



Marguerite Yourcenar's *Le Labyrinthe du monde*: autobiography of an absent self ?

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Abstract

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Marguerite Yourcenar's autobiography Le Labyrinthe du monde surprised readers by its lack of self-representation and by being mainly a lengthy exploration of the genealogy of her ancestors. This article pursues the hypothesis that although Yourcenar is considered an autonomous creator, uninfluenced by the Parisian avant-garde of the sixties and seventies, certain aspects of her practice of self-representation draw on a new approach to historiography of which Michel Foucault, for example, was one of the earliest practitioners.

1. Introduction

In 1980 Marguerite Yourcenar became the first woman elected to the *Académie Française*. It is thus unsurprising that her three-volume autobiography *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, published between 1974 and 1988, attracted attention. However, readers expecting to find out at last who the reclusive Yourcenar, who had lived for years on Mount Desert Island, really was, were to be disappointed. In the *Labyrinthe du monde*, Yourcenar meticulously explores her genealogy but gives very little information about herself. This provoked Elena Real, for instance, at the end of an international congress on Yourcenar's work in 1985, to leave the audience with the following question: "What kind of writing is this, that begins with the self, ends with the self, and yet never really speaks of the self?" ("Quelle est cette écriture qui part du Moi pour aboutir au Moi et cependant ne parle pas de soi?") (Real, 1990:209).

A brief overview of the three volumes of Yourcenar's autobiography, *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, justifies Real's question. The first volume, *Souvenirs pieux*, is devoted to the maternal branch of Yourcenar's genealogy. The second, *Archives du Nord*, deals with her father's genealogy and the final, unfinished volume, *Quoi? L'Éternité*, which one could expect to have spoken at last of Yourcenar's own life, does so only very briefly. In fact she chose to trace the life of her father after her own birth and also that of a couple, whose partially fictitious names in the text are Jeanne and Egon de Reval¹. Jeanne was a friend of Yourcenar's mother and, according to the author, also perhaps her father's lover. Marguerite, child and adolescent, appears intermittently through the text, but at the end the reader still has little information about her. According to Yvon Bernier, to whom Yourcenar entrusted the care of her documents in her will, she intended to add another fifty pages to her autobiography. These final pages were to deal with her father's and Jeanne's deaths, with some of her earlier writings and with her own life up to the declaration of the Second World War (Yourcenar, 1991:1432). Of the 624 pages occupied by *Le Labyrinthe du monde* in the Gallimard edition of Yourcenar's collected *Essais et Mémoires*², only 20 deal specifically with her early childhood. A further 30, recounting the life of her immediate family before and during the First World War, are interspersed with some information on her life between the ages of 11 and 15.

The general consensus on Yourcenar's oeuvre does not lead the reader to expect that the self should be absent in her autobiographical writings. After the success of her two major novels, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951) and *L'Œuvre au noir* (1968), her reputation as a writer of historical novels with, as Tilbey puts it, "a matchless gift for the reconstruction of time and place" was established. If this is true, why does Yourcenar choose not to reconstruct her own history in her autobiography? Tilbey's appreciation of her oeuvre reads as follows:

Her work exhibits a brand of humanism that is manifestly at odds with some of the most cherished premises shared in recent years by members of the Parisian avant-garde, while being almost wholly immune to charges of naïveté or anachronism (Tilbey, 1990:8).

In this definition of Yourcenar's work, "a brand of humanism" refers to her vast knowledge of Roman and Grecian Antiquity so evident in her

1 The couple's real names were Jeanne and Conrad de Vietinghoff. They had a son whose name was Egon (Savigneau, 1990:36).

2 All page references made in this article to Yourcenar's autobiographical works refer to this edition.

writings, and to an effort to represent or “mime” the past in a convincing way in her historical novels. Underlining this resurrection of the past, is a “privileging of subjectivity” in the sense that the novelistic subject is the centre of the discourse. The Yourcenarian subject possesses “a unified self in which consciousness determines behaviour and in which thought and feeling can, at least potentially, mesh into a harmonious whole” (During, 1992:18)³. One can assume that the “cherished premises shared in recent years by members of the Parisian avant-garde” are the main trends of thought which characterise the movement of the “New New Novel”, namely the refusal of conventional novelistic structures, the decentring of the narrative perspective, and the conception that the literary text cannot refer in a simple transparent way to an extra-textual referent, but can only be an incessant play of signifiers (Smyth, 1991).

Qualifications like “humanism”, and an “unwillingness” to accept the main currents of thought of the “Parisian avant-garde”, suggest that Yourcenar is a conventional writer. Staying within such a tradition seems to exclude the possibility of creating an absent autobiographical subject that could be the product of an evolution beyond humanism, of a conception of the self as being decentred, unable to be the origin, focus or end of historical processes.

Contrary to those commonly accepted interpretations of Yourcenar’s work, this article takes up a few cues from Foucault’s writings to construct a hermeneutical hypothesis about Yourcenar’s autobiography, namely that her practice of self-representation draws on a new approach to historiography of which Michel Foucault, for example, was one of the earliest practitioners. Foucault is a contemporary of Yourcenar, but also her antipode in the sense that he is an historiographer associated with the refusal of humanism (During, 1992:17) and is known to have encouraged avant-garde writing (During, 1992:7).

2. Yourcenar and Foucault

2.1 Historiographical methods

The problematic of the possibility/impossibility of the objective and transparent rendering of historical facts in historiography is important to both Yourcenar and Foucault. Where Yourcenar was the fine, meticulous historian who investigated every piece of evidence she could find to reconstruct the past in a faithful way, Foucault was often criticised for

3 During formulates this definition on humanism within a discussion of Foucault’s refusal of humanism.

inaccurate representations of history. In 1977 he explained to an interviewer that the histories he wrote were "fictions" or "interpretations". However, this does not invalidate Foucault's historical writings, because their prime intent was not to represent "the literal truth concerning the past", but rather to function as attacks against an existing order which he wished to dismantle through them (Megill, 1985:234)⁴. Foucault is clearly a radical thinker, and is concerned with the functioning of structures of power in contemporary society, which his "genealogies" intend to disrupt. Yourcenar never goes to such extremes, although the present also determines the way she considers the past in her historical novels (Tilbey, 1990:9).

Yourcenar, though, comes nearer to Foucault when she explains her own historiographical method of writing an autobiography. In her text, she often interrupts the narration of the past to share the process and difficulties of writing a historically sound autobiography with the reader and to remind him/her of the fabricated and discursive nature of her endeavour. For instance, in the opening lines of *Souvenirs Pieux*, after having given a few particulars about her birth, where she was born, who her father and her mother were, in the dry tone of an official document, she tells the reader what meagre, uncertain material, devoid of human content, "pressed for more than [it] can yield" she had at her disposal. She concedes that all this is "false and vague", but that it is the only link between the baby she has been and her present self (Yourcenar, 1991:708). She will have to restore life to the dry cracked leaf of the past (Yourcenar, 1991:790) and the only way to do this is to use her imagination, to create fictions, like Foucault. She herself is curious to see the final outcome of this process (Yourcenar, 1991:708). Thus Yourcenar seems to also undermine the historical credibility of her genealogical project from the moment she embarks on it, because historical veracity is by implication not the central issue, but rather the process of writing and what is created by discourse. Discourse, and how the subject is constituted by it, is also the main concern of Foucault's work.

2.2 Conceptions of history

Foucault's essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History"⁵, contains a conception of history that is in some respects similar to Yourcenar's own

4 His writings are meant to function "usefully" and creatively in the present as "Nietzschean myths" i.e. "useful myths" that will "disorder order, those that will break up what is extant (...)" (Megill, 1985:235).

5 This essay was originally published in 1971 under the French title "Hommage à Jean Hypolyte" (PUF), but it also appears in Rabinow's *Foucault Reader* (1984). Because

view of historical processes and the place of the subject (and by implication that of the autobiographical subject) within history. Using Nietzsche's concept of genealogy and history as his point of departure, Foucault (1984b:86) defines genealogy as a new kind of philosophical enquiry, "the history of morals, ideas, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty (...)". For Foucault genealogy is further the recognition that "the forces operating in history (...) do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events" (Foucault, 1984b:88). Although Foucault uses the concept of genealogy in a much wider sense than Yourcenar, her autobiographical genealogy is permeated by a conception of history that seems to echo the Foucauldian view of an incoherent historical process, incapable of conveying an ideal continuity. She does not impose any unifying supra-historical vision of cause and effect on the meandering corridors of her own lineage. By calling this three volume autobiography *The Labyrinth of the World*, she does not only refer to the myriad of ancestral lines she discovers in her past, but is certainly also alluding to a specific attitude towards life. Unlike the conventional novel where meaning unfolds through a linear succession of events, Yourcenar's novels and autobiography depict life as something inexplicably steered by chance.

Our very conception is determined by chance, states Yourcenar, for we are one of the "(...) possible descendants [of a certain man and woman], one of the seeds of which millions are lost, without developing, in the cavities of the body or between marital sheets"⁶ ("[un des] descendants possibles, un des germes dont les milliards se perdent sans fructifier dans les cavernes du corps ou entre les draps des époux") (Yourcenar, 1991:974).

Like many other things in her life, the place where she was born was the result of chance: "The place itself was more or less fortuitous, like a lot of other things were going to be during the course of my existence and during the course of any existence closely examined". ("Le site lui-même était à peu près fortuit, comme nombre d'autres choses allaient l'être au cours de mon existence, et sans doute de toute existence regardée de plus près") (Yourcenar, 1991:708).

this article also refers to the essay "What is Enlightenment" which has been published only in the *Foucault Reader*, Rabinow is used here for both essays.

6 All translations of Yourcenar's autobiography are mine.

On his deathbed, Marguerite's father, Michel, cannot find any unifying element in his past: "I have lived several lives (...). I can't even see what links them together" ("J'ai vécu plusieurs vies (...). Je ne vois même pas ce qui les rattache les unes aux autres"). Yourcenar concludes: "he did not even try to understand (...)" ("il n'essayait même pas d'établir un bilan (...)") (Yourcenar, 1991:1087). This interpretation of the past as being determined by chance, can be supported by Yvan Leclerc's view that, "[c]ontrary to most other genealogical enterprises which arrive after a long chain of cause and effect at a necessary by-product, *Le Labyrinthe du monde* merely multiplies those events that arrive by chance". ("À l'inverse de la plupart des entreprises genealogiques qui aboutissent après une longue chaîne de causes et d'effets à un sous-produit nécessaire, *Le Labyrinthe du monde* multiplie les hasards") (Leclerc, 1990:214).

For Foucault (1984b:93) the "discontinuity" introduced "into our very being" by history is an essential moment in the process of disrupting the present order: such history is "parodic, directed against reality, (...) dissociative, directed against identity, (...) sacrificial, directed against truth". Not only does Foucault justify here the fictional character of his historical/genealogical writings, he also undermines the notion of an identity that can exist prior to history. This, of course, links up with his notion that identity is something to be invented, not discovered (Foucault, 1984a:42).

At this point the analogy between Yourcenar and Foucault needs some qualification, because in Yourcenar's autobiography discontinuity is a truth in itself, an unalterable ingredient of life that one has to accept. The autobiographer, confronted with the "inextricable tangle of events and circumstances which more or less determine all of us", hesitates, "seized by a feeling of vertigo", intimidated by the impossibility of such a vast undertaking (Yourcenar, 1991:707).

Although the fact of discontinuity in history is valued in different ways by these two authors, the mere recognition that life cannot be neatly reduced to cause and effect, causes the same reaction in both of them as far as the constitution of identity is concerned. Discontinuity seems to free the subject to create him/herself. As Foucault exhorted people to do, Yourcenar, as a "free being", invents, creates her own "ontology" (Foucault, 1984a:45-50). Her initial hesitation overcome, she passes from the recognition of discontinuity to reconstructing imaginatively the existence of her ancestors and then further even supplementing the genealogy of her real ancestors creatively by means of further links of her own choice. She includes non family members, like the "intrepid protester" Martin de Cleenewerck, who died for his religious convictions;

the painter Rubens, who is more interesting to her than the distant aunt to whom he was married; and the famous revolutionary Saint Juste, for whom she felt a deep affinity. She adopts her mother's friend Jeanne as a mother, and states that Zenon, a main character of one of her novels, is like a brother to her. Ultimately in *Archives du Nord* she even links her own birth to the beginnings of the planet earth and to non human forms of life. This leads Leclerc (1990:217), for example, to declare that Yourcenar replaces the usual, humanist, anthropocentric point of view associated with autobiography, by a quite cynical conception of the human being as only one humble form of life amongst many others. Does she not approximate Foucault's refusal of humanism in this?

This freedom to create textual genealogical links other than those dictated by "blood and sperm", thus creating the self obliquely through his or her preferences, finds an echo in the Foucauldien idea that the recognition of the role of contingency in the constitution of the subject finally liberates the subject to define him/herself. In his essay entitled "What is Enlightenment?" (1984a) Foucault wants to invert the notion of historical understanding with which we have become acquainted so far, by once more giving a privileged position to the notion of contingency: instead of accepting "what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory" we have to ask, "what is the place occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints"? Foucