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**MASK AND GENDER IN THE WORK
OF MARGUERITE YOURCENAR:
STAGING THE VOICE**

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>I. Alexis and the “portrait of a voice” technique</i>	18
<i>II. The Imaginary Father: Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Yourcenar</i>	22
<i>III. Humanism that crossed the abyss : Thomas Mann and Marguerite Yourcenar</i>	27
<i>IV. Masked Ball and Fragments of Love Discourse</i>	34
<i>V. The mask as a face</i>	38
<i>Conclusion</i>	42
<i>Contributions of the thesis:</i>	46
<i>Bibliography</i>	47

INTRODUCTION

This study endeavors to investigate the interplay of mask, gender, and subject in the works of Marguerite Yourcenar, positing that their construction is intrinsically linked to the notion of staging the voice. These concepts are derived not solely from theoretical trajectories but rather from Yourcenar's paraliterary texts, including essays, notes, prefaces, and, of course, her artistic works. The theoretical presuppositions of this study suggest that gender is constructed through a discursive masquerade, hence perceiving identification not as monolithic, fixed, or essentialist, but rather as playful, establishing a interdependence between mask and gender.

The central hypothesis regarding mask and voice posits that they do not oppose each other but engage in a shared dynamic, as noted in Yourcenar's specific writing technique. This involves staging a narrative voice through which the timbre, range, pitch, and internal modulations smooth both the fictional reality of the novel and the narrative's temporal scope, along with the heterogeneous subject in process. Importantly, the voice is always secondary and reconstructed, imagined through texts, archives, and written traces.

This study draws upon two significant strands within Bulgarian literary studies, succinctly represented in Miglena Nikolchina's *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf* and Amelia Licheva's *Stories of the Voice*. Licheva's conceptual framework, which the dissertation continues, posits the *voice* as “a narrative of acoustic masks, of the roles and travesties of the voice, of the plots of its construction, of its various appropriations”¹. By deconstructing the notion of *voice*, Licheva's book demonstrates both theoretically and through the history of European literature, from Homer to Yourcenar, the atopic nature of the voice, continuously undergoing processes of disintegration and construction, appropriation and alienation, and intersecting intimately and externally with body and language.

The function of the mask in Yourcenar is examined through Julia Kristeva's concepts of the abject and the imaginary father. Nikolchina applies these concepts to her analysis of the difficulty of admitting female names into literary canons and the tendency for women's

¹ Licheva, *Stories of the Voice*, 2002, 8.

contributions to literature and culture to be retroactively erased: if Harold Bloom sees the oedipal “anxiety of influence” as defining literary genealogies, in the case of women writers “abject” motherhood turns out to be the matrix of (lack of) inheritance². Kristeva's response to this matrix is her idea of the 'singularity' of female genius - it is as such singularity that Yourcenar can be seen.

What is it about the figure and oeuvre of Marguerite Yourcenar that compels her to be the focal point of this study? It is precisely her embodiment of the challenges associated with integrating into the literary canon. This is most conspicuously illustrated by the oft-cited but significant fact that she was the first female member of the French Academy.³ The belated inclusion of a woman into the French Academy, while significant in itself, has ignited considerable debate regarding Yourcenar's position among twentieth-century women writers. The primary controversies surrounding her figure pertain to her masculinist writing style, her refusal to endorse feminism, questions about her affiliation with French literature, and her American citizenship. Moreover, Yourcenar's life was geographically and culturally diverse, having spent half of it in America and possessing a mixed heritage—Belgian maternal and French paternal. Consequently, her admission to the Academy was fraught with complications. Opposing critiques have long been directed at her, ranging from the dismissive remark, “her only flaw is that she is a woman”, to the contradictory, “she is not woman enough”. Additionally, some critiques have been ad hominem, attacking her physical appearance with comments such as “she is not a good writer because she is so ugly and fat” or undermining her intellectual accomplishments by asserting that “a person who has read so much cannot be a good writer.”⁴ Not a real woman, not a real French woman. This study aims to examine Yourcenar within the context of a dual refusal: avoiding the confinement of her work to an entirely masculine style, and resisting the temptation to frame her as a feminist pioneer. In Bulgarian, the nuanced observation of one of her translators, Krassimir Mirchev, aligns with the hypothesis of this work. Mirchev remarks on Yourcenar's reception in the French literary scene between the wars in a manner that emphasizes universality: “For them, the pinnacle of her work remains *Flames* (1936) – beyond this book (and indeed largely with it) begins the “elusive” Yourcenar, who decisively turned away from the very domestic, largely self-indulgent circle of Parisian writers and preferred the ways of the world, embracing an

² Nikolchina, *Matricide in Language*.

³ In the issue of "Literary Journal", on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Yourcenar's admission to the Academy, various Bulgarian intellectuals answer the question of what it was that broke the male order and opened a new page in the history of the French Academy. Zemyarska, "A Woman Member of the Academy," 10-11.

⁴ Savigneau, *Marguerite Yourcenar: Inventing a Life*, 1993, 383.

increasingly open humanism.⁵ . Today, Yourcenar should not be thought of through the framework of national identity or entirely in the context of the French Academy. This study considers Yourcenar's figure in the spirit of a cosmopolitan community of world literature and humanism.

Part of the stakes of the work involve not overlooking this aspect, which seeks the writer's place on the map of world literature. Yourcenar succeeds in following an ideal of world literature that does not fall into any of the three pitfalls outlined by Tsvetan Stoyanov in his brief 1970 article⁶ . Nor does she fit into the narrow confines of isolationism and nationalist discourse; she does not fall into the globalizing trap and Alexandrian (Anglo-Saxon) uniformity; she does not follow the market logic in which small literatures are seen through the lens of exoticization.

Yourcenar is included in one of the most influential visions of world literature today, that of David Damrosch. For Damrosch, Yourcenar is a long-loved exemple - he has spoken about her in various public lectures, but also in his books *Comparing Literatures: Literary Studies in the Global Age* (2020) and *Around the World in 80 Books* (2021). Quite directly to the question of the modes through which Yourcenar fits into his conception of world literature, Damrosch replies that although Yourcenar is part of the French Academy, she is first and foremost an American citizen who wrote her major novels in the United States⁷ , fascinated by open spaces and African American culture. Damrosch does not fail to emphasize Yourcenar's travels around the world and her interest in "multiple pre-modern worlds rather than (...) [in] modern chronotopes"⁸ . In his readings of Yourcenar, Damrosch especially emphasizes that she should not be thought of as a perpetual European whose life in the United States is an exile in a cultural wasteland⁹ . This is a primarily geographic and spatial approach – an *American citizen travelling extensively around the world, creating distant worlds, much like her own distance from France* – which is even more evident in the idea behind the *Around the World in 80 Books* project. Translation is an important criterion in the creation of this typography of

⁵ Yourcenar, "Flames", 6.

⁶ Stoyanov, "The Ideal of 'World Literature'", 66-65.

⁷ By some of the most prominent Yourcenarist, this issue is examined in the collection Marguerite Yourcenar and America in three ways: the writer's encounter with the American way of life, the presence of America in her work, and the reception of her work across the Ocean. See: Goslar, *Marguerite Yourcenar et l'Amerique*.

⁸ Damrosch and Zemyarska, "World Literature as the Two-Headed Imaginary Animal of Butney-Drapney," 10.

⁹ Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 220.

literature for Damrosch, insofar as he recognizes world literature primarily in English¹⁰. The book emphasizes that this journey is only one version of world literature, without pretending to be a list of canonical books like Harold Bloom's, nor to give a uniform order to globalized literature. David Damrosch himself refers to Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, which he calls "a magnificent book," but his idea is to extend its scope to a contemporary "global landscape," not just a European one, while also stripping away the claim of universality. To use Bloom's terms from *The Anxiety of Influence*, this attempt by Damrosch to continue the canon-building begun by his colleague would be a *tessera* (completion) - a second treatment of predecessors in which their work seems fragmentary and incomplete. In Bloom's defense, it may be added that the authors he considers in *The Western Canon* are by no means, as Damrosch points out, twenty-six, but considerably more, including the final list, in which Marguerite Yourcenar is present in the chaotic era with two of his novels¹¹.

To the way in which Damrosch constructs world literature it is good to add the view of Galin Tihanov. Tihanov critically rethinks the notion of circulation, behind which one clearly recognizes the liberal Anglo-Saxon discourse and the idea of a more encompassing ecosystem in which all texts in English flow unhindered, move and are translated. As a counterpoint to this ahistorical and decontextualized notion of world literature, Tihanov develops the idea of literary zones and a zonal modus in which Bulgarian literature is in dialogue with the Balkan literary zone, the Slavic zone, and as such these zones internally overlap, hybridize, contest, and flow into world literature¹².

To this current debate, I find particularly relevant the hypothesis of Ognyan Kovachev from the last chapter of his book *Literature and Identity* (2005), which compares the concepts of national, world and global literature in the contemporary situation¹³. Kovachev examines the concepts in terms of both their territorial and their tropological referentiality. It seems to me significant how the linking of *world* and *literature* can be divided into before and after the entry of globalizing tendencies: 'the correlation between national and global formats in the pre-globalization discourse carefully takes the form of incorporating the private contribution into

¹⁰ Damrosch, *Around the World in 80 Books*, xviii.

¹¹ Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 552.

¹² Tihanov, "Beyond Circulation," 223-247; Tihanov, *World Literature. Cosmopolitanism. Exile. Selected articles and interviews*, 225.

¹³ Beyond the chapter on "Literature and Identity Transformations of Otherness," Ognyan Kovachev reflects on the problem of world literature in Kovachev, "National Literature. World Literature. Global Literature?" и Kovachev, "World Literature Today - a Sphere Centered Everywhere?".

a not only quantitatively larger whole'¹⁴ . Kovachev thus points to the universality and universal dialogue of world literature, already outlined by Goethe's conversation with Eckermann on 31 January 1827, as its guiding principle, but even more importantly its temporal dream between *past* and *present*, *classical* and *modern*, *exemplary* and *contemporary*. After all, in such temporal articulation we can see the theories of canon formation familiar to us from T.S. Eliot, Borges, and of course H. Bloom from *The Anxiety of Influence*. Skeptical-anxious reflections on the differences that come with globalism and global literature, accompanied by new media and virtuality, are especially important. They diagnose new trends that are no longer utopian or dystopian at all, but increasingly available: 'New tools not only facilitate and accelerate human activities and communication, but reproduce a technological world in whose virtual spaces roam the ghosts of a lost sense of reality?'¹⁵ . In short, what Damrosch calls world literature today is well described by Kovachev in terms of global literature with all its attendant deceptive similarities and workable differences from the Enlightenment-romantic image of world literature. It is in this perspective that I find it fruitful to reread the stakes of *Literature and Identity: transformations of otherness*, in which the dream between national, world and global is the thread of Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos that runs through the whole book. In the chapter on Daniela Chodrova, Theta is examined as a metafictional novel and is juxtaposed to John Barth, Pynchon, Calvino, Angela Carter, but also to Cervantes, Borges, Kundera, but also Debelyanov is read alongside Rilke, Gothic symbolism is sought in Bulgarian symbolism, and the possibility of thinking of a Balkan Gothic is considered. This in fact fits in well with Tihanov's idea of the zonality of world literature and a possible intertextual dialogue and tension between different zones in which aesthetic, political, social and economic factors are not forgotten. Kovachev's theoretical framework thus provides the necessary tools to critically look at the contemporary global notion of world literature with an argument more akin to Bloom's.

But to return to *the example of Yourcenar*. Of course, the lineage around her inscription and, by extension, inscription in the various contexts and languages in which she resided during her lifetime is extremely interesting and complex. Beyond her biographical history, Yourcenar

¹⁴ Kovachev, *Literature and Identity Transformations of Otherness*, 247.

