominates. The non-resolution of this fixation means that a girl will continue to take her mother as a love object. The result is double: first, sexual inversion, and second, the transformation of the father into an older brother.

Yourcenar's women bear witness to the association of two paradigms: first, sexual difference and heterosexuality, whether symbolized by wife or mistress, and second, expendability, pain, humiliation, infection and death. In *Denier du rêve*, Lina Chiari, whose vocation institutionalizes heterosexual abuse of women, is stricken with breast cancer. To the terror, humiliation and solitude

that characterize Lina, Yourcenar adds a strange dimension: courtesy. Before her operation, Lina's thoughts are for a client whose rendez-vous she would have to cancel, and Yourcenar notes, "she is polite, having the exquisite politeness of simple people. . . . I like her humility" (*ER*, p. 92). But she also calls her a little mediocre nothing of a Roman prostitute, and adds that, like Marcella, "she is the Earth, the earth in springtime." Sophie's mirror reflects a face with childlike, angelic eyes, a face also compared to the earth in springtime.<sup>13</sup> However, the incongruity of this description coming immediately after Eric's brutal insults—she consults her mirror to regain self-esteem—casts a shadow on the image of a divine, fertile, and innocent though abused earth. In a moment of despair and fright, Sophie throws herself against good old fraternal Eric. For him, her body weighed down his arms as mysteriously as the earth would have, had he died. Thinking of Sophie in his arms, he reminisces, "I do not know at what moment delight turned to horror, reactivating the memory of that starfish Mommy, long ago, had forced into my hand . . . provoking my convulsive fit" (*CG*, pp. 191-92). This image leads back intertextually to Lina, who contemplates her cancerous breast. She will lose the visual and tactile proof of fertility and the ability to nourish proper to the heterosexual female. Like Eric face to face with the horror of the female body, she recalls a similar childhood trip to the beach. When an octopus clung to her skin, she "screamed and ran, encumbered (*alourdie*) by this hideous living weight. The animal could only be torn away by making her bleed. All her life, she kept in reserve the memory of those insatiable tentacles, of the blood, and of the scream that frightened her herself, but that now would be futile to let out, because she knew this time she would not be delivered."<sup>14</sup> In this barely disguised scene of Fernande's ordeal—kept in "reserve" by Marguerite—at the mercy of the forceps-wielding "butcher" (as Michel called the doctor) and the febrile seizures of peritonitis, the little girl is at once the pregnant woman and the baby. In fact, the texts disconcert by the number of fevers, burns, fires, flames, crucibles, and furnaces that inform them.

Simultaneously the source of life and death, woman sees in her mirror the reflection of another. In *Denier du rêve*, when Angiola watches herself on the movie screen, her make-up, as for all Yourcenar's women, serves as a mask, and the screen her mirror.<sup>15</sup> The narrator describes her ghoulish celluloid double: "this pale monster had drunk all of Angiola's blood. . . . She had sacrificed

everything to this ghost . . . great feminine Narcissus, . . . she smiled, fascinated by this monster of herself . . . this gigantic shadow . . . of an amorous viper, . . . like an Eve who would have amalgamated her serpent" (*DR*, pp. 134-36). A more extreme case of narcissistic pathology, Lina leaves the doctor's office, catches a glimpse of herself in a shop's mirror, and almost passes by her own unrecognizable reflection with "indifference" (*DR*, p. 29), for the face she beholds is her cadaver's. After rummaging for her lipstick, she goes straight into the parfumerie: "A lipstick is a necessity," explains the narrator. Her newly rouged mouth—the French *incarnat* is more telling—allows her to banish the phantom of her future self. A "thin layer of make-up" suffices for a vivifying, "dazzling mask" capable of blocking out the void and despair (*DR*, pp. 30-32).

