Contemplative "Délire"

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Even for authors who use fixed forms or emphasize the role of craft and artistry over inspiration, the actual composition of literary texts always remains somewhat mysterious: characters, stories, and words can seem to come from nowhere; texts can seem to write themselves as much as they are written. This is especially true with Marguerite Yourcenar. For her, writing is "un grand mystère" motivated by "un instinct profond" (*Radioscopie* 58). Poetic language is magic and incantation (*Yeux* 197). She describes literary creation as "l'érudition […] au service de l'hallucination" (*Portraits* 65), "délire" (*Portraits* 325), "quelque chose de médiumnique" (*Yeux* 107) and "la vision" (*Yeux* 232). She often spoke of hearing her texts dictated to her (*Yeux* 232) and physically seeing characters appear. When her translator and partner, Grace Frick, would ask why characters did certain things at certain moments, all that Yourcenar could say was that she actually *watched* them as they were doing it (*Oeuvre* 464).

Although Yourcenar has openly discussed her methods in notes to her major novels (*L'Oeuvre au noir* and *Mémoires d'Hadrien*) and in published interviews (particularly in *Les Yeux ouverts*), most Yourcenar scholars, paying homage to her privileged position as a member of the Académie Française, tend to ignore the more hallucinatory aspects of her methods and focus instead on her meticulous research and mastery of language. Yourcenar is fairly critical of this position: "Je crois que la plupart des gens se font des idées érronées sur l'érudition […]. Les Français surtout s'imaginent qu'on va plonger dans les livres du matin au soir, commes les rats de bibliothèques des romans d'Anatole France […]. Mais ce n'est pas comme ça que les choses se passent" (*Yeux* 139). Rather than relying

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primarily on her intellect for her work, Yourcenar attaches more importance to her body, senses, and emotions. She compares the work of writing to that of baking bread: knowing by feel when to stop kneading or when to stop working a phrase (*Portraits* 350). And she says that she has learned almost as much about literature from working in her garden as from reading the great masters (*Portraits* 128). The few Yourcenar scholars who do cite her "mysticism" or "sagesse" leave it at that, and by failing to describe what Yourcenar does and why, they render her approach to literary production even more mysterious and inaccessible.

Yet in all fairness, Yourcenar does not leave readers much to go on. Even her use of the term *délire*, which she adopts as a concession to those who might not otherwise understand her approach, is also a deliberate attempt to throw readers off the path. Evoking the poetic inspiration of Rimbaud, or even that of the Pléiade poets of the Renaissance, Yourcenar situates herself in familiar and established literary traditions in France while referring to something else entirely: "Quand je dis délire, je parle pour le dehors. Pour le public, c'est un délire, pour celui qui s'y adonne, c'est le comble de la sagesse […]. Cela paraît si opposé à la pensée, à la manière de vivre, d'écrire, de causer en France […] que c'est extrêmement difficile à expliquer" (*Yeux* 153). So difficult indeed that she never does. Instead, what Yourcenar leaves us with is a body of notes and comments which suggest profound affinities between her approach and Buddhist meditation practices, namely those of Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. To understand how—and why—Yourcenar uses these traditions to inform her work, I would like to look at her affiliation with Buddhism more closely, and then trace how she adapted its meditative and philosophical methods to her writing in two ways: the adoption of tantric techniques from the practice of deity yoga to create characters; and the application of the radically deconstructive teachings of Zen to the historical novel. If indeed this contemplative *délire*/delirium runs as deeply through her work as she suggests, what might this imply for readers or for understanding her place in literature?

Yourcenar and Buddhism?

The question is a good one. Unlike other twentieth-century authors such as Victor Segalen, Paul Claudel, André Malraux, Saint-John Perse, Marguérite Duras, and Roland Barthes, who generously incorporate references to Asia in their texts, nearly all of Yourcenar's work is set in the heart of Western culture: Greece, Rome, and Western Europe. The social, political, and cultural questions she engages are clearly those of Western humanism and her writing is itself quite traditional and canonical.

