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Marguerite Yourcenar, Alchemist

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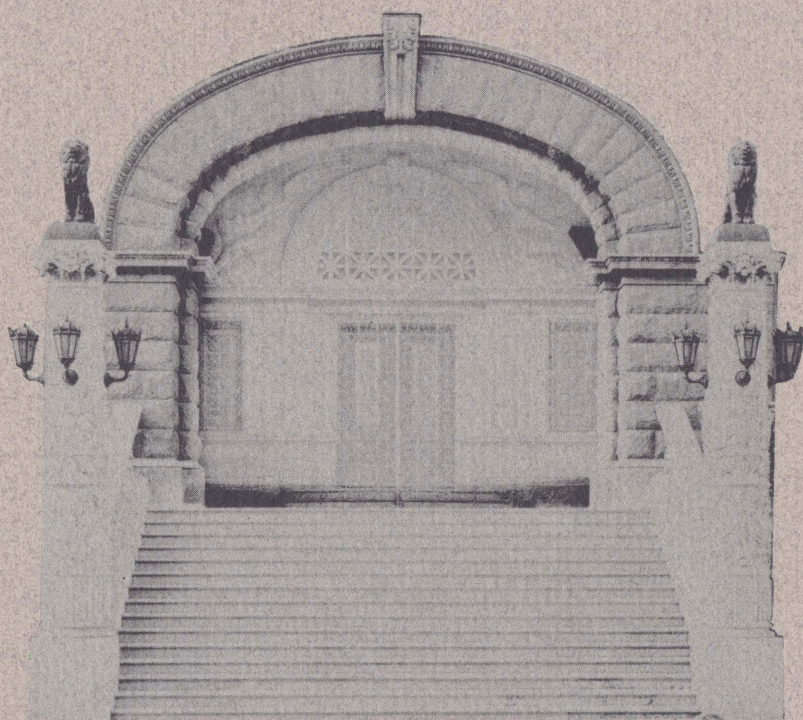
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Marguerite Yourcenar, Alchemist

BY RHODA LERMAN

Marguerite Yourcenar worked with full consciousness and deep knowledge in the language and landscape of alchemy. She was not only writing books; she was remaking her soul. In the "Reflections on the Composition of *The Memoirs of Hadrian*", appended to the novel, she notes that she writes "with one foot in scholarship, the other in magic arts, or more accurately, without metaphor, absorption in that sympathetic magic which operates when one transports one's self in thought into another's body and soul". In *The Memoirs of Hadrian* we enter the territory of the landscape with her. In *The Abyss* we read only the map.

The Memoirs of Hadrian is a series of letters from the Roman Emperor Hadrian to his young lover. *The Abyss* is the tale of the alchemical dissolution and transmutation of Zeno, an imagined sixteenth-century Flemish philosopher. While the plot is Zeno's story, it is also, most importantly, the description of Yourcenar's own work on herself as she wrote *The Memoirs of Hadrian*. It is no small matter that the original title of *The Abyss* is *L'Oeuvre au noir*, an alchemical term for the Black Phase of the Great Transmutation. *The Abyss* is a book about the writing of *The Memoirs of Hadrian*: the alchemical transformation of the writer, without metaphor, into the body and soul of another. The writing of Hadrian's story was the alembic for Yourcenar's own process, her own transportation.

The Memoirs of Hadrian is a miracle of a book: an autobiography of an historical figure by a writer whose special gifts extend the writing beyond the ordinary into the essential. It is written in the first person. The novelist becomes her subject. Hadrian bursts forth from the pages alive. One feels the mosquito bite his nose. Yourcenar abandons her own consciousness, crosses the flimsy bridge into his consciousness and brings him back alive. Simply, Yourcenar made believe she was Hadrian and became Hadrian. A genuine voice spoke through hers.