¹⁵ Kovachev, 242.

crafts a vision of world literature in her work through a surreal combination of ancient masks and contemporary bodies.

This dynamic can be thought of most directly in *Flames* and *Eastern Novels*, two books that Yourcenar worked on in parallel during and after his first trip through Greece and the Balkan Peninsula. The novellas tell stories taken from folklore or everyday print, from different parts of the world - Greece, Serbia, India, China, Japan. The thoughtful combination of *Flames* and *Eastern Novels*, however, provides a glimpse of both the cultural past and the challenges of the present, clothed in poetic language and combining various realities of literature from the contemporary circle to just-occurring authors such as Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, but also the whole tradition to which Yourcenar refers such as Racine, Shakespeare and also to the ancient world, not omitting the Balkan peoples with King Marco, but also Prince Gendji, Wang Fu, the goddess Kali. Therefore, it seems to me that it is not the journey itself that guides Yourcenar's method, but the possibility to use *stylistic masks*, to mimic the respective traditions, dialects and customs. Through the idea of zonality, we can think of *Eastern Novels* as an amalgamation of the Balkan and Slavic literary zone, but also that of the Near and Far East. This wholly imaginative articulation and juxtaposition of traditions grows precisely out of Yourcenar's ostentatious point of view, which, through her journey into modern Greece, performs a kind of immersion in the past that allows for the archaeological crossing not only of geographical but also temporal zones.

Here is the place to add Kamelia Spassova's interesting idea of *world literature as imaginary*: "The idea of a world literature can be represented not only through the geopolitical factor (a contemporary anthology-collection of genre-images from exotic parts of the world or an accumulation of works from different times and epochs), but also through the factor of the imaginary component, which is capable of creating wholeness and a world. In this case we can speak of imaginary world literatures, their multiplicity and asymmetry being at the very basis of the definition of the concept"¹⁶ . And in this sense, yes, world travel is important to Yourcenar, but her own biographical experience and especially her creative experience show that travel and location literature work with an imaginative element. World literature is impossible precisely without an imaginative component that brings together scattered

¹⁶ In his paper at the Forum "Cinema, Canon, Gothic" (26-27.11.2021), dedicated to O. Kovachev, presented his idea of *world literature* as imaginary. I quote her idea through part of her abstract, which has not yet become a published full text.

geographies into a shared world; allows for reenactments of times gone by; and gathers fragmented life experience into a plot with a beginning, a flow, and an end. Through the example of Yourcenar's work, we can even more clearly focus on a notion of world literature that must serve itself with two components, the imaginary and the zonal, only then does it gain its relief.

The proposed study on the work of Marguerite Yourcenar does not follow the chronological order of the writing of her works. The first chapter of the work is on the author's early novel *Alexis* (1929), the second on her memoir trilogy *The Labyrinth of the World* (1974-1984), the third discusses her novel *The Abyss* (1968), and the last two chapters, chapters four and five, examine her collection of prose poems, *Flames* (1936). One of my reasons for choosing such a composition is the thesis, traced throughout the dissertation, that in Yourcenar chronology is always folded into typology: early works anticipate later ones, late works incorporate early ones. This approach, derived and motivated again through the writer's own writing, is my preferred one both at the structural level and at the level of the chapter-by-chapter work. What Yourcenar has created is always secondary, retroactive and reflexive. It is secondary insofar as it makes use of documents, archives, other earlier manuscripts, drafts and notes; it is retroactive insofar as the later works absorb the early; it is reflexive insofar as it procures paratexts in which the similarities and differences with predecessors, intertextual connections and philosophical stakes of the fiction are commented upon. The secondary, retroactive and reflexive approaches elaborate the multi-layered structure of Yourcenar's work.

Yourcenar never stops thinking about an already completed work of his, even when edits at the level of plot and style have already been discontinued. The Belgian-French writer¹⁷ often adds new paratexts: prefaces, notes, afterwords, complementary fragments; and also modifies a plot or technique from an old text into a new one. But this process works forward and backward in time. The early novel *Alexis* is so remarkable as a "portrait in one voice" and

¹⁷ In French-language scholarship on Yourcenar's work, it is not or extremely rare to find her referred to as a "Belgian-French" writer, inasmuch as her Belgian country is often borrowed. Since French-language is her largest reception, Yourcenar is traditionally referred to as a French writer. For the present study, the Belgian component is significant insofar as her own genealogical fantasy is also significant. In this context, therefore, Belgian-French and French are used as synonyms. It should be borne in mind that throughout I think of the figure of Yourcenar in terms of this amalgam of origins, but I use only "French writer" more often so as not to unnecessarily burden the language where there is no meaningful charge to this emphasis.

because this technique appears in the great novel *The Memoirs of Hadrian*. *Alexis* is a narrative sketch of *Hadrian*, a stripped-down technique.

A beautiful, strange example of this folding of time is the story surrounding the 1938 completion of *Dreams and Destinies*, which illustrates both the dynamics of early into late and late into early, and the writer's talent for turning trauma into narrative.

"*Dreams and Destinies* is a catalogue of oneiric experiences recorded by Yourcenar over a five-year period between 1931 and 1936. It took the writer about two years to turn the diary entries into a book, but her thoughts and work on it did not cease after that. In time, the writer pulled quotations about dreaming from books she read (Novalis and the Surrealists, Artemidorus and Freud, Pascal and Cayois) to revise, expand, and republish her reflections on dreams. She was unable to follow through with her idea, as death caught up with her before she could finish the new edition. Yourcenar left copious (but also somewhat haphazard) notes on *Dreams and Destinies*, kept throughout her life, in her archive, which is preserved at the Harvard Library. Only her most explicit wishes are therefore added directly to the text of the posthumous editions. Whatever began to move her moved her along the writing of the rest of her texts, so that dreaming appears as a theme in many other works beyond *Dreams and Destinies*-that is why it is the most distinct among the requirements, she has left is the addition of two lengthy epigraphs from her two major novels, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) and *The Abyss* (1968), in which Hadrian and Zenon reflect on the ghostly-surreal nature of dreams. They comment on the power of dreams at the threshold of their own death in the peculiar state between agony and enlightenment. For Adrian, dreams bring forth events more intense and more real than reality. Like him, Yourcenar commented that among the fog of ordinary dreams there are some more extraordinary ones, which can be recognized by the vividness of the images and colours in them. In Zeno's case the epiphany is in the opposite direction, the learned alchemist achieves a state in which reality becomes more saturated than dreams. Epiphany for Hadrian remains in the thrall of the sensual; alchemical enlightenment for Zeno goes beyond the mediation of the senses through the idea of creation in black, decay, working with negativity. The emperor and alchemist's reflections from the two later novels are transformed into epigraphs to the earlier of their two, *Dreams and Destinies*.

Thus, an early work by Yourcenar turns out to be the last and unfinished one, and what is written in the later works is embedded in the earlier one. Through this bidirectional passage

of time, one significant aspect of the analyses in the individual chapters of this work can be drawn out: it has to do with the hybridity of real and imagined kinships in Yourcenar.

As already stated, in 1980 Yourcenar became a member of the French Academy, but her path was traced by her admission to the Royal Belgian Academy in 1971. Such a reminder can serve as a metaphor for us to see behind the figure of the father and her French origins the often overlooked figure of the mother and her Belgian ancestry. Yourcenar Fernand's mother died a few days after the difficult birth of her daughter Marguerite. In this sense, the maternal homicidal scenario in Yourcenar is not a phantasm but a fact. Both *Dreams and Destinies* and *The Labyrinth of the World* begin with the moment of Yourcenar's birth and her mother's death. This approach of Yourcenar's to sketch in the early works and incorporate what is sketched in the later ones (and sometimes, as I have shown above, to complete the early ones by incorporating parts of the later ones) is what has led me to arrange the themes discussed in the work not in chronological order but in an attempt to think them typologically.

In *Dreams and Destinies*, Yourcenar most directly and immediately reveals the role her mother's death played in her own formation. Her father, Michel, is covered in numerous memoirs, letters, and interviews, but the big story about him comes in the memoir trilogy *The Labyrinth of the World*, which begins with this birth/death. In this first part of the trilogy, Yourcenar chronicles the lives of Michel and Fernand, and their families, slowly and in beautiful detail. She introduces the atmosphere that precedes her birth - the gloomy weather in Belgium, her parents' library where they read under the watchful eye of Minerva's statue, all the women shuffling through the castle corridors, speaking now in German, now in French, her father's mild disappointment at his young wife's petit-bourgeois habits, Trier the dog contentedly sipping milk from his daily home delivery. Yourcenar's observation that her mother's most charming quality is, in all likelihood, her voice, whose tone and rhythm the author imagines from a note her father kept from the time her pregnant mother could not speak due to a sage operation, is remarkable, and it is through her writing that she makes daily contact with Michel. Yourcenar does not fail to bring in a fatalistic line that suggests that her mother foresaw in the days before her birth what was to come, as both her mother's mother (Yourcenar's grandmother) and her mother's grandmother (Yourcenar's great-grandmother) died in childbirth. Little Yourcenar's birth is painful, prolonged and bloody. The child is taken out by forceps and Fernand is gripped by fever. The narrative depicts her mother's death with an attached piece of paper on which her father recorded the mother's pulse and temperature from the 11th to the 18th of June. Beyond this account of the writer's last decade, which is

probably the most emblematically referenced by her researchers in relation to the mother figure, Yourcenar has also left a recurring childhood dream of her own in the preface to *Dreams and Destinies*, which she herself interprets as a dream of her birth:

[I]n dreams, I saw a bloody and mutilated body fall into a room through the conduit of a singularly large, dark chimney. My sleeping little girl's reasoning explained this event by the presence upstairs of burglars, about whose exploits the maids often read aloud from the evening papers in my presence, but it now strikes me as plausible that this was actually a dream of giving birth, resulting from curiosity about sexuality, or rather about procreation, on the part of a little girl who must often have heard whispered allusions to her mother, deceased in childbirth, and to the use of forceps at the moment of her birth.¹⁸

Where does the terror of this dream come from and how does the dreamer explain it? This is a dream about childbirth as a maternal homicide. The separation of the baby from the mother's body is associated with images of tearing, dismemberment, disfigurement. Julia Kristeva introduces the notion of *abject* in relation to the earliest phase in the construction of the subject. The boundary between subject and object has not yet been established. The abject marks, after all, a fine line that is drawn between clean and dirty, between my clean body and its exterior. The trauma in Yourcenar is that this phantasmatic separation from the murdered maternal body - the abjection of that body as formless and horrific and the concomitant guilt fantasy of maternal murder - has literally happened. The daughter's birth did cause the mother's death. What is remarkable about Yourcenar's memoir is that this loss, necessary for psychic development, this constitutive separation experienced as murder, has now been replaced by the theme of the mother's voice, that voice so beautiful that the author imagines based on what her father has written. The imaginary father, who in Kristeva is a hybrid figure, an amalgam of mother and father, appears as a rescue of the maternal voice in the father's written word. The mother is lost, but the *voice* is found *as writing*. This metamorphosis of the abject into the imagined father, the metamorphosis of loss into rhythm, timbre, voice, and finally into narrative and imagined literary origins and affinities, is the carrying construct for the present work.

In *Dreams and Destinies*, the interpretation of the dream is immediately taken to another level, literally going upstairs through metaphor. There is a narrative of maids, sensational crimes drawn from the newspapers, thieves: an essentially much more acceptable explanation, in which, most importantly, there is a story. What the little girl's dream makes is the leap

¹⁸ Yourcenar, *Les Songes et les Sorts*, 30.

between *the abject* and the *imaginary father*, between the corpse mother and the story of the maids. The material mark of this metaphorical leap is the "whispered hints." The whisper in Kristeva's terms is the *semiotic*, which is the mother's pre-language. It is language not as a logical and symbolic system, but as timbre, rhythm, intonation, gesture, vocalization. The whisper is the very site that allows such a sublimatory leap, a creative moment in the construction of the subject. In Kristeva's theory and in Yourcenar's prose, this subject is multiple, heterogeneous, cognizant of the forces of negativity.