In all instances, make-up disguises or denies reality rather than simply embellishing or enhancing it, and clearly assigns to woman the role of dissimulator. Far from highlighting the contour of the face, here the use of makeup indicates the absence of a stable existence of an original face. The tropological function of rouge—the color, moreover, of fire and blood—is to bestow a visage, in two senses: catachresis and prosopopeia. Taking lipstick in hand, Lina creates a face, pens a catachrestic name in red for what did not yet have a name, and sketches (in a sense) a pseudo-nym. Prosopopeia: in the etymological sense of the term, makeup masks what does not have an original face, masks an absent, turned away, or nonexistent face. The metaphor of the face is replaced by the negative knowledge of its figurative structure and its unreliable ontological status. For example, in "Achille ou le mensonge," Achilles—disguised as a woman—gazes at himself in a mirror that returns his face to him "in a reflection more terrifying than the void, the sallow and made-up (*fardée*) proof of his non-existence as a god."<sup>16</sup> By painting her face (like Lina), woman fakes her incarnation, and makes herself other than she is, in other words, a cadaver or ghost. In a stunning contrast to these rouged, spectral creatures, Yourcenar's description of her mother's mortuary photographs and of the dead woman rendered presentable on her deathbed evokes an overwhelming impression of whiteness, of everything, and especially the body, having been washed immaculately clean (*SP*, pp. 39-40).

Another of Yourcenar's painted ladies, Sophie, manages, despite wartime deprivations, to buy that necessity, make-up. Eric, who loves her like an older brother, muses, "Those eyes smeared with kohl . . .

those highlighted cheekbones did not make that face any more disgusting than would the scars of my own blows. I thought that once divinely pale mouth did not lie all that much in trying hard to look as if it were bleeding. Boys tried to capture this big butterfly, devoured before their eyes by an inexplicable flame" (*CG*, p. 178). Curiously, Yourcenar uses the same word, *barbouiller* ("smeared"), as a sign of an aggression against a woman and, in an interview, as a synonym for the word *écrire* ("to write") (*RS*). All of these elements recall the scene of the mother's doomed struggle as it structures Yourcenar's imagination: blood, dirt, wounds, scars, devouring fire, the soul escaping from men, and a nostalgia for the divine pallor associated with death, and in *Feux*, with virginity (p. 199). Writing of the doctor's decision to use forceps, she imagines (but presents as fact) that "the beautiful room seemed like the site of a crime" (*SP*, p. 27).

Even the causes Yourcenar champions seem implicated in the primal horror. She identifies with animals that are massacred, and especially the harpooned, bleeding whale, killed in a fashion homologous to the forceps delivery. Not surprisingly, she sees the whales as "victims of the bloody coquetry of woman," sacrificed to the manufacture of cosmetics. She sees other animals as "martyrs" whose lives are taken to provide women with their "bloody finery" (*LYO*, p. 285). Avoiding the butcher, at whose hands her mother suffered so pathetically, Yourcenar abstains from meat, and says (as if the fact were self-evident) that of course she never eats beef because of her "deep feelings of attachment and respect for the animal of whom the female gives us milk and represents the earth's fertility" (*LYO*, p. 307). Fernande did not nurse Marguerite even during the few days she might have and, while this is understandable, Yourcenar recounts this fact with little sympathy. In a *nouvelle orientale*, Philip speaks proudly of his mother, calling her "beautiful, slim, made-up, hard like the pane of a shop window" (*NO*, p. 47). The reader thinks of Lina Chiari leaving the parfumerie with her deceptive new lease on life. Philip adds that when he and his mother go out together, he is taken for her older brother. By now, this comes as no surprise. But further on he laments, "it is only in legends of semibarbarian countries that one still encounters creatures, rich with milk and tears, of whom one would be proud to be the child" (*NO*, p. 47). Thus, fluids flowing from the breast and the eye (recalling the imagery in "Death's Milk") define richness, inscribing value in the code of narcissism. There is no doubt about the meaning of tears: in *Feux* we read that "the strangled woman's eyes

squirted like two long tears" (p. 49). "There was no question," Yourcenar coldly writes, "of Fernande deforming her breasts" (*NO*, p. 30). In contrast, describing her bottle, she gushes, "the rich food comes from a life-giving animal, the symbol of the fecund earth" (*SP*, pp. 30-31). Here, the word *nourricière* describes the cow, but combined with the word "mother" (*mère*) it signifies "foster-mother." The oral destructive wish to devour and destroy the mother must be kept in abeyance. It is none the less quite clear that the glacial hostility felt toward the mother is emphasized by its juxtaposition to such effusive sentiments toward the cow.