On the other hand, *The Abyss* is written in the third person. Given

almost equal amounts of scholarship, energy and imagination, the third person seems a barrier to essence. But possibly, the unfortunate distance between both works originates in far more esoteric causes than the choice of narrative viewpoints and will give us a view of Mme. Yourcenar's real work—which is soul-making. Zeno, the hero of *The Abyss*, who is in presentation similar to his real contemporaries, Erasmus and Giordano Bruno, remains a synthetic figure. For Hadrian, the choice of first person is a gate, which, once opened, leads to a landscape in which the writer becomes the subject. The use of third person narrative in *The Abyss* results in a more objective rendition, a step apart, a barrier. Zeno becomes an unwieldy collection of information about the times, not the man. The writer is too much present in the work. She plunges Zeno into every current of his times and we are left with an abstract character. The constant and careful mention of eel pies and harquebuses, the listing of names, the battalions of characters passing needlessly in and out of the book, awkward translations, characters unrealized, are obstructive. They are from Yourcenar's scholarship, not Zeno's heart. This foot is not in magic: she was not extending her imagination. She did not allow herself to drop into the abyss, to shed herself to enter into Zeno. He does not become flesh in the way that Hadrian does. She fails to open the gate, to leap the great distance. In her alchemical terms, Yourcenar has not married the alchemical king, has not achieved the conjunctio that she did with Hadrian. The structure is uneven; it is too small a book to be a vast tapestry (the original plan) and too large to be as loosely woven as it is. With Hadrian, one never considers the structure because the man is so compelling. One never considers the language, for it is as cool and fitting as the marble of his villas. The facts, the confusions, lies, distortions of Hadrian's life have human focus. A human orientation of the period is filtered through an elaborate mind with all its limitations in time and its prophetic leaps forward out of time. Her choice of first person narrative or third person is more than choosing a simple narrative technique. It is the measure of the degree to which Yourcenar *becomes* her subject. And that measure is an alchemical measure: the transportation of one's self in thought into another's body and soul.

The very process of her writing is the alembic of the Great Work in which the author is transmuted. One can reasonably assume, given Yourcenar's knowledge of alchemy and her own explanation of her

involvement with Hadrian, that *The Memoirs of Hadrian* is not only a book but the salt left in the bottom of the alembic of Yourcenar's soul-making. What she did in order to capture and become Hadrian is the plot line of Zeno and his attempts at soul-making.

It is recommended here that the further an author dissolves himself, the further he transports himself, kills himself to become the other, the more pure will be the artistic creation. To choose first person, to dare to write a fictional autobiography of an historical figure, is to open the gate. To step into the landscape is an act of courage. And to succeed thereafter is soul-making. The true work, then, is the dissolution of the author and then the conjunctio, the marriage of author and subject.

It is within this frame that works by others can also be measured. The composer Stockhausen said, "First, I make the music and then the music makes me". He knew the landscape of creative soul-making. Mme. Yourcenar reminds us in the "Reflections" that Yeats had said of his own revisions, "It is myself that I remake". In both books—*The Memoirs of Hadrian* successfully and *The Abyss* not as successfully—Yourcenar attempts without metaphor this transportation of body and soul. Such a transportation does not merely border on, but becomes, in fact, a work of alchemy, a work of process. The book is the alembic, the vessel for the transmutation of the self into another's body and soul; the process is the writing. One can reasonably question whether the author of such a work is then the performer or the performed.

Yourcenar writes, "The sorcerer who pricks his thumb before he evokes the shades knows well they will heed his call only because they can lap his blood". It is a dangerous game to call the shades. One bleeds. One is bled. One performs. One is performed. One changes. One is changed. The writer is not the same person when the book is finished. All prior notions and conceptions have been dissolved. "The rupture of established notions [is] a great crack in the heart of things", Zeno explains. One rips off what one is and descends into the abyss. The book is less a goal than the self. The transmutation of the author and then of the reader when he "gets into the book", into the vessel, is the real work. Yourcenar's work in *The Memoirs of Hadrian*, is the reduction of her consciousness into the unconsciousness of the prima materia of existence, the leap across distances of centuries, and then the final coagulation, crystallization

of a new consciousness: the essence. She has married the subject. In the final scene of *The Abyss*, Zeno bleeds himself to death. It is a perfect alchemical image. The puddle of blood escaping at the end through the door of his prison means that he has accomplished the beginning of the Black Phase of the Great Work. Transmutation will follow. There will be a new coagulation outside the prison door, a new life. Yourcenar pricks her finger and bleeds herself, and her blood, loosed, makes a new coagulation with Hadrian's. His essence becomes hers, hers his. "Never mind", she writes in the "Reflections". "That disjunction, that break in continuity, that night of the soul which so many of us experienced at the time was essential perhaps in order to free me into trying to bridge not only the distance which separates me from Hadrian but above all the distance which separates me from my true self." What more can one ask of an occupation, other than it bridge the distance which separates the writer from his true self? *The Abyss* is a fine novel as novels go. Its real value comes, however, in explaining the magic that made *The Memoirs of Hadrian* the masterpiece it is. For in the *Memoirs* an ancient consciousness is evoked from the chaos of the past, and a new consciousness is brought forth. *The Memoirs of Hadrian* as a novel is an alembic. Mme. Yourcenar, in the full meaning of the word, is an alchemist. Through the vessel of writing she rewrote her soul.