On closer inspection, however, there is much evidence that Yourcenar was deeply influenced by the East: from the tantric Buddhism of Tibet that caught her

imagination as a young woman in France to her study of Zen in the last forty years of her life, from her travels to India and Japan to the meticulous notes on the meditation practices she adapted for her own use. Even a casual glance into her private library at Petite Plaisance reveals that her collections in Eastern art, religion, and literature rival those of specialists and serious Zen students.

Moreover, her entire *oeuvre* is replete with echoes of the East. In *Les nouvelles orientales*, Yourcenar writes about a Taoist master who loses himself in his art, composes a tale about the Hindu goddess Kali meeting the Buddha, and imagines a new episode to the *Tale of Genji*. "Conte bleu" is a rewriting of the Tibetan legend of the wish-fulfilling jewel. First-person narratives in *Alexis*, *Feux*, and *Mémoires d'Hadrien* echo Zen teachings on the emptiness of self. Zénon in *L'Oeuvre au noir* and Père Cicca in "Rendre à César" recall bodhisattvas. Her travel essays reflect the pilgrimages of Basho; her translations include Noh plays. Key passages of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* and *L'Oeuvre au noir* are taken directly from Buddhist sutras and meditations, and the starting point of Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy is a Zen koan: "What was your original face before your mother and father were born?"

Most compelling, however, is Yourcenar's clear avowal of her indebtedness to Buddhism:

> Je sais gré, pour ce qu'ils m'ont appris de précieux sur moi-même et pour autant que j'en ai entrepris et poursuivi l'étude, au Tantrisme, et à ses méthodes quasi physiologiques d'éveil des puissances et de l'esprit du corps, et au Zen, cette lame étincelante. Surtout je reste profondément attachée à la connaissance bouddhique […] Non seulement sa compassion pour tout être vivant amplifie nos actions, […] elle replace l'homme, passager, dans un univers qui passe, mais encore […] elle nous met en garde contre les spéculations métaphysiques ambitieuses pour nous inciter, surtout, à mieux nous connaître. Et tout autant que les philosophes modernes crues les plus audacieuses, elle insiste sur la nécessité de ne dépendre que de nous-mêmes: "Soyez pour vous-mêmes une lampe." (*Yeux* 313)

However, literature, rather than sitting meditation, becomes the site and focus of her practice. In one letter she describes her life as "une existence consacrée en effet en grande partie à essayer à réaliser des ambitions littéraires (et plus secrètement spirituelles)" (*Lettres* 229-30) and writing as "la technique de la méditation pure" (*Portraits* 49)—or, using her alchemical metaphor, as "un effort pour se rapprocher de l'essence de la réalité, une manière d'établir l'Oeuvre au noir" (*Portraits* 128-29). She often compares her rather solitary writing life at Petite Plaisance in Maine to monastic life in a Zen temple, her writing room to "une cellule de connaissance de soi" (*Yeux* 137). Given the evidence Yourcenar herself has placed before readers (albeit scattered throughout interviews and texts), it would indeed be surprising if Buddhism did not play a significant role in

her work.

Unwriting the Self / Writing Others

In Buddhism, the initial practices center on cultivating a meticulous attention to quiet and empty the mind to undo fixed ideas and dualistic perceptions. While quite characteristic of Zen, this discipline is also used for the more lively and engaged practices of Tibetan Buddhism, which deliberately manipulate and use illusion as a skillful means of awakening. Yourcenar's journals contain extensive notes on such practices, particularly those regarding arriving at a "one-pointed mind" capable of intense and unbroken concentration. As she once explained in an interview, in order to avoid the limitations and interferences inherent in the process of consciously "creating" with the rational mind (which in her view is antithetical to art), it is necessary to eliminate the jumbled collection of thoughts and ideas and to fix one's mind on one thought, one sensation, one word, or on absolutely nothing at all: "La méthode la plus simple, la meilleure, l'attention qui fait le vide en soi pour considérer seulement l'objet, ou le souvenir qui vous importe" (*Yeux* 214). Although the cultivation of such a deep and continuous inner silence is extremely difficult, she also finds it absolutely essential: "D'abord, bien entendu, quand on est romancier, cela consiste à se laisser investir par un personnage. Mais cela consiste aussi à faire un total silence des idées, à éliminer tout l'acquis, à faire table rase du tout" (*Yeux* 145).