The interconnections of these images and tropes proliferate in every text. A fleeing lover is a "bloodless specter," who no longer gives any kisses, as well as a "somnambulist of crime" (*Feux*, p. 99). Attys' father beats her so much that she becomes "afraid of everything: of ghosts" (*Feux*, p. 200). Sappho makes up in order to camouflage her "snowy, deathlike pallor": she looks like a "cadaver of an assassinated woman, with a little of her own blood on her cheeks" (*Feux*, p. 193). Rouge's metaphorical link to blood also triggers Eric's association of Sophie's lipstick with his fist's impact on her face. Blood is further equated to fire and to loss of love in a representative prose poem of *Feux*, in which the abandoned lover awakes nightly in the conflagration of her own blood (p. 110). The text's overdetermination of these images is striking.

An analogous and favored image of a bleeding sun often appears as a sun bleeding onto the sea (not unlike the harpooned whale): for Zénon, his death is accompanied by this sun being drained of its vital fluid. The emblem carries the morbid connotation of Fernande's bloody, soiled sheets incinerated in the embers of the kitchen fire (*SP*, p. 28). This scene is described with all the appearances of cold-blooded objectivity by the daughter who goes on immediately to describe her newborn self with the detached gaze of the narcissist, and then continues: "the mother, too extenuated to tolerate any more fatigue, turned her head away when the infant was presented to her" (*SP*, p. 28).

By an unconscious convergence of experience and text, the turning away and the return of the ghost underpin the writer's vengeance. As Yourcenar presents the facts, her source of life and warmth bled because of her, turned away from her, and was extinguished forever. After some seventy-five years of living, this woman equated "the true face of life" to a "brazier," using the same

lexicon she had when describing the mother's averted look and the concomitant burning of the bloodied, criminal evidence. Here again, concern for a true (as opposed to an absent or artificial) face is coextensive with love's torture. Life, she goes on to say, "is like fire; it feeds on destruction; it is devouring. . . . I do not deny the reassuring presence of the fire of love, but it too often happens that that fire is extinguished faster than the others, or that it too becomes devouring" (*LYO*, pp. 220-21).

In Yourcenar's works, the sun, if it is not bleeding, is either already burnt out or horrifyingly devouring. In an illustrative tableau in *Feux*, "Antigone ou le choix," a series of metaphors equates awful sun and heart, and associates them with hatred and infection. Love, like radioactive emanations from the heart, eats away at one's conscience and causes blinding, intolerable pain if faced directly. These rays cannot cure the uncontrollable, lethal disease consuming the body like a fire. Any attempt to tamper with love, even, or especially, in the form of the dark sunrays of a love snuffed out, leads to blindness, in other words, the lack of visual communication critical to healthy archaic narcissism and absent between Marguerite and Fernande.

Disturbed narcissistic development repeatedly determines Yourcenar's imagery. Alexis, for example, hates his mirror for inflicting upon him his own presence (*Alexis*, p. 76). Narcissistically bemoaning his lost youth, he thrills to sleeping in the bed he occupied during adolescence. "I had," he realizes, "the sensation of joining with myself" (*Alexis*, p. 117). Eric's double is projected in the form of Sophie's brother Conrad, whose footsteps in the sand are identical to his own. When Conrad dies, so too does Eric's own youth (*CG*, pp. 143-44). This identification and love for an object representing one's own self corresponds, in the characterology of pathological narcissism, to an oral-sadistic hostility projected against the primitive parental images, and especially against the mother.

Zénon also exemplifies a divided self in search of its reflection. "Another awaits me elsewhere: I am going to him," he declaims to his stupefied cousin. "Myself," explains Zénon, turning back. In each part of the novel Zénon observes himself in some sort of reflecting object. At the end of his life's journey, his magnifying glass uncannily returns the image of his own, enlarged eye: the reflection is at once disorienting and repetitive.<sup>17</sup> "In a sense," the narrator elucidates, establishing an unusual polarity, "the eye counterbalances the abyss"

(*OAN*, p. 243). What, then, is the fate of one, like Yourcenar, who imagines being denied the look of the other/mirror? The hypertrophied presence of the eye compensates for the abyss, metaphor of death, of Mother Earth, of unfathomable waters, of continual repetitive displacement, and of the inner void symptomatic of narcissism, a feeling usually localized in the stomach or the heart. Condemned, Zénon slashes his wrists; as he bleeds to death, he feels the palpitations of a scarlet globe bleeding on the sea. Coextensive with his heart's cold and dark retreat is Zénon's blindness. This withdrawal of love and sight signifies death, mimicking the basic metonymy of the narrative, that is, a simulacrum (or ghost) of the criminally derealized referent: the mother.