And so the composition of the dissertation does not follow the chronology of the publication of the works under consideration, but the logic of the metamorphoses of the lost maternal voice in the paternal speech and the retroactive twists of the temporal layers resulting from the method of Yourcenar, in which old and new texts do not cease to complement each other. The chronology at each point preoccupies me and is biographically present in each chapter of the study, but it is, as it were, a paradigmatic cut, and the composition is guided by the priority of thematic ordering. This logic is also itself based on the psychoanalytic interweaving of the logical and the chronological in the becoming of the subject according to Julia Kristeva, where the symbolic and temporal order is supported and overturned by the turbulences of the semiotic.

The theme of finding the lost voice runs through the first chapter of the work, *Alexis* and the 'portrait of a voice' technique. It focuses on Yourcenar's earliest novel, *Alexis* (1929), where the protagonist is an artist-musician who has ceased to create. Here Yourcenar elaborates a technique he names "portrait of a voice," or monody. The polyphonic internal disintegration of the monody is key. The entire narrative is driven by the voice of the protagonist alone, with no external instance to correct it. Alexis' voice, however, is not monolithic and uncontradictory; on the contrary, it continually disintegrates into a swarm of inner voices of prejudice, unconscious desires, and self-delusion. We can describe the dynamics of the voice, its timbre, intonation, rhythm, through Kristeva's *semiotic*, and the enduring identification with a painting carries out the work tied to the *imaginary father*. The voice itself becomes a stage in which the pieces of a scattered life are attempted to be arranged - the narrative is retrospective, backward-looking, but its story must reach to the point of the subject's emergence. In Kristeva's terms, Alexei's final rupture, or the narrative's starting point, is the breakthrough that allows him to move beyond the depressive-melancholic relationship with the mother to creativity.

The second chapter, "The Imaginary Father: Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Yourcenar," traverses the French-Belgian author's entire oeuvre to arrive at her memoir trilogy, *The Labyrinth of the World* (1974-1988), the last work she worked on. Here, Kristeva's notion of an *imaginary father* is brought to the fore, and through it is explained the power and passion of Yourcenar to infer (imaginary) kinships, distant genealogies and uncles from centuries past. Yourcenar removes his own self from the memoir, but not actually completely. She stages her own voice in them precisely as the driving force of the narrative, cutting and editing the layers of time, shifting the optics of the distant and recent past, linking her personal birth (the story of her mother's murder) to the attempt to procure her kinships. The example of Woolf is particularly relevant insofar as the Franco-Belgian author is the translator of *The Waves*, a novel composed entirely of interior monologues. The connection between this device and Yourcenar's monodies, such as her novels *Alexis*, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, is quite obvious. In addition to Woolf as Yourcenar's "imaginary mother" and the shared technique of "portrait of a voice," the chapter brings out another important characteristic of the voice: to continually *traverse the territory of inside/outside*. This retroactive utterance from within of an entire world in Yourcenar takes its most extensive and glamorous form in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, insofar as the emperor's introspective voice does not tell us the drama of his personal loss, but shows us the end of a world.

The third chapter, "Humanism Past the Abyss: Thomas Mann and Marguerite Yourcenar," deals with the *alchemy of sublimation*, what Kristeva calls the psychic capacity of the subject to transform the traumatic into the creative. The extreme forms when sublimation fails lead to difficulty entering language, psychosis and hallucination respectively, and the most intensely successful experiences are in writers. "This alchemy of sublimation, which Freud places at the basis of the faculty of thought, is of the utmost interest in understanding the work of writers."¹⁹ . The master of sublimation in Yourcenar is constructed through the mask of the Renaissance humanist, scientist and alchemist Zeno, who, the more he looks into the abyss of the political turmoil of the 16th century, the more he sees the abyss in himself. In this chapter, Yourcenar's reflections on Thomas Mann accomplish several tasks. The first is somewhat expected: it shows how the author creates imaginary kinships by also fitting Thomas Mann into a chain of great modernist predecessors. The second task is to make a reading in dialogue between *The Magic Mountain* and *The Abyss*, insofar as Yourcenar's novel is a rejoinder to

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Sens et non-sens de la révolte*, 123.

Mann's. The third is to thematize temporality in the genre of the novel by developing an analytic of time in both novelists. Through it, different layers of time become visible, as well as its particular ambivalence. Not only does the new step on the old, but the past is also thought of as a dynamic quantity - it is not stagnant, but changing, full of unrealized possibilities, allowing for new transformations. In this sense, the alchemical metaphor of sublimation capacity is juxtaposed on a work with time. Its twisting back and forth allows the alchemical transmutations of the subject in the process to be heterogeneous, multifaceted - characters with thousands of faces. The work demonstrates the ways in which layers of time are superimposed in Yourcenar's work, dwelling at a micro level on the symbiosis between fact/fiction; archive/imagination; past/narrative. The subject itself is thus seen not as a static but a dynamic category. The history of the subject is guided much more retroactively by covering memory or aftermath (*Nachträglichkeit* in Freud's terms) than by linear determinism. Ultimately, the writing experiences of Yourcenar and Mann are seen as an attempt to think a new kind of humanism that knows the horror of World War II and, without stripping away the demonic in man, does not lose faith in it.

The last two chapters of the work are devoted to the prose poem *Flames* (1936), but each chapter serves a different function. Chapter Four introduces us to a dramaturgy of masks in which the subject constructs his scenography of love. Gender is thought of as a play construct, a mask. Thus each of the fragments in *Flames* is a kind of mask behind which stands the intimate lyrical passion - Phaedra, Sappho, Antigone, but also Achilles, Patroclus as stories of love through a particular narrative voice. Yourcenar's diaristic experience is embedded not so much in a female character like Sappho as in a male character like Achilles - he most accurately names her phantasm. In this section, through Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, an attempt is made to conceptualise *the null figure*, the unmasked speaking, to show that there is no direct authentic writing: the voice is always staged. The fifth chapter, "The Mask as Face," paradoxically or not, turns to the beginning. Amidst the skimming of the abject question throughout the work at the expense of the imaginary father, the last chapter picks up again on the question of maternal homicide.

This is also the time to note that there is no separate section on *Memoirs of Hadrian*, but this novel is comparatively discussed in each of the other sections: (1) the relationship between "Alexis" and "Hadrian" is explored along the lines of the "portrait in one voice" technique; (2) the component of imaginative kinship that Yourcenar draws out in relation specifically to his characters Hadrian and Zenon in the *Labyrinth of the World* trilogy is

examined; (3) the distinction between monody in Hadrian and polyphony in *The Abyss* is seen; and (4) the fantasy that links *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *Flames* is also thought of, insofar as the emperor and his beloved Antinous take on the characters of Achilles and Patroclus, whom in turn Yourcenar makes his heroes precisely in *Flames*.

My original idea was to end this work not with the prose poem *Clytemnestra* or the *Crime*, but with the play *Electra or the Removal of the Masks* - that would have meant turning again to Elektra's abject or mother-hating passion. The grim conclusion that Yourcenar reaches in the play is that in time the person tears off all masks, but what is underneath is the drive to death: 'and so the different faces of truth and error will in the end identify with one another. At a certain level it makes no difference that Electra's hatred may or may not be love inverted'²⁰. I would have preferred the ending to be on point, which puts a much more important emphasis on the possibility, deployed by Yourcenar, that *Clytemnestra* is not the dead maternal corpse, but a political subject with a voice of her own, making *Flames* a genealogy of the tradition of imaginary mothers and fathers of Antiquity.

²⁰ Yourcenar, "The Eternal Electra," 98.

I. ALEXIS AND THE “PORTRAIT OF A VOICE” TECHNIQUE

Chapter One, “Alexis and the “portrait of a voice” technique ” aims to bring out Marguerite Yourcenar's understanding of the concept of *voice*. The novel *Alexis ou le Traité du vain combat* (1929) is Yourcenar’s first work on the occasion of which she retroactively states that she uses the narrative technique of the portrait of a voice, which became emblematic of her later work. This early prose is examined here as an experiment that tested the possibility of composing a *monody*, a narrative entirely led by a single voice.

The chapter of the dissertation develops in two directions: first, it collects and links various commentaries, essays, and prefaces in which Yourcenar speaks of the voice in order to derive her conceptual understanding of it; second, it analyzes the novel *Alexis*, as an exemplary case for a "portrait of a voice" through the figures of ekphrasis and epitope.

Yourcenar conceptualized his understanding of voice most succinctly in two prefaces he wrote in the 1960s on the occasion of the Gallimard reissue of his novels *Alexis* and *The Atonement*. The French writer attempts to get at the intonation of her characters by removing all mediation, including the narrator's commenting voice. The literary device of "portrait in one voice" can be summarized by five leading characteristics. It is a narrative in the 1st person singular - (1) whether it mimics an oral narrative, epistolary, or memoir, which results in the erasure of the author/narrator figure; (2) it therefore has a singular focalization; and (3) the narrative is not corrected, commented upon, or interrupted from an external point of view. The voice fully manifests its own "angle of inflection," which is inevitably distorted insofar as it contains its own blindnesses and prejudices (4). In turn, this requires an active reader (5) who can reconcile the internal gaps and contradictions in this voice without the navigation of the author.

The "portrait of a voice" technique involves creating a stylistic mask of a character by capturing the inner contradictions, ruptures, and fluctuations in him. Discovering the right voice does not mean the characters' self-identity, but the pursuit of their complex intonational curves. On the contrary, the voice in Yourcenar is always layered into a multitude of imaginary, hidden and enigmatic voices. They inhabit the subject simultaneously, making fundamental the internal incongruity along with the work of negativity. In this sense, identity in Yourcenar, including the question of gender, presupposes this imaginary component of subversive voices that always make identity multiple and heterogeneous. They act in tension: they both "create" and "un-create" the personality. In Kristeva's terminology, the subject can be said to be always

in process, and the intonational aspect can be linked to the semiotic as a dynamic of stabilization and destabilization.

The voice is laid in this work through several theoretical premises. It is (a) *a discursive practice* that unravels the very boundary between inside and outside: the internal voice that weaves the entire narrative in Yourcenar is the only instance through which the fictional world is constructed. The voice is the exposure of an intimacy, a memory, through which everything external is revealed to us, so that the historical plane is always integrated and refracted. The voice is b) *a stylistic mask through which the story of a life is told*, but it is also a stage on which we observe the transformations, the disguises, the changing masks of the protagonist in a complex dramaturgy where the protagonists are memory, phantasm, the incorporated voices of others. The voice is also c) *a narrative technique*, i.e. narrative voice that introduces a split subject, through the critical distancing of the narrator from what is being narrated - this gives a particular twist to the tenses within the narrative: the one presenting the story about himself is no longer the same self, but he is trying to evoke, through the forces of memory, an always already disconnected image of this self in the past - this return to the mismatched self is always nuanced by the discursive displacement of self-irony, the punishing voices of reproach, the simplifying voices of acceptance of one's own mistakes. Such a montage of tenses through flashbacks in view of a temporal cut or discontinuity is key for Yourcenar, for whom the beloved metaphor of time is that of a *great sculptor*. In this sense, the "portrait of one voice" technique indicates multiple narrative identities, even though the narrating voice is one. The voice is a network of clues, it is (d) *a letter*, quite literally - its characters Alexis or Hadrian send letters with a specific addressee. And like a letter, accordingly, the voice decays into polyphony, spreads out in polyphonic mismatch. It follows quite logically from all this that the voice is not primary and present, and in Yourcenar's handwriting, it is always e) *secondary* and retroactive.

Novels such as *Alexis* or *Memoirs of Hadrian* are "just a voice and nothing more," quite in the formula of the Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar. In his book, he thinks of the voice in a Lacanian perspective as an object (as object little a), but also as a site of rupture between the inner and the outer in the subject (with respect to the idea of the extimate) in an "asymmetry between exposure and emission." Dolar's conclusion that "*one is too exposed to the voice, and the voice exposes too much*, to incorporate and to discard too much"²¹ is valid in relation to

²¹ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 112.

Yourcenar's writing. The incorporation of multiple foreign voices makes it so that narrative voices, as stylistic masks, expose too much in writing, both that which they make sense of and that which they are not conscious of themselves. Thus, for the voice in Yourcenar, in addition to being a *discursive practice*, a *stylistic mask*, a *narrative technique*, a *letter*, and a *retroactive way of* stabilizing and destabilizing the subject, it is important to bring out another characteristic: the voice is a site of incorporation of other voices, (e) *empathetic inhabitation of* other lives. Without this skill, a life can never be translated into a narrative.

The idea of a "portrait of a voice" goes back to Yourcenar's division of novelistic writing into two types: monody and polyphony. She elaborates this division in her essay "Intonation and Language in the Historical Novel" (1972): *monody* is constructed through the mask of internally constructed speech, while *polyphony* is constructed through dialogue and counterpoint. Narrative voices in Yourcenar can be read in the light of Bakhtin's theory of the novel, taken up and developed by Kristeva in the 1960s, where polyphonicity means the internal disembodiment of a character, his disintegration into multiple voices. Bakhtin's polyphonic aspects are at work in the novel monodies of Yourcenar as the unified voice is layered on an intonation curve of imagined, hidden and overt, conscious and unconscious tones. In other words, not only are the novels of polyphony polyphonic according to Bakhtin, but also the novels of monody. This genre typology on which Yourcenar reflects is primarily applied to *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *The Abyss* insofar as they are the exemplary examples in her oeuvre, but it also works for Yourcenar's other novel attempts.

Yourcenar thinks the narrative technique of *portraying a voice* in a plastic metaphor: the voice literally sculpts, models, sculpts. Some random phrase extracted from the paraliterary documents serves Yourcenar as a piece of a Greek statue - a leg, an arm or a bust. For her imagination, it is enough to experience a sonic shock, the walls of time crumble and she inhabits bygone places and faces.

"Alexis" as *epistola* constructs the narrative voice through rhetorical techniques familiar from Hellenistic-Roman treatises, such as the *etopeia* (character description, ἠθοποιία,) and the *ekphrasis* (ἐκφρασις)²². Ethiopia is the sculpting of a character through the mimicry of his speech. Ekphrasis is a type of visual representation (of a work) that requires a transfer from a non-textual to a textual medium. The narrow definition of ekphrasis is a description of a non-

²² Here I draw on the work of K. Spassova and B. Paskaleva in their joint seminar on ekphrasis, which gave me the stimulus to think more generally about the use of this technique in Yourcenar, and more specifically to read the musical and pictorial ekphrases in Alexis.

literary work (painting, sculpture, musical work) in a literary work that creates the structure of a work within a work²³. An epitaph provides an opportunity to show a character by likening his stylistic and intonational habits, or literally creating a portrait through voice.

It is important for the interpretation on the novel "Alexis" to emphasize that ekphrasis can be found both in the "telling" of a picture and the transmission in words of a musical composition. The narrow definition of ekphrasis as a literary device²⁴ can also be derived from Nicholas Sophist²⁵. In whom the technique is associated not simply with the description of an object but with the presentation of a non-discursive work in discourse.

The narrative method "portrait of one voice" can be thought of as combining both etopia and ekphrasis. The etopeia as a speech mask represents a fictional (Alexis) or historical (Hadrian) character. To question which is historically authentic and which is precisely fictional is irrelevant. In Yourcenar's fiction, as shown in the chapter unfolding the figure of the imaginary father, the dividing line between the documentary-historical and the fictional is difficult to draw clearly, inasmuch as the leading component is precisely empathy as an imaginary inhabitation of remote times or persons. Yourcenar's work is restorationist and sculptural, the basis of the sculpting is a fragment - a phrase, a word, a document and the leading tool for this is the imagination.

Alexis can be thought of as a *meta-phrase* that encompasses the overall narrative. In the novel of Alexis, Yourcenar not only embodies (epitope) and narrates (ekphrasis) the voice of her protagonist, but she also stages her own characteristic method.

²³ The structure of a work within a work; transposition; and dynamic prominence are three of the six characteristics in defining ekphrasis. K. Spassova, "A Book of Ekphrases," 1.

²⁴ B. Paskaleva comments on the relationship between the ancient and modern understanding of ekphrasis. Spitzer defines ekphrasis as a literary device of "verbally conveying a sensory image," cf: Spitzer, "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'," 72.

²⁵ Nicholas Sophist, "Definition of Ekphrasis," 11.

II. *The Imaginary Father: Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Yourcenar*

The second chapter, "The Imaginary Father: Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Yourcenar," is devoted to Yourcenar's encounter with Virginia Woolf in biographical and artistic terms. A line of similarity can be drawn between the two writers in terms of their attraction to paraliterary genres such as biographies, diaries, and memoirs. Yourcenar wrote two essays on Woolf's work, *Virginia Woolf* (1937) and *A Radiant and Shy Woman* (1972). With her reflection, the French author provides a key to some of the intersections between herself and the English novelist. The flow of consciousness in writing, or to put it another way, Woolf's method, Yourcenar recognizes as "street haunting" (street haunting), or the constant drifting between the inner and the outer. The relationship between Yourcenar and Woolf offers an interesting entry into the French author's method of writing in terms of the construction of voice. In Woolf's creative approach, the observing eye is more important than the observed, and the narrative follows its outward and inward direction and pulsation, provoked by external stimuli. For Yourcenar, herself a translator of Woolf's *The Waves*, the inner monologue and Bergsonian subjective durations develop into a writerly technique for constructing voices that are not monolithic but plastic, or to put it in the words of the Roman emperor from *Memoirs of Hadrian*, they are *varius, multiplex, multiformis*. The multiplicity of forms that a character's voice takes in Yourcenar obeys the logic of what is called *street-voicing* in Woolf. Yourcenar's characters never have a strictly fixed identity because she thinks of the subject as different, changeable and multiple.

Within this study, the figure of the father is the foundation in connecting, paralleling, and discerning the autobiographical writing of Marguerite Yourcenar and Virginia Woolf. The task of such a reading is to see how this figure is represented in their autobiographical writing through Julia Kristeva's concept of the *imaginary father*. Kristeva's imaginary father will be put through a feminine lens to the question of creativity as an instance that allows for the sublimation and self-reflection of the woman writer. This will provide an opportunity to offer an interpretation of the role of the hauntingly present father in the autobiographical texts of Yourcenar and Woolf.

In Julia Kristeva's work, the imaginary father is an extremely important figure in the dynamics of primary identification. This imaginary instance is first introduced in *Histoires d'amour* (1983) and continues to occupy an important place in books such as *In the Beginning*

Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith (1985), *Au commencement était l'amour. Psychanalyse et foi, Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie* (1987) and *Sens et non-sens de la révolte* (1996). According to Nikolchina, what is defined as a psychoanalytic turn in Kristeva "starts from the dismemberment of the semiotic, which through the prism of analysis splits and projects two new concepts: the abject and the imaginary father"²⁶ "The imaginary father is a hybrid figure, a fusion of the two parents, a fusion of maternal desire and the father: not the father who judges us, but the one who loves us. The imaginary father is the relay that will allow the subject's entry into language and "even art," thus offering consolation for the loss of archaic fusion with the mother."²⁷

The novelty that Kristeva brings is the emphasis on this early father figure already in the pre-dip phase. Kristeva elaborates the idea of the imaginary father into a constellation of concepts. He is linked to the primary sensuous identification (a), which is accomplished by direct and immediate transference, by a sudden heterogeneous leap, or by metaphor (b). This identification is not objective (c), it is much more passion, gesture, sound. The imaginary father is mother-and-father (d), through him abstraction is incorporated and so the very possibility of language is allowed. The transference he makes is from incorporation to sublimation (e). Thus the sublimatory illumination, or creative potential, rests on the figure of the imaginary father.

The two faces of paternity that Kristeva connects are the symbolic father of language and the imaginary father of affect. In her own memoir, she talks about her father in *passionate terms*. His image is presented as a harmonious whole between imaginary and symbolic father. On the one hand, Kristeva has the unconditional support of her parent, who gave up medicine after World War II to avoid being assigned as a country doctor and to secure his daughters' education in Sofia; on the other, he is the strict father-in-law with whom the young Kristeva has her first scientific and cultural disputations. She points to this highly affective aspect of her relationship with her father, stressing that her relationship with him was a love to the death.²⁸ Kristeva brings out this figure as mother and father at the same time, as a fusion in which the imaginary father passes into the symbolic, as rebellion and thought. And if her theoretical books can be called theoretical fiction because they use metaphorical and passionate language, Kristeva points out of her novels that they are not embroidery on trauma, intoxication with

²⁶ Nikolchina, "The Bulgarian Trace in Julia Kristeva's Psychoanalytic Turn", 126.

²⁷ Nikolchina, 127.

²⁸ Kristeva, *Je me voyage*, 18.

autofiction that repeats sadomasochistic pleasure over and over again, but seek a cathartic effect and play the role of a counterdepressant.²⁹

The most notable autobiographical example from Kristeva is her novel *Murder in Byzantium* (2004), in which she invents her imagined genealogy and the Byzantine component in the history of Europe. One turns to the theme of her origins and begins partly to reconstruct it, partly to invent it as a remedy for depression. Thus, in addition to the characteristics already outlined, the imaginary father is linked to the experience of constructing one's own genealogies. The question of origins never simply refers to a factual-historical line from direct memory or from the archive. It is always an attempt to expand personal biography by means of the witty and the fantastic; it is a reinvention of one's own genealogy precisely with a foothold in the imaginary.³⁰

This dynamic of constructing a symbolic genealogy in both Woolf and Yourcenar relies on various forms of combining the autobiographical and the fictional. Both authors pay close attention to their backgrounds, dwelling on the figure of the father. In her memoir trilogy, *Le Labyrinthe du monde* (1974-1988), Yourcenar almost entirely omits the narrative of herself; rather, she is present as a narrating and commenting voice to illuminate and flesh out her roots. By turning to the history of her ancestors, the author aims to encompass her own amalgam, a complex tangle of faces and texts that precede her. In this semi-archival - semi-fictional memoir, the paternal lineage is most dominant. Memories of the mother, who died at Yourcenar's birth, are constructed through the narrative by the father. Thus her genealogical insight, her father as lining, is a screen to protect her from identification with the literally dead mother or with death in general.

V. Woolf's purely biographical relationship to her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, is far more complicated - on the one hand, she makes severe accusations against him about her education, on the other, she defines herself as his heir and successor. In her diaries³¹ she comments on her father controversially. In her 1932 essay on him, "Leslie Stephen," she outlines the contradiction between strict law and complete freedom by recounting an incident in the life of her sister, Vanessa Bell. The father of the two girls strongly opposes women's right to smoke

²⁹ Kristeva, 242-243.

³⁰ Kristeva, *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholy*, 33.

³¹ The text uses Virginia Woolf's diary, which Leonard Woolf compiled on the recommendation of the writer herself, dated 20 March 1926. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 167.

and bans Vanessa's cigarettes, but at the same time supports her in her dream of becoming an artist, and "freedom of this sort is worth more than a thousand cigarettes"³². As a passionate admirer of his library, Woolf learns this lesson regarding the art of reading - read only what you like and don't pretend to what you don't. Her father's attitudes toward women and literature carry the same ambivalence.

It is a categorical sign that the transfer from the imaginary to the symbolic father works for both Woolf and Yourcenar that both authors leave significant fictional, critical and autobiographical texts behind. Beyond the worldwide fame of their novels, there are also numerous pages devoted to their thoughts, observations, and reflections on classical and contemporary literature and art, as well as reflections on their own creative journeys. There is, however, a curious point of juxtaposition between the two writers in terms of their fit into the symbolic order. The first and best known fact about M. Yourcenar is that she was the first woman member of the French Academy, admitted there in 1980. Woolf consistently refused to accept prestigious honors and titles. In 1933, she was awarded the honor of the title of Dame. In 1933, the University of Manchester wanted to award her the title of Doctor of Letters, but Woolf sent a formal letter of refusal. In 1935 she refused to become a member of the London Library Committee, and later to accept the Knighthood of the Order of the Garter. The reason for the refusal was probably that a single recognition would not change the status of women, a subject that vividly concerned Woolf. Even through this biographical detail, it can be noted that the transition from the imaginary father to the symbolic order in M. Yourcenar is more gentle and natural, while in V. Woolf is more complicated and obstructed.

The mother transcends the biographical mother and joins the "flesh of the cosmos," the nirvanic sense of merging with the world and maternal wholeness. The father as *legal fiction*, as Joyce calls it in *Ulysses*, procures the larger narrative - where there is speech, difference and articulacy.

Yourcenar's fixed gaze on the creative, rather than the biological or the support of the imaginary father, is the instance that saves the writer, in this case literally, from the deadly mother-daughter grip: "I object to the often-heard assertion that the untimely loss of a mother is always a misfortune, or that a child deprived of his or her own experiences a lifelong sense

³² Woolf, *Literary Essays*, 77.

of lack and nostalgia for the absent one. At least in my case things turned out differently"³³ . Yourcenar points out that she was not deprived of a number of female substitutes for the maternal substratum - her father's governess, mistresses and would-be lovers, and his third wife. These perishable, frequently changing, and easily overlooked relationships save her from the attachments and obligations to mother that she might have had had her mother remained alive. The unconcealed annoyance of the never-never obligations and limits that her mother's life would have imposed on her sounds as liberating to her creative path as the oft-quoted sentences of V. "My father's birthday. Today he would have been 96, yes, 96; and he could have been 96, I know people like that: but, thank God, he wasn't. His life would have utterly destroyed mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; - unthinkable"³⁴ . With the help of creativity, both writers were able to do the revision work. Thanks to the imaginary father she creates in "To the Lighthouse," Woolf transcends the strong symbolic father and is able to free herself from everyday thoughts about him³⁵ . Yourcenar, in turn, forms his own amalgam by constantly retrospectively reimagining his origins. Thus, at the end of her literary and life journey, by fabulating herself as a character, Yourcenar is able to create a strong female voice , which had been missing from her work to that point, insofar as the powerful women she creates wear antique masks, and the narrative voice here is synchronous with her own time.

³³ Yourcenar, *Souvenirs pieux*, 2006, I:60.

³⁴ Woolf, *Diary of a Woman Writer*, 244.

³⁵ Woolf, 244.

III. HUMANISM THAT CROSSED THE ABYSS : THOMAS MANN AND MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

Chapter Three, "Humanism Past the Abyss: Thomas Mann and Marguerite Yourcenar," highlights one of the most important figures in Yourcenar's work, that of Thomas Mann. In the essay "Humanism and Hermeticism in Thomas Mann" (1955-1962), Yourcenar captures the possibility of thinking through Thomas Mann's work on the alchemical transformations of a modern humanism that has "passed through the abyss" [*l'humanisme qui passe par l'abîme*]³⁶. These reflections, and later her novel on Zeno, *The Abyss*, show a deep connection between the two writers, insofar as in them the theme of the alchemical reworking of European heritage in a time of crisis and disruption appears crucial. The turn to a more classical form of the novel and the refusal of radical experiment are part of a rethinking of a modern type of humanism that recognizes decay and the demonic.

In this chapter the encounter between the two is unfolded in eight steps. The first subpart traces the biographical and creative experience of the two men in bringing the classical spirit of Europe to America, leaving the Old Continent shortly before World War II. The second and third subparts deal with the history of the writing of Yourcenar's essay "Humanism and Hermeticism in Thomas Mann." The fourth and fifth subparts reconstruct the epistolary communication between the two writers. The sixth part is devoted to distinguishing in Yourcenar the old humanism, the basis of the belief in the perfection of man through the sciences and arts, from the new type of humanism, for which she points to Thomas Mann's essay, *Freud and the Future*. This is where Mann sees in the face of Freud the idea of a "humanism of the future" that is open to the unconscious, illness, and the infantile nature in man and unafraid to explore them. The seventh and eighth subparts read Yourcenar's mature novel *The Abyss* as a dialogue with Thomas Mann's work and most directly with *Doctor Faustus* (1947). Yourcenar begins to think first on *creation in black* [*œuvre au noir*] in *Humanism and Hermeticism...*, insofar as "the old-fashioned term of the alchemical philosophers, suits the picture of the dissolution and transformation of human substance" [*dissolutions et des résolutions de la substance humaine*] portrayed by Mann³⁷. *The Abyss* is thus a continuation of

³⁶ Yourcenar, "Humanism and Hermetism in Thomas Mann," 218; Yourcenar, "Humanisme et hermétisme chez Thomas Mann," 1991, 169.

³⁷ Yourcenar, "Humanism and Hermetism in Thomas Mann," 236; Yourcenar, "Humanisme et hermétisme chez Thomas Mann," 1991, 186. Originally in the essay, the alchemical term "creation in black" is given not in Latin

the same critical reflection, but now with its own creative means. In this sense, the essay on Mann is not just a magnificent insight into his work, but a negotiation of its narrative, chronotopic, linguistic, stylistic and thematic features, but also an intertextual approach to the novel of Zeno.

In exploring the work of Thomas Mann, Yourcenar discovered ideas that resonated deeply with her own reflections on the nature of art and the artwork. Curiosity and engagement with the tradition of Hermeticism and the occult crystallized in Yourcenar as she reflected on Mann. The attempt to volumize, order and theorize a large, complex and diverse body of work leads her through a series of themes, but the thread that helps her to traverse the labyrinth-Mann is the question of the dialectic between *contemporaneity* and *universality*; *time* and *eternity*; *microcosm* and *macrocosm*, *tradition* and *demonism*, *humanism* and *chaos*, which she resolves in terms of alchemical transmutation.

Full-blooded and insightful is Yourcenar's analysis of the characters he traces from Hans Kastrof, Claudia Schoscha, Nafta, Setembrini, Minher Pepperkorn, through Gustav von Aschenbach, Joseph and Potiphar, Tonio Kröger, Felix Krull, Gregory, Hanno Buddenbrook, to Serenus Zeitblom and Adrian Leverkühn. Her observations, subtle and nuanced, run through all of Thomas Mann's major novels - The Buddenbrooks, The Magic Mountain, Joseph and His Brothers, Lotte in Weimar, The Chosen One, Felix Krull; they dwell in particular detail on the landmark role of the novella "Death in Venice"; they do not fail to consider the role of some of the short stories - "Switched Heads", "The Wardrobe", "The Mirage", etc., to acknowledge his magnum opus, Doctor Faustus, as the pinnacle of his work. Yourcenar runs through this vast material, constructing a kind of poetics of Thomas Mann's prose. The conceptual threads she draws out are not static but dynamic; she shows how in this prose certain theoretical kernels emerge, intersect, mix, distill, crystallize, reduce to paradox, and surface as simple forms and thoughts. Yourcenar's own work on Thomas Mann is reminiscent of alchemical processes.

The poetics of prose in Humanism and Hermeticism in Thomas Mann can be traced in twelve processes, which I have unfolded below in seven steps. These are 1. Manic realism and myth; 2. Multilayered time; 3. The isotopia between micro- and macrocosm; 4. Demonism and the exploration of the abysses; 5. Play and risk; 6. Hermeticism and initiation; 7. Eroticism and fiction; 8. Music and magic; 9. Nigredo: death and awakening; 10. Alchemy and ambivalence;

(*opus nigredo*) but in French as *œuvre au noir*, which literally repeats the title of the novel about Zeno, L'Œuvre au noir. Beyond the title, the guiding idea on the process of *decay* and *transformation* is a convergent topos between *The Abyss* and Yourcenar's reflections on Doctor Faustus.

11. Cosmic dimension and classical form; 12. Chaos and Humanism. Critical texts on Yourcenar usually do not dwell on such a detailed grid of conceptual kernels, but bring out two or three of the aspects in the essay as leading ones. The treatment of these twelve principles is important not so much as a detailed analysis of Mann's prose, but as a transition in Yourcenar's thought from her critical reflection to her creative work on Zeno. This topos is extracted by me with a view to presenting the writer's observations in a more theoretical way. A jocular analogy is made here with the number of the twelve alchemical transformations organized in a ladder of seven stages. The twelve alchemical operations are 1. Calcinatio; 2. Solutio; 3. Elementorum separatio; 4. Coniunctio; 5. Putrefactio; 6. Coagulatio; 7. Cibatio; 8. Sublimatio; 9. Fermentatio; 10. Exaltatio; 11. Augmentatio; and 12. Proiectio.³⁸ The two fundamental operations that most excite Yourcenar, both in the essay on Mann and in *The Abyss*, are *solutio* (dissolution) and *coagulatio* (thickening, conversion, modification of a liquid into a solid). Dissolution and transformation are the processes that drive the first alchemical stage, namely creation in black. Dissolution and the crystallization of the notion of the human are thus central themes in the essay on Mann.

Yourcenar thinks of Mann's works in the category of "contemporary classics"³⁹, in the double grip of the provisional and the canonical. She points to the work of Proust, Joyce, and Mann as the most compelling of the first half of the twentieth century, with the latter seeming the most difficult to access. In all three writers, Yourcenar notes that beneath the surface of what is contemporary and fashionable, layers of the archaic and mythic, "the most outmoded reflections on the very essence of reality," can be dissolved.⁴⁰ In her view Mann is most difficult precisely because he deceives with the apparent simplicity of a pedantic realism behind which lies something entirely different - "a timeless and cosmic background." It is not surprising that the German writer's fiction is introduced with this topos, beloved of Yourcenar, of the twisting between time and eternity, the contemporary and the universal, but also between manic realism and myth. Mann's mythopoetic world is in constant flux and ambiguity between realism and transcendental eroticism; between realism and dream-imagination; between realism and allegory. But this is not Kafka's allegory, which has three or more bottoms and into

³⁸ They were developed by Paracelsus' follower and "contemporary" of Zeno - Josephus Quercetanus (1576), cf: Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 285. Jung, whom both Mann and Yourcenar had read, viewed alchemical operations as principles of the unconscious and modalities through which to achieve the unity and integration of the personality.

³⁹ The institutional effort of the American publishing house Alfred A. T. Mann to be produced in the figure of the modern classic see: Boes, *Thomas Mann's War*, 52-70.

⁴⁰ Yourcenar, "Humanism and Hermeticism in Thomas Mann," 245.

which interpretation fails. With Mann, the magical and the fantastic grow precisely out of this pedantic realist narrative in search of deeper philosophical grounds.