Besides the cultivation of emptiness, her notes also center on practices of extensive visualizations to imaginatively reconstruct reality. As John Blofeld, a Western adept of Tantric Buddhism whose work was familiar to Yourcenar, explains:

> The purpose of visualization is to gain control of the mind, become skilled in creating mental constructions, make contact with powerful forces (themselves products of mind) and achieve higher states of consciousness in which the non-existence of own-being and the non-dual nature of reality are transformed from intellectual concepts into experiential consciousness—non-duality is no longer just believed, but felt. In short, visualization is a yoga of the mind. (84)

The particular form of visualization that drew Yourcenar's attention was the tantric practice of deity yoga:

> Dans les disciplines religieuses tibétaines, le novice se retirait longuement dans sa cellule, un an parfois, pour apprendre à se créer en esprit, pièce à pièce, un personnage divin, protecteur. Puis, il sortait et il fallait que son protecteur l'accompagnât, qu'il ne perdît pas de vue, malgré les distractions du monde. Ensuite, on lui disait de rentrer dans sa cellule pour se défaire pièce à pièce du personnage qu'il avait crée, et revenir à l'absolu sans forme. Cela vaut pour nous tous. Cela vaut aussi pour le romancier. (*Yeux* 232)

The parallels between such *yidams* (personal deities) and characters are indeed quite direct. Blofeld explains that these deities are "to a greater or lesser extent symbols of either prime universal forces proceeding directly from the void or else of forces intimately connected with the mind of the individual adept" (115). Whether a kind of universal archetype or an imagined entity, both the *yidam* and the literary character take on a life of their own.

Yourcenar perceives her own creative processes in a remarkably similar way. After cultivating the necessary inner silence (which parallels with the completion of all preliminary practices of concentration), the writer is then to abandon herself with great humility to her characters, imitating the tantric ritual self-sacrifice (*chöd*): "Se désincarner pour se réincarner en autrui. Et utiliser pour faire ses os, sa chair et son sang, et les milliers d'images enregistrées par une matière grise" (*Oeuvre* 467). After doing this, Yourcenar would find voices and images of characters suddenly appearing in her mind, seemingly manifesting themselves of their own accord. In *Les Yeux ouverts*, Yourcenar describes the arrival of the Prieur des Cordeliers quite vividly:

> Un peu fatiguée par mon travail, je suis partie pour Pologne et pour une courte excursion en Russie, laissant Zénon, en quelque sorte, assis à sa place. Et sur le chemin de retour, je me suis retrouvée en Autriche, et là, subitement, j'ai eu envie d'aller à l'église des Franciscains de Salzbourg, qui est très belle. Je me suis assise là, j'ai assisté à la grande messe... Et j'ai littéralement vu entrer, dans ma pensée, bien sûr, je dirais dans la pensée de mes yeux, le Prieur des Cordeliers. Ce personnage qui n'existait encore que dans une seule phrase du livre, tout d'un coup il était là, vivant, il avait beaucoup à me dire. (167)

Yourcenar's characters seemed so real to her that she claimed they were *as present*, both mentally and physically, as the people with whom she felt the closest: "Je les vois, je les entends, avec une netteté que je dirais hallucinatoire si l'hallucination n'était autre chose, une prise de posséssion involontaire" (*Yeux* 238). Yourcenar would describe thinking about them, turning toward them to speak with them silently whenever circumstances or places would bring them to mind. While Hadrien kept a bit of an imperial distance, Zénon proved to be a constant companion. As she once noted: "Il m'arrive de causer avec Zénon. Quand je suis fatiguée, j'ai l'impression que nous sommes fatigués ensemble" (*Portraits* 186). During sleepless nights, Yourcenar often had the impression that she was holding Zénon's hand, a hand she knew to the smallest details:

> Je connais bien cette main d'un brun gris, très forte, longue, aux doigts en spatules, peu charnus, aux ongles assez pâles et grands, coupés ras. Le poignet osseux, la paume assez creuse et silonnée de nombreuses lignes. J'en connais la pression, de cette main, son dégré exact de chaleur. […] Cette geste *physique* de tendre la main à cet homme inventé, je l'ai plus d'une fois fait. (*Oeuvre* 464-65)