"L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides," recounts another version of the personalized alchemical metaphor. Panégyotis returns completely and irrevocably transformed by his visit to the nymphs. Never again could he live like those around him once he had encountered the "feminine world . . . different" from his island's.<sup>18</sup> His transformation is as profound "as if he had visited death" (*NO*, p. 102), recalling Eric's sentiment when he held Sophie in his arms. Thereafter, nothing could rid Panégyotis's blood of the nymphs, those mad, sun-colored phantoms whose powers are feared like those of the "dangerous sun" (*NO*, pp. 99, 100, 103). The narrator's maxim explains that "happiness is fragile, and when men or circumstances do not destroy it, it is threatened by phantoms" (*NO*, p. 99). Such a dramatic transformation perhaps astonishes so completely because Panégyotis had simply, but significantly, gone to find a veterinarian, a profession unconsciously suggestive of another, that of the "butcher" who delivered Marguerite.

Yourcenar seems to suggest he might have been better advised to do without the animal doctor and, despite the attraction of the world of "illusions," stay on his island. In *Denier du rêve*, the narrator asks rhetorically, "What is woman?" The implied answer proleptically precedes the question: "to lie, to burn the bridges between the other and oneself, to bury oneself in lies like in the interior of an island" (*DR*, p. 146). In *Feux*, Sappho the acrobat, at home neither in the heavens nor on earth, like a ghost, seems disguised as a woman. Her heart, hidden and too heavy, resembles a wild animal who half devours her (like the "hideous living weight"—octopus/cancer/pregnancy—Lina Chiari experienced). Sappho tried secretly to tame it. What she has in her favor is having been born on an island, which, the

narrator remarks, "is already a beginning of solitude" (*Feux*, pp. 195-96). As for Hadrian, the only female lover he ever really loved died young, "on an illness-ridden island."<sup>19</sup>

Lost in the fog, the island of Achilles represents, in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, the convergence of writing, the mother-child relationship, the mother, death, the female ghost, the abyss, and the rejection of heterosexual love. Achilles' mother, who wished to make him invulnerable by baptizing him in the Styx, disguised her son as a woman, echoing Sappho who symbolizes both inversion and reversion. So important in the memories of Lina and Eric, site too where Zénon bizarrely observes himself in his magnifying glass, the beach plays a major role in Hadrian's memoirs: Thetis returns nightly from the ocean's depths to converse with her son, Achilles, on the shores of the island where, Hadrian recounts, "the shade of Patrocles appeared at Achilles's side" (*MH*, p. 296).

Nothing is inessential in Yourcenar's scriptural economy, and least of all the myth of Achilles. An intertextual reading reveals the gap between the myth, as it is generally known, and its translation into the Yourcenarian alchemical code. "Achille ou le mensonge" tells that Thetis dressed Achilles like a goddess in order to fool death, while Achilles, whom the narrator describes as "infected by mortality" reminds his mother of "the only error of her divine youth: she had slept with a man without taking the precaution of changing him into a god" (*Feux*, pp. 42-43). Achilles' arrival on the island (that would bear his name) causes a transformation as radical as that undergone by Panégotyis or Zénon: "Day was no longer day, but the blond mask placed on darkness; the women's breasts became breast-plates on soldiers' chests" (*Feux*, p. 42).

In "Patrocle ou le destin," only one woman disengages herself from "this heap of trampled women," "this naked pulp [of] screaming women giving birth to death through the breach of wounds" (*Feux*, p. 67). A clinical case of narcissism, this woman (valorized by the text) is "armor-clad, helmeted, masked with gold, this mineral Erinye . . . alone among her companions, she had consented to have her breast amputated" (*Feux*, p. 67). Face to face with this avatar of Lina with her cancerous breast, Achilles advances, then retreats, "riveted to this metal that contained a consecrated wafer, invaded by the love one finds at the bottom of hatred" (*Feux*, p. 68). But when Penthesilea's visor is raised, Achilles discovers "instead of a face, a mask with blind eyes that kisses no longer reached. . . . It was the only being in the

world who resembled Patrocles" (*Feux*, p. 69). A symbolic apotheosis of the denial of the repressed, everything in this scenario participates in negation: space permits retreat, the host is illusory, the face does not exist, the mask lacks power (whereas the metaphor of makeup indicated the false face of a deformed catachresis, here the face is but a false mask, or a deformation of a *prosopopoeia*), kisses are no longer efficacious. However, this "being" of negation, this plenitude of absence (of the absent woman) is the double of the only beloved, desired being. That the fiction portrays a masculine couple in no way means that on the level of the repressed fantasm onanism or pederasty are at play. Enunciating Patrocles' name is yet another negative turn of the impossible return to origin and therefore allies itself with abnormal narcissism and with death. Yourcenar's fiction figuratively repeats the matricide that her physical existence literally wrought.