Yourcenar's reflections on time in Mann are akin to those in *Time, That Great Sculptor*⁴¹, which has become an exemplary and oft-quoted section of her essays. The timeless is nothing but a layering of alterations upon matter and its forms. The eternal is the patina of time inscribed as destruction and reshaping in some stone or Greek statue, destruction and dissolution playing the role of new redactions. Such a transformation is also traced in relation to Mann. The leading example is "Magic Mountain," this *Zeitroman*. It is curious that Yourcenar does not explicitly make the usual Bergsonian point about temporal relativism, or about the difference between the time of clocks and the time of human experience as a capacity to contract and stretch subjective time according to the intensity of experience⁴². For Yourcenar, however, matter is also driven by its own laws; it is the active force that transforms and changes. This process, related to the accumulation and saturation of memory, is presented to us through stylization in an alchemical vocabulary. The two key hermetic operations of this transformation are *dissolution* and *precipitation* of substance, a leitmotif in *The Abyss* that leads to the interpenetration of creator and created.

Yourcenar's thesis is that Thomas Mann's work should be seen through the occult tradition and hermeticism, through the idea of alchemical transmutation. This line appears as a leitmotif from the very beginning of Humanism and Hermeticism and becomes more central as the essay progresses. Yourcenar increasingly translates episodes from Mann's prose into the alchemical vocabulary. She sees this work as a compendium of hermetic motifs.

Yourcenar loves Thomasman's gesture of writing brilliant self-reflexive texts on her own work, and interpreters of *The Abyss* have deferred to her notes. They enumerate and unravel Zenon's intertextual web of prototypes as presented by Yourcenar herself in the afterword to the novel. The author also identifies the research from which she draws inspiration and insight into the alchemical tradition and its modern uses. Thomas Mann is not mentioned in the notes to *The Abyss*, but elsewhere Yourcenar clearly links the title of her novel to her work on the German writer.⁴³ After the observations made in this dissertation on Humanism and Hermeticism, we can safely infer his figure as one of Zeno's imaginary fathers. The twelve

⁴¹ Yourcenar, "Time - That Great Sculptor (1964-1982)".

⁴² There is a similar emphasis in Isaac Passy's interpretation of *The Magic Mountain*, Passy, *Thomas Mann*, 37-40.

⁴³ Yourcenar and Galey, *Les yeux ouverts*, 1981, 163.

topoi examined, critically extracted from the French author's essay, successfully serve as an interpretation of her alchemical novel. And although Zenon is a character from the time of *traditional humanism* and believes in the merits of human reason, a modern anxiety is inscribed in his features. The central oppositions in Yourcenar's essay on Thomas Mann are cultural - barbaric, rational - irrational, humanism - chaos, and classical form - decay. These same oppositions ring clearly as complex dilemmas in *The Abyss*.

Towards the end of his essay, Yourcenar develops the line of juxtaposing and distinguishing Mann's work and Proust's in terms of the role of *music as magic*.⁴⁴ In Proust, *music as magic* is present as an aesthetic purification of forms, whereas in Mann it carries the element of chaos, decay, and the formless. The distinction can easily be translated in Nietzschean terms as Apollonian music in Proust versus Dionysian in Mann. Yourcenar prefers another approach; she resorts to the vocabulary of the alchemists. Instead of Dionysius, she draws an analogy with *The Abyss*: 'L'Œuvre au noir': - the ancient term of the alchemical philosophers, suits the picture of the disintegration and transformation of human substance portrayed by Mann"⁴⁵. These are precisely the alchemical processes - *solutio* and *coagulatio* - of decay and new crystallization, and the aim is to formulate a new concept of the human.

Can the *opus nigredo* be transformed into the *opus rubedo*, the creation in black pass to a higher stage in the alchemical process and become the creation in red? This, according to Yourcenar, is the great question in Mann's work. And put another way, the question is - does death lead to awakening and enlightenment, to a radical form of making sense of human destiny. Yourcenar finds the answer in the relationship between alchemy and ambivalence, recognizing Mann as a master of ambiguity. The undecidability is whether death leads to a cosmic insight and transformation of human substance, or whether it is the subject's insatiable capacity for self-delusion even at the limit. The opposition structurally reiterates the interrogation addressed to the role of the creator - whether he follows a high predestination or is a comic impostor who does not abandon his masquerade until the last.

Here, at the point of death, opposition takes its most extreme form. Is it an alchemical death, i.e. a passage and a passing beyond the abyss; or is it merely an illusion, a guarantor of the human that succeeds in constructing meaning in the face of the final decay? At the limit, the

⁴⁴ Yanakiev, in his essay on memory/forgetting and the rediscovery of "lost times," distinguishes Proust's "lyrical sadness" from 4. Yourcenar's "epic sadness," and sees an alternative to both in the possibility of Christian "eternal memory" in the person of François Mauriac. Yanakiev, "Yourcenar's 'Time' and Moriac's 'Eternity'".

⁴⁵ Yourcenar, "Humanism and Hermeticism in Thomas Mann," 236.

opposites of order-and-disorder, form-and-formless, meaning-and-meaninglessness, and death-and-immortality coincide disturbingly. Ambivalence is unsettling precisely because of its intractability. The human is seen in the ability to persist in inventing meaning in the face of the abyss without and the abyss within. Man's last illusion of himself is the staging of his own death. The Death of Zeno must be read in the light of these reflections of Yourcenar.

The ambiguity remains with regard to the overall message of the essay - whether a modern humanism is being affirmed, having passed through the political abyss of the Second World War and the horrors of Hitlerism, or whether the rescue of the candlesticks and statues is an illusion on the verge that something of the classical spirit of Europe can be saved. The point, to put it through a Foucauldian image from the finale of *Words and Things*, is whether the human will disappear as the sea obliterates an image drawn on the coastal sand⁴⁶. The anti-humanist tendency tends towards a similar dissolution of the human; it does not go beyond the abyss. Yet Yourcenar stands on the other side: she sees the possibility of a "dark" humanism in which human knowledge is prone to all kinds of transformations, in which the rational passes into the irrational and humanism into chaos. "Such a humanism, directed towards the obscure, the mysterious, and even the arcane, seems at first sight to be opposed to traditional humanism: it is rather its vanguard and left wing": Thomas Mann is seen as one of those spirits who let nothing of culture fall away, but "dangerous disrupters in the process of a constant rethinking of human thought and behaviour. (...) This is in all probability the work that goes furthest in the analysis of latent human capacities and of their fearful and hidden dangers"⁴⁷.

Mann's and Yourcenar's dark humanism employs the classical forms and complex inflections of language-speech-narrative, speech-projection, timeless speech, and the variegated forms of dressing up past tenses in the face of speech habits. The two writers do not follow the trends of syntactic breakdown and decay at the linguistic level. On the contrary, they feel quite

⁴⁶ "If we take a relatively short chronology and a limited geographical span - European culture since the sixteenth century - we can be sure that in it man is a recent discovery. Man of recent date, as the archaeology of our thought readily shows, is an invention. And perhaps one with an imminent end", Foucault, *Words and Things*, 514. And more: it seems fruitful to me to read *The Abyss* through this Foucault book precisely as a transition from pre-modern knowledge to the birth of disciplinary fields.

⁴⁷ Yourcenar, "Humanism and Hermeticism in Thomas Mann," 244-255.

comfortable in a classical form, which they slowly and imperceptibly begin to dissolve and transform. As a consequence of such a transformation, manic realism can pass into the fantastic; the historical moment into eternity; play into risk; the microcosm into the macrocosm, and the universal dimension of the human can open out of the classical form. The formation of the human is thus dialectically linked to the negative forces of decay - chaos, disease, the demonic, the erotic, death. The stakes of such a poetics are philosophical: to bring to light the contradictory varieties of inner experience. In this sense, the alchemical metaphor in the essay "Humanism and Hermeticism in Thomas Mann" shows man not as a black, white, or red creation, but as a being in transition.

The ending of *The Abyss* is not optimistic at all. When Matthieu Gallet asks whether Zeno's death is an opening to metaphysics or a door that is closing, Yourcenar replies eloquently, "It is a door that is opening, but we don't know to what. Perhaps to a world in which Zenon is no longer necessarily Zenon, and in which he may not even remember-or at least not for long-that he was Zenon. A Return to the Universal"⁴⁸. Achieving the universally human comes at a high price - the stripping away of all life's masks and historical conditioning leads to the real of death.

In discussing Yourcenar's reading of Thomas Mann in the section "Nigredo: death and awakening," a paradox is brought out: it is not clear whether death leads to awakening from illusions, or whether it is the last human illusion of the existence of freedom. Such ambiguity is entirely referable to the last scene of *The Abyss*, and such indecision can be seen as a universal feature of the human. The ultimate dilemma that the novel leaves open is whether everything is predetermined, or whether everything is chaos but the human dimension gives it form and order. Yourcenar's dark humanism is not afraid to write in a more classical form of the polyphonic novel, nor to think in terms of the eternal as a decomposition and crystallization of the temporal; to seek the universally human as an attempt to transcend its own context. In this sense, the fate of the alchemist can be read through Yourcenar's formula applied to Thomas Mann - Zeno is an allegory for the autonomy of man, or for 'humanism passed through the abyss'.

⁴⁸ Yourcenar and Galey, *Les yeux ouverts*, 1981, 174.

IV. MASKED BALL AND FRAGMENTS OF LOVE DISCOURSE

In Chapter Four, the thesis examines several texts from the collection *Flames* to trace three relationships to the problem of the mask: the fragment as tenth mask, gender as mask, and the mask as work.

Traditionally, Marguerite Yourcenar's work has been associated with masculinity, with scholars adding a parenthetical note that beyond this logic of constructing memorable male characters remains one of her early books, *Feux* (1936), which is populated by Phaedra, Clytemnestra, and Antigone. Such opposition works when the relationship between *gender* and *writing is foregrounded*, even when this is done through pointing out the mismatch between the author's gender and male/female writing. My reading does not support such a linking - whether in terms of conformity (women supporting female fictional voices) or incongruity (women supporting male fictional voices). In her monograph *Histories of Voice*, Amelia Licheva points to the position on the representation of Yourcenar's handwriting "as mysterious and cool, as male or at least genderless" as "contentedly one-sided"⁴⁹. Yourcenar presents gender as a universal category, not asexual but always androgynous and inevitably passing through the filters of imagination and phantasm. The name given to this filter by Yourcenar herself is mask, travesty in the Shakespearean sense. Such mediation structures the desire and the positions of the lover and the loved. In this sense, Yourcenar's Phaedra, Clytemnestra, and Antigone are twentieth-century characters with contemporary understandings. Ancient names serve as masks that clothe desire and the searing forms of passion. The flames of devastating inner experiences are cloaked in different masks. They do not strike directly, but come distilled through the classical forms and names of the classical lovers. Thinking of *Flames* as an exception to the masculinist writing in Yourcenar's work would sound far less convincing if we looked at it not as directly gendered but as a *masked ball*⁵⁰.

The conceptual and poetic role of the mask in Yourcenar can be deduced from the preface of *Flames*: a strong passion is masked by an alien face and an alien story. The pathos

⁴⁹ Licheva, *Stories of the Voice*, 2002, 347.

⁵⁰ A definition that Yourcenar herself gives in the preface to the book, Yourcenar, "Flames," 21.

of the flame is thus conveyed indirectly. The mask serves to distance and distance from the direct exposure of the pain of absence, the madness of love and the fear of abandonment, the folly of happiness, loneliness and death, suicide, crime, dreams as wreckage of a shipwrecked reality. Yourcenar gives "Flames" the genre definition of "poem in prose," which tells of an unrequited love through nine figurative masks - Phaedra, Achilles, Patroclus, Antigone, Lena, Mary Magdalene, Phaedo, Clytemnestra, and Sappho. The shadows of the Greco-Roman past begin to haunt Yourcenar's handwriting even in this early work. She emphasizes that the primary method in working on the book is masking or revealing a kind of pathos. Here it is abundantly clear how Yourcenar works out the technique of dressing up the instance of experience by inhabiting another's voice, using familiar masks from the past and myth.