To bring her characters even closer, Yourcenar would often borrow a practice common to Zen as well as the tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism: the use of a mantra: "Au temps que j'écrivais la seconde et troisième partie de ce livre, il m'est souvent arrivé de me répéter silencieusement ou à mi-voix à moi-même: 'Zénon, Zénon, Zénon, Zénon, Zénon….' Vingt fois, cent fois davantage. Et sentir qu'à force de dire ce nom un peu plus de réalité se coagulait" (*Oeuvre* 457). At other times, she would put herself in a trance and use automatic writing to "channel" the voices of her characters (*Yeux* 145) or write in their handwriting or native language (*Yeux* 101-02). Far from psychosis, this "channeling" was for her, the result of assiduous inner practice:

> Quand on passe des heures et des heures avec une créature imaginaire, ou ayant autrefois vécu, ce n'est plus seulement l'intelligence qui le conçoit, c'est l'émotion et l'affection qui entre en jeu. Il s'agit d'une lente ascèse, on fait taire complètement sa propre pensée; on écoute une voix: qu'est-ce que cet individu a à me dire, m'apprendre? Et, quand on l'entend bien, il ne nous quitte plus. (*Yeux* 224)

At this point where the character, like the deity, is as real as one's own self, Yourcenar explains, the writer must surrender to the inner logic of the characters, relinquish all control and let the book simply write itself: "Tout se passe comme si son personnage l'avait précédé un peu et tenu par la main" (*Lettres* 379). Yourcenar describes her role as that of the nearly invisible stagehands of Noh theatre, dressed in black and silently changing the set of a dark stage during a performance. This kind of *délire* consists of entering so deeply into each character and situation that one disappears into them (*Portraits* 325): "J'ai l'impression d'être un instrument à travers lesquel des courants, des vibrations sont passés. Et cela vaut pour tous mes livres, et je dirai même pour toute ma vie" (*Yeux* 309).

What is most interesting is that Yourcenar clearly believed in the "reality" of these characters to almost the same degree that she believed in her own, with their memories and sensations just as real and intimate—and necessarily so: "Je ne vois que peu de différence entre ce qui est et ce qui pourrait être" (*Portraits* 185). In another interview, she notes: "A travers eux, j'ai vécu des vies parallèles" (*Yeux* 241). Furthermore, reversing the usual paradigm of author as creator and source—consistent with the practice of deity yoga—Yourcenar claims that *she* was derived from her characters: "En un sens, ils sont plus réels que moi-même, qui change, passe, me transforme, tandis qu'il en est vite de nos personnages comme d'une manière non-ductile: ils ont acquis une forme qu'ils ne nous permettent plus de changer" (*Yeux* 241).

However, once the novelist, like the practitioner of deity yoga, has fully constructed the existence of her characters through assiduous visualization, the

next step is their deconstruction. When the tantric adept is able to perceive the deity in its most subtle form, the need for it (produced by the belief in a permanent self) disappears and the deity simply dissolves back into its original emptiness. Similarly, when the novel is written, the writer is able to step back and release the close identification with characters. In both cases, there is an opportunity for direct insight into the constructed and fictitious nature of self which leads to an awareness of the interconnectedness of all existence and the rise of deep compassion. As Yourcenar herself explains, "Un des mérites de la littérature, lorsqu'elle parvient, c'est de nous faire entrer dans la peau d'êtres différents, de nous faire comprendre qu'ils sont nous-mêmes, que nous aurions pu vivre à la manière dont ils ont vécu, que c'était là une de nos opportunités. Et j'ai essayé de montrer cela, d'étendre cette sympathie à tous mes personnages" (*Radioscopie* 122).

Writing as an oeuvre au noir*: Emptiness and Textuality*

In Buddhism, the primary cause of suffering is ignorance, while enlightenment is synonymous with a realization of the emptiness of self and of the complete interdependence and impermanence of existence. The task of the practitioner, then, is to study the self in all its manifestations and contradictions through meditative awareness to ultimately undo the mistaken beliefs in permanence and essentiality. For Yourcenar, creations of narrative and characters allow her to intimately examine how a sense of self and reality is constructed—and then begin the work of deconstructing them: stripping away all assumptions, identities, fixed ideas and habits of mind in order to arrive at a point where "tout se défait" (*Portraits* 61; *Yeux* 125), a point where the inherent emptiness of existence shines through without obstruction. As she reminds readers: "Ecrire une façon de pénétrer dans les profondeurs de l'être" (*Portraits* 380).

Although Yourcenar shares certain affinities with the postmodern theory of deconstruction, her imitation/adaptation of the Buddhist form of deconstruction allows her writing to go beyond endless cycles of reinscriptions and deconstructions. As the Buddhist scholar David Loy asks: "What might a Buddhist teacher, concerned to help his students realize this freedom, say about Derrida's deconstruction? That Derrida's freedom is too much a textual freedom, that it is overly preoccupied with language because it seeks liberation through and in language—in other words, that it is logocentric" (239). Unlike Derrida's approach, the Buddhist version of deconstruction includes language, but it is not primarily linguistic. Rather, it aims for the deconstruction of the everyday world and its disguised (automatic and unconscious) metaphysics that posits discrete things interacting in time and space. Emptiness, or the lack of permanence or essence, is used as a deconstructive tool which is itself deconstructed.[1] This double deconstruction

subverts all ontological claims and philosophical positions, and as a result, prepares the way for direct insight into the nature of reality. Like the "live words" of Zen koans which suggest realities beyond conceptual thought, Yourcenar's aim is to use words to go beyond them, to move herself and her readers from theoretical understandings to experiential ones through spiritual/literary practice. To use her own metaphor, she wants her texts to resemble a Taoist vase: "une forme, qui est très belle, et qui évoque le grand mystère du vide et de la plénitude qui a hanté les Chinois depuis des siècles" (*Portraits* 389-90).[2]

Yourcenar's attempts at a literary *via negativa*, couched in the coded, mystical (and deliberately obscuring for the uninitiated) language of alchemy, function as a skillful transposition of Buddhist dialectics of emptiness into literature. A primary example is the "double deconstruction" she performs with regard to her view of history, specifically as it relates to the novel. She first negates the term "historical novel" as invalid, since all novels are "historical" for the simple fact that they are all set in a near or distant, real or imagined past (Rosbo 39). Her rejection of the historical novel is seconded by a rejection of linear, reified, or systematized notions of history itself. She takes particular issue with the idea of history as some kind of objective absolute or as forces and conditions that impose themselves on individuals: "Le temps est issu de nos horloges. Cette division du temps est peut-être vitale pour la pratique quotidienne, mais je trouve que nous en faisons un usage excessif et erronné. Nous en sommes arrivés au point d'être victimes de notre conception du temps" (*Portraits* 220-21). Escaping such dualistic traps and linear models by insisting on history as an empty category, Yourcenar instead describes an engagement with living memory and emphasizes the flow of continuity. Using a Buddhist understanding of cause-and-effect, the events and persons of the "present" are simply the current manifestations of innumerable infinite interrelations of "past" causes and conditions, and the future is merely the idea of the past projected forward. For this reason, Yourcenar refuses to see any essential difference between phases of time or between time and phases of existence, and uses this perspective to contest the reality of both time and eternity. Both, based on conceptual thought, are illusory, and all that we actually perceive is, as Yourcenar notes, "une certaine durée" (*Portraits* 220).

To express this notion of duration, Yourcenar prefers a more tangible and spatial metaphor: "une série de domaines géographiques, qui s'entendent tous sous le même ciel, qui au fond se trouve situés presque simultanément, mais qui ont chacun leurs caractéristiques" (*Portraits* 166). What Yourcenar seems to suggest is that when the false boundaries of time are erased, it is possible to perceive a kind of intersubjective simultaneity in which all events and all persons can be perceived in the context of all their particular conditions and interrelations—and all as "present" in the contemplative act of writing. When the barriers between past and present are dissolved and historical experience is distilled, history be-

comes "une espèce de miroir qui condens[e] la condition de l'homme" (*Yeux* 161)—a mirror she and her readers can use to study themselves (and in turn can deconstruct the dualism of self/other). As she explains: "Notre belle aventure terreste se résume, au fond, à ce schéma identique: les gens vivent, aiment, haïssent, souffrent, se réjouissent de temps en temps et meurent […]. Elle nous apprend beaucoup sur nos propres conditionnements" (*Radioscopie* 102-03). Like Zénon's alchemical experiment, reading and writing history become "une école de liberté" (Rosbo 43), a site which lends itself to a realization of emptiness.

Reading Yourcenar in Context(s)

Most writers are read either in the context of a period, literary movement, or critical framework of their time. Yourcenar rejects all of these possibilities outright, beginning with her century and her contemporaries: "Je suis assez peu de ce vingtième siècle, mes luttes, mes lectures, mes voyages, mes relations avec les autres, mes complicités […] sont ma seule démarche au coeur de la création" (*Radioscopie* 89). She dislikes André Gide and finds him superficial, describes Malraux as exaggerated, and rejects the extremes of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and François Mauriac. She feels that the writings of the existentialists are "beaucoup trop intellectualiste, beaucoup trop didactiques" (*Portraits* 366) and that the *nouveau roman* was an interesting experiment that did not go far enough. As for theoretical approaches, Yourcenar finds Freud's theories without much depth and dislikes Jung's jargon. She followed Barthes for a moment, but did not think his work had much to offer her. In spite of familiarity and contact with other French authors and theorists in exile during the war, most notably André Le Breton and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Yourcenar largely ignored the succeeding currents of structuralism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, feminism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism. As she insists: "Les modes me laissent indifférentes" (*Portraits* 128). Not only does Yourcenar reject the notion of belonging to any literary scene, group, or school—claiming that they represent false values (*Portraits* 392)—she goes as far to say that their literary productions are "des produits d'usines" (*Portraits* 395). She found it "indispensable" to keep a certain distance from them and the notion of literature itself in order to maintain independence of thought and clarity of judgement (*Radioscopie* 107).

Given Yourcenar's rejection of the prevailing lineages, schools, and literary theories of twentieth-century French literature (which echo the streams of negations found in Buddhist thought), coupled with the marked influences of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in her work, how are readers to interpret Yourcenar and her place in literature? Perhaps the best response is to see her work as occupying spaces between established categories, much like the dialogic and heteroglossic work of Basho who blended the high and popular cultures of Edo Japan and

infused his work with the means and meanings of Buddhism as well his own literary and spiritual pilgrimages. Basho transformed *haikai* literature, making it at once transgressive and traditional, spiritual and ordinary, or in *haikai* terms, arriving at the "new" from what was deeply familiar and accessible. Yourcenar's incorporation of Buddhism in her own work can be seen as performing the same task. While her literary forms from the *conte bleu* to the historical novel are solidly within French literary traditions, her texts also seamlessly embody Buddhist themes, tropes, and genres. By inscribing the alterity of Eastern metaphysical perspectives in and through literary forms ideologically committed to and shaped by Western dualism, Yourcenar manages to uncover new possibilities within those standard forms, reinvigorating literary traditions which many postmodern writers and critics have dismissed or abandoned. In doing so, she, like Basho, anticipates a readership and another generation of writers to continue the dialogue, either by re-examining or widening the canon to include readings of other French writers who have done the same, or by further experimenting across cultural and literary lineages.

NOTES:

[1]The third century Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna, whose insights are central to all schools of Mahayana Buddhism, insists upon a double deconstruction in which both terms of binarism are used to deconstruct the other. He first uses cause-and-effect to demonstrate that things, lacking inherent existence, are empty, then reverses the dialectic to use the emptiness of things to deconstruct cause-and-effect and thus disallows the possibility of reification or reinscription of some kind of "ultimate truth."

[2] In *Reading Emptiness*, which discusses the influence of Buddhism in Western literature, Jeff Humphries underscores the same: "I would like to argue that literature is a privileged ground for the realization of emptiness. This is true because in reading literature, there can be no doubt that one is not dealing with an objective reality […]. To the extent that we read texts as a collection of signs that can take the shapes and assume the importance of realities when we read, we directly experience the nature of emptiness, just as we do in dreams" (45).

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