Marguerite Yourcenar rejected the world of Marguerite de Crayencour in favor of a remote Maine island that—in the language of narcissism—exemplifies "splendid isolation." But as Alexis' vain combat proves, "we are never completely alone: unhappily we are always with ourselves" (*Alexis*, p. 80). After killing Sophie, Eric realizes that "one is always trapped by these women" (*CG*, p. 246). And Yourcenar's Clytemnestra resigns herself to the fact that, much as one would like to, "one cannot, after all, kill a corpse" (*Feux*, p. 190). For Achilles, "all his life, women had represented the instinctive part of misfortune, of which he had not chosen the form, that he was supposed to suffer, could not accept" (*Feux*, p. 66).

The woman's discourse is the unreadable in the narrative. For the writer, it is what she believed she did not write. Her repressed feminine discourse concerns the trauma of an injury to the very specific relationship between a daughter and a mother, one very different from the male homosexual or frustrated heterosexual relationships largely at play on the texts' surface. The very hiddenness of this discourse declares the painful message of their relationship gone awry, become hideous. Clues to the unreadability of this supposedly steely, cool, wilfully detached writing—writing claimed to be indifferent to sexual markings—slip out but are taken as an accident. It goes without saying that these slips undermine the narrative and disorient the reader. At every turn is written the repression of a discourse that is properly feminine: it is a daughter's anguish, elicited by the psychic wound of her imagined matricide and her mother's

irrevocable abandonment. It is the writing of her desire for her mother's forgiveness and the impossibility of forgiving her mother. It is the rage of the daughter writing herself differently.

## NOTES

1. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Alexis ou le traité du vain combat* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 43. Subsequent references shall appear in the text abbreviated as *Alexis*. The translation is mine, as are all translations in this essay.

2. Patrick de Rosbo, *Entretiens radiophoniques avec Marguerite Yourcenar* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972), p. 77. Abbreviation: *ER*. These talks were broadcast by the ORTF, 11-16 January 1971.

3. Vincent Descombes, *L'Inconscient malgré lui* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 20.

4. Serge Leclair, *Psychanalyser* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p. 127. Abbreviation: *Psa*.

5. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Souvenirs pieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 53. Abbreviation: *SP*.

6. Matthieu Galey, *Les Yeux ouverts* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1980), p. 55. Abbreviation: *LYO*.

7. *Radioscopies*, interview by Jacques Chancel on France-Inter, 11-15 June 1979. Abbreviation: *RS*.

8. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Théâtre II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 21.

9. I would like to thank psychoanalyst Monique Schneider for this and other insights shared during a conversation at Cerisy (July, 1982).

10. I would like to thank Dr. Bruce Kehr of the Psychiatric Institute in Washington, D.C. for his help with this discussion of the letter *Y*.

11. Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1975), p. 229.

12. It is pertinent that the English title of *L'Oeuvre au noir* is *The Abyss*, a translation privileging this notion of endless displacement implied by the chapter title *L'Abîme*.

13. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Alexis . . . , suivi de Le Coup de Grâce* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 172. Abbreviation: *CG*.

14. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Denier du rêve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 27. Abbreviation: *DR*.

15. The nature and function of mirror images in *Denier du rêve* are examined in detail in Farrell and Farrell, "Mirrors and Masks in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Denier du*

rêve," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 17, No. 3 (Summer 1981), 307-19, but no mention is made of the mirror's psychoanalytic significance.

16. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Feux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 52. Page references follow the title: *Feux*.

17. Marguerite Yourcenar, *L'Oeuvre au noir* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1968), p. 242. Abbreviation: *OAN*.

18. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Nouvelles orientales* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 104. Abbreviation: *NO*.

19. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 66. Abbreviation: *MH*.