The passion for Antiquity with its well-known figures of famous loves, jealousies and threatening passions is one of the two components that make up *Flames*. The second are the fragments laid between the individual stories. Thus it should not be overlooked or downplayed that compositionally the book is composed in this two-beat rhythm: alternating fragments and characters from the European past. The hypothesis I propose is that these fragments are in fact the **tenth mask** in the structure of the book. In the preface to *Flames*, Yourcenar notes that he uses two approaches: direct and indirect. The indirect, or masked, is the voice through figures, and the direct is the voice from the fragments, recalling thoughts, revelations, ramblings, moans: "In *Flames*, these feelings and circumstances find expression either directly - but rather veiledly - through individual 'thoughts', which at first for the most part constituted a personal diary, or else indirectly, through narratives borrowed from mythology and history, intended to serve as points of reference in time"⁵¹. If the figures of Achilles, Patroclus, Sappho, and Clytemnestra read like a subplot in Yourcenar's work to dress a voice in masks, the fragments form a tenth mask - the masking of one's own face. The depiction of 'self' as a mask in the transmission of life experience in the fragments is palpable in the very construction 'direct - but rather veiled' of the 1974 preface. The phrase can be read as 'the rhetoric of direct speech will be used here', but also 'a mask will be mimicked here that is transparent and completely merges with the face'. Even more curious in this respect is the earliest preface, from 1936, in which the poem "*Flames*" is likened to a house with only one door, completely hidden so that the building appears to have no entrance and no exit. Inside, a masked ball is in progress, a disturbingly bizarre ball in which everyone is dressed as himself. The diary fragments (with a skip to R.

⁵¹ Yourcenar, "*Flames*," 13.

Barthes) can be summed up in the genre of 'fragments of love discourse'. They are cumulative of the dressing up in the particular figure of 'direct speech', which claims to go beyond rhetoric and is a kind of null figure.

The juxtaposition between "Flames" and "Fragments of a Love Discourse" (1977) by R. Barthes works on several levels and makes it possible to highlight even more clearly the conceptual stakes in Yourcenar: the love discourse, the figure, the fragment and the distance are parts of a shared approach to love as a letter. In both Yourcenar and Barthes, the method of working is announced as dramatic - to allow love to speak itself beyond the philosophy of love and the pitfalls of a metalanguage.

MISANDRA AND ACHILLES: GENDER AS A MASK

The idea that gender is a mask is unpacked quite unambiguously in the poem "Achilles, or Deceit" on several levels. From this perspective, the poem illustrates well Yourcenar's view that there is nothing fixed, and that gender is a playful construct associated with the constant possibility of remodelling and movement along the spectrum between the extreme positions of the feminine and the masculine. Quite as in Shakespeare's comedies, the act of cross-dressing is a sufficient condition for changing gender identity. In such a scenography, only the figure of Patroclus is posited as devoid of disguises and deceptions. And just as on the level of style the absence of a figure can also be seen as a figure, so here on the narrative level Patroclus participates in the theatre of masks with his own face. In this lyrical prose, everything is masked - *the landscape, the characters, their motivations and their possible purposes.*

PATROCLUS AND PENTHESILEA: THE MASK AS ARTWORK

In Yourcenar's Achilles, love and death go together. In the two successive stories of The Flames, "Achilles, or the Deceit" and "Patroclus, or the Providence," Achilles meets death through the image of two women he loves and kills, Deidamia and Penthesilea. If the first poem, "Achilles, or Deceit," follows the love quartet between Achilles, Misandre, Deidamia, and Patroclus, the second, "Patroclus, or Providence," can be seen as a love triangle mediated by death between Achilles, Patroclus, and Penthesilea. The two lyrical prose poems can also be seen as complements in Freud's general dynamic of drives (Triebe). Whereas Achilles plays out the masquerade of sexuality (Eros), Patroclus already goes beyond the pleasure principle

(Thanatos)⁵² into the confines of melancholic indifference. The central axis for "Patroclus, or Providence" is the sculpting potential of death.

The mask motif also appears quite explicitly in *Patroclus, or Providence*, in a particular way fitting and subverting the unmasked persona of Patroclus (he is like a naked sabre) amidst the masked ball on the island of Skyros from *Achilles, or Deceit*.⁵³ In the previous story, Achilles is disguised as a woman under whose veil he falls in love with a man. And in "Patroclus," Penthesilea is disguised as a man - her devotion is so fierce that she is the only one of the Amazons to have both of her breasts ripped out. Here, the moment of falling in love is in the negative - instead of the phallically exposed Patroclus, the epiphanic revelation comes at the sight of the masked Penthesilea: 'she had pulled the peak of her helmet down over her face, the only one who dared to reject the hypocrisy of standing with an open face. Armour, helmet, golden mask...'⁵⁴ Falling in love with Patroclus is refusing a mask in the midst of the theatre of life, falling in love with Penthesilea is going beyond the pretense of the "open face" into the arena of death. Thus the figures of Patroclus and Penthesilea are brought together and doubled in the gesture of death and the final removal of masks.

Quite explicitly, the dynamics of *face* and *mask* in Penthesilea's figure are reversed. In my interpretation, the relationship between Patroclus and Penthesilea is not so much drawn on the theatre of sexuality as on the arena of death. The dead Patroclus reveals to Achilles the majesty of the corpse that is sculpted into a figure, a sculpture, a work of art. The dead Penthesilea, who removes the golden armour of her eyepatch, reveals a mask instead of a face - it is a death mask.

The idea of the sculptural death mask as a work is an important aspect of the whole mosaic of *Flames*, where Yourcenar wants to enact a masquerade in which everyone is masked with their own face. "Patroclus, or Providence" provides a kind of negative to the idea of a masked ball with the final scene where the removal of Penthesilea's mask reveals a new mask. Thus we can read *Flames* through two lenses - the theatre of life and the stage of death. With

⁵² According to Freud, the sexual principle is characterized by the search for pleasure and the avoidance of displeasure, cf: Freud, *The Urges and Their Destinies*. And the death drive is regressive in nature and is related to a drive for repetition; it is a homeostatic return to something that has gone before, including the return of traumatic experience, see: Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

⁵³ C. Farrell and R. Farrell view the *Flames* as a mosaic or kaleidoscope of subtle variations on a series of leit-motifs, they give as a simple example the role of armour and its undressing in Achilles, Patroclus and Antigone, cf: Farrell and Farrell, "Marguerite Yourcenar's *Feux*," 26.

⁵⁴ Yourcenar, "Flames," 43.

the help of Belting, Blanchot, and Nancy, I view Penthesilea's death as her final gift to Achilles. This moment returns and builds in Yourcenar's work now much more directly and extensively in *Memoirs of Hadrian*. The moment with the death mask of Antinous and the reading of his death as his last gift to Hadrian provide a basis for raising the question of what makes a life into a work. It is the key autotextual moment on which I dwell. According to him, Achilles and Patroclus (of the Flames) become an imaginative component of identification for Hadrian and Antinous, and their lives are paralleled. The death of Antinous, that disastrous gift, causes Hadrian to retrace the steps of his life and see it in its entirety and finally to narrate his life as a work. And a very specific work at that - as a complete poem about Achilles and Patroclus. In the light of Antinous' blind gaze, Hadrian sees his own sunset and the sunset of the Roman Empire with new power.

V. THE MASK AS A FACE

Chapter five proposes the thesis that Yourcenar's *Clytemnestra* should be seen as a political subject. It focuses on the appearance of the Atrides in the French author's work - in particular in the poem *Clytemnestra*, or the Crime and the play *Electra*, or the *Removal of the Masks*. The main analysis focuses on the lesser-known *Clytemnestra* of Yourcenar, that of *Flames*.

In the preface to his play, Yourcenar traces the transformations of the image of *Electra* from ancient Greek myth through its transformations in the history of literature to its contemporary modifications. In the few pages, she builds a comprehensive paradigm around the figure of *Electra* from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Goes to *Electra** (1931), Giroud's *Electra* (1937), and Sartre's *The Flies* (1943).⁵⁵ In her typical aphoristic style, she traces the differences in the development of the myth in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Her language is laconic and brilliant, reaching to the core in extreme generality. She likens "the torments of *Electra* and the image of the crime family" to a ball of snakes that continually change and take new forms through time.

"Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is a trilogy to affirm the logic of the father as more legitimate than the mother's right. The mark of this political shift is the transformation of the vengeful mother

⁵⁵ The book by P. Brunel (*Le Mythe d'Electre*, 1971), which deals with the myth in a structural way. Following C. G. Jung, Brunel considers the notion of the *Electra complex* as a particular version of the Oedipus complex. Brunel defines *Electra* as "a girl of the night, dark and cursed, who rightly belongs to the theatre of cruelty", Fraisse, "Review of *Le Mythe d'Electre*," 664.

goddesses Erinyes into harmless and benevolent Eumenides, as well as Orestes' vindication of the trial by the young gods Apollo and Athena. "Sophocles' Electra is now convinced of the rightness of her father's law; she must restore Agamemnon's just law against his usurper in Aegisthus. She is, as Yourcenar stresses, the father's girl, possessed by masculine determination and driven by the idea of justice. In Euripides, the image of Electra is seen differently - it is developed with psychological depth through both the external conflict with Clytemnestra and the internal split in the matricide herself, wrought with hatred and a blind will to revenge. Yourcenar takes Euripides' line as the closest.

The poem "Clytemnestra, or the Crime" unambiguously refers to Aeschylus' Eumenides, but also inverts ancient tragedy. In her article "Marguerite Yourcenar's Two Clytemnestrae," Remi Poiño examines the powerful figure of Clytemnestra through three main roles: mother, mistress, and wife⁵⁶. Poigneur compares the relationship between these three positions of Clytemnestra from *The Flames* and Clytemnestra from *Electra, or the Removal of the Masks*. My reading does not dwell on these three positions insofar as it sees Clytemnestra as something else - as a political subject.

The poem presents the narrative of Clytemnestra, her primary motivation to kill the victoriously returned Agamemnon. Up to the point of the murder, Yourcenar sticks to Aeschylus' trilogy, adding and modifying some minor details. He tells us the story on behalf of Clytemnestra, presenting the various stages of her transforming plan. She goes through four versions of the murders: (1) first she intends to kill Aegisthus, (2) then she replaces her plan with the idea of killing herself, (3) finally she wants to get Agamemnon to kill her, (4) to arrive finally at the decision to kill Agamemnon herself. Essentially, though, this doesn't change the story's plot - the murdered is the king. The most important difference in Yourcenar is the subsequent reaction of the polis and her children. The locals side with her, Orestes does not become a mother-killer, and it is not long before he hands her over to the police and accordingly sends her to trial.

In *Clytemnestra, or Crime*, the whole stake is in breaking the logic of generic revenge, in which one murder drags with it the next. Thus Orestes withdraws from his function as a mother-killing son and bloody defender of his father's law, and Electra is not even mentioned in *Flames*. This allows the moment of *stasis to occur* in an earlier frame, with the political

⁵⁶ Poignault, "Les deux Clytemnestre de Yourcenar".

theatre played out not through the clash of Orestes and the Erinyes before the human judicial institution of the Areopagus, but through the image of Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra is not a chthonic monster, but a woman with free will who has the right to reveal the motives of her crime and to be tried, which legitimizes her as a legal subject.

The second important and big difference is the trial itself - Clytemnestra's speech to the court. In Yourcenar, the queen is not an insatiable ghost from the shadow realm, demanding vengeance and inciting the Erinyes to pursue Orestes - as she appears in the prologue of the *Eumenides*. Her defense before the court does not follow rhetorically exculpatory strategies. Rather, she analytically seeks to expose the depths of her motives - not seeking pardon or mercy, but clarity in the exposition of her position. Here she is not a passive object caught by Orestes' knife, but a subject with a voice of her own.

Finally, in Yourcenar, there are no erinyes and monsters and no version of generic revenge, but the abyss of the inner labyrinth and the complex layers of the unconscious behind the crime is fully opened. Clytemnestra is not plotting a brutal matricide, but she is warning us that there is no redemption and everything is repeating itself all over again⁵⁷.

Contrary to Aeschylus' trilogy, which begins with the ghost of Clytemnestra, Yourcenar ends the story with the ghost of Agamemnon returning each night. This constant return is like a painting rendered under the brushstrokes of surrealism.

In *Clytemnestra, or the Crime*, there is no other voice and no other point of view than that of the queen, so the whole fragment is told as a monody. Its finale abruptly shifts the register of logical and sequential exposition of motifs to open onto a poetic summation of *time* and *eternity*, a dynamic much loved by Yourcenar. Clytemnestra, with all her narration, seems to be saying: my story is more complex and with many more layers than it is remembered. But at the very end, she introduces us to the dungeon of her unconscious, where the same scene is repeated over and over again. Clytemnestra foresees what will happen when her death takes her to the underworld - there she will relive again and again the joy of meeting Agamemnon, his departure "to conquer some province of Death" and his fatal return. Clytemnestra comes to the conclusion that she has achieved punishment for her crime - that the flame for Agamemnon should not be extinguished. Thus we can interpret *the flames* as that passion which defies change - it stops time, freezes the passage of time and shapes it into a piece of eternity. Towards

⁵⁷ Yourcenar, "Flames," 97.

the end of the fragment we can retrospectively see Clytemnestra waiting for Agamemnon. It is a duration that has changed her character, slowly transforming her into Agamemnon himself, or into a masculine (phallic) woman, and thus into a subject who cannot reconcile herself to her passive role.

The fragment "Clytemnestra, or the Crime" can be read in an anthropological-archetypal key through the myth of the eternal return or through the psychoanalytic theory of the repetition and return of trauma. My reading takes a third direction, which finds proximity to Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy in order to draw out differences from it. Thus, although the image of Clytemnestra is sculpted after Aeschylus and the crime is the same, committed in the same way, in Yourcenar we see a political theatre being played out before us in which Clytemnestra is an active figure - she is not frightened by her fate, but is prepared to shape it as she should.

CONCLUSION

The end of the thesis on the work of Marguerite Yourcenar goes back to the beginning in order to underline that the two main lines of the study - the examination of the *mask-gender-voice triad* and the attempt to derive the writer's notion of humanism that passed through the abyss of the Second World War - are intersected in the discourse on world literature in which the Franco-Belgian author is recognized and inscribed. What Yourcenar's creative method gives to the contemporary notion of world literature is that: (a) in terms of *geography*, it thinks literature cosmopolitan; (b) in terms of *temporality*, it resolves contemporary crises by dressing up in *archaic masks*, showing how a modern consciousness can distance itself from its own aeon in order to embody itself in past times and events; (c) in terms of *language*, it follows the humanist ideal of mastery of ancient classical and modern European languages; (d) in terms of tradition, it makes every effort to enter into dialogue, whether direct or imagined, with its contemporaries as well as with the voices of the past; (e) in terms of the *subject*, it presents how it is a complex amalgam of phantasmal and historical elements.

The question of the contradiction between the masks of things and their unmasking - as an unmasking before the abyss - is insistently present in Yourcenar's work. In it, the paradox between mask and abyss, between dream and death, between the portrait of a passion and direct horror finds its different voices, forms, stories. This work traces some of their possible trajectories with a view to the question of the construction of the subject as a universal man, marked by the masquerade of his gender difference, but also and above all capable of a sublimatory creative gesture in which to express the ongoing process of his becoming and dissolution.

What the text repeatedly turns to is the possibility of *seeing things* through different perspectives. The process of writing through masks, or bridging the gap in Yourcenar, of course has its dark side. Beyond the story of writing, completing and editing, another story can be told - that of the lagging and burning of manuscripts. Almost all of Yourcenar's significant works published after the Second World War have had their original version abandoned and/or destroyed before then. She herself sums up her drama in one fragment, "Drowning in Despair of the Writer Who Does Not Write"⁵⁸. The author's creative journey shows how destructive

⁵⁸ Yourcenar, "Notes on the History of the Writing of Hadrian's Memoirs," 270.

power can become creative power, and working with negativity can be a way of staging other voices. Techniques of self-obliteration and depersonalization of one's own voice are directly related to the possibility of capturing the architectonics of an alien voice.

The dark side of writing or not writing includes another point. Behind the formula "humanism passed through the abyss" developed in chapter three is the question of whether it is still possible to think of man in generalized terms and in universal terms, not just after the collapse of faith in the human after the wars, but after the collapse of possible Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modernist utopias. Yourcenar - and in this sense she is complicit with Thomas Mann's effort - answers in the affirmative, but this future man is only possible insofar as he can work with negativity, collapse, the unconscious, the aggressive, the chaotic. Man is only possible insofar as he transcends the abysses.

The very thinking on the category of *subject* implies a complex movement between *inside/outside*; between *stable/destabilization*; between *anchoring/dissolution*; between *crystallization/liquefaction*. This dynamic can also be seen in terms of the torsion between *mask* and *face*. Adrian reflects on how the external is incorporated: 'It did not matter that the agreement reached was only external, imposed and probably temporary: I knew that both good and evil were a matter of habit, that the temporary could last for a long time, that the external penetrated within and that over time the mask became a face'⁵⁹. Yourcenar, on the other hand, reflects on how the voice can be sculpted, that is, to convey the inner as the outer: "To recast from the inside what nineteenth-century archaeologists had done from the outside"⁶⁰. The double paradox in relation to the *inside/outside boundary* is related to the incorporation of the mask as a face and the design of intimate space as architecture. Yourcenar's effort to translate the materiality of the voice into a plastic metaphor (sculpture, painting, architecture) is captured here through the idea of a "portrait of a voice".

The author's archaeological effort to capture the contours of Adrian's voice is tantamount to distancing herself from her own voice, time, vocabulary, tastes, conventions. The very notion of voice functions not in terms of primordially and authenticity, but as document, letter, narrative. The voice is thus the instrument of delineating the contours of the self through a particular mask. Working with masks is working on oneself *as someone else*.

⁵⁹ Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, 1983, 94-95.

⁶⁰ Yourcenar, "Notes on the History of the Writing of Hadrian's Memoirs," 272.

This within the present study is traced at a micro level in chapters four and five through analyses on *Flames*. These capture the asceticism of self-obliteration of one's own voice, which runs parallel to the hedonism of presenting one's experience as someone else. In this sense, Yourcenar goes against contemporary identity politics insofar as he shows how the subject, whether fictional character or historical figure, is as much a product of its contextual inscriptions such as language, nationality, gender, as it is a product of its imagined identifications. In short, the person never fully coincides with himself insofar as the personality is a series of his own imaginary projections.

Through the real-life encounter between Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Yourcenar, discussed in Chapter Two of the thesis, the role of the *imaginary component* in an approach that contemporaries invented their transitions is highlighted. But how better can this be illustrated than by another real encounter, and with none other than Jorge Luis Borges himself. Yourcenar, who has a shared passion for stylistic masks and fictional authorial doubles, alchemy, libraries and Piranesi's architectural fantasies, specifically went to visit the dying Borges in June 1986. The last essay she wrote was dedicated to the Argentine writer, Borges, the Seer (*Borges ou le Voyant*, 1987). In it she comments that in Borges's world everything changes and becomes something else, stressing that "Jorge Luis Borges and Shakespeare are both themselves and also profoundly all people, they are at once each and the mysterious Nobody of Greek legend"⁶¹. The subject's ability to transcend the self and identify with historical or imaginary persons is related to *empathy*, which in the present work is developed through the figure of the imaginary father. This ability of the personality to use itself as with stylistic masks, to be both nobody and everybody, leads to a universally thought of category of man. Through such a frame, the universal person, being male or female, can stage his or her history regardless of gender; to imagine oneself in another time as a hero with a thousand faces. Such an emphasis is especially important when the identity politics that come through a globalist regime increasingly compel us to label ourselves within a specific perimeter. This makes it radically impossible to see ourselves, like Shakespeare, Borges, or Yourcenar, in a mode of play between real and imagined identifications.

"Mask and Gender in the Work of Marguerite Yourcenar: The Staging of the Voice" can most synthetically illustrate its hypothesis with the fragment "Le regret d'Héraclite" by

⁶¹ Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires*, 583-584.

Borges, quoted and commented by Yourcenar: "I, who have been so many people, have never been the one in whose arms Mathilde Urbach lost her sanctity"⁶². Yourcenar comments that although the fragment is written in the first person singular, the author uses a double mask, attributing the thought to an imaginary Russian poet taken from a fictional anthology. Such a construction of the subject as both a *nobody* and a *who-is-and-what-is person* makes the persona malleable, formative, multiple.

The universality of the human at work is deployed in terms of a notion of humanism that recognizes the pitfalls, destabilizations, and demonic abysses of the unconscious. The contemporary notion of world literature needs just such a rethinking of humanism in the perspective taken by Thomas Mann and Marguerite Yourcenar. This work provides an opportunity to situate Yourcenar within an understanding of world literature today. More importantly, the French-Belgian author's work itself helps to point to the ideal of a world literature that 1. Thinks of man as a universal, multiple and mutable subject; 2. Temporally shows that the present is always traversed by the layers of past times; 3. Contemporary bodies are inevitably articulated by the masks of imagined identifications; 4. The genealogies of literary kinships are the product of a dialogue with predecessors that is as self-reflexive as it is fanciful; 5. The mimicry of foreign voices, alchemical transformation, and magic by sympathetic means in Yourcenar's vocabulary are creative means by which persons, fictional and historical, are always represented as discontinuity and combination, document and fiction, absence and imagination. The subject is an aggregate of many voices; it is sculpted by different tenses and masks.

⁶² Trans. Ivangelina Vateva by Borges, *Obras completas*, 852.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THESIS:

1. The dissertation is the first study in the Bulgarian context on the work of the French-Belgian author Marguerite Yourcenar.
2. The study questions the chronology of the creation of Yourcenar's oeuvre, showing the highly complex dynamics in which late and early works function.
3. Yourcenar's definition *portrait of a voice* is conceptualized as a concept and an overall method in the work of a writer in which method monody is layered into polyphony.
4. Yourcenar's writing is thought not simply through the framework of national French or Belgian literature, but inscribed in the discourse of world literature. A vision of world literature as a surreal combination of ancient masks and contemporary bodies is offered through Yourcenar's work.
5. The work provides a coherent and systematic examination of Julia Kristeva's notion *of the imaginary father*, which is then used to connect, parallel and identify the autobiographical writing of Marguerite Yourcenar and Virginia Woolf.
6. The work shows how the multiplicity of forms that a character's voice takes in Yourcenar obeys the logic of so-called *street hovering* ("street haunting") in Woolf.
7. The work of Marguerite Yourcenar and Thomas Mann are challenged in terms of thinking about a *new type of humanism* that has gone through the collapse of the Second World War but continues to maintain a universal idea of the human.
8. The alchemical metaphor in Yourcenar is systematized into twelve steps, which then serve as a theoretical grid through which the novel *The Abyss* is read.
9. Throughout the prose poems of *Flames* is a distinct dynamic between mask and gender that is seen as relevant to all of Yourcenar's work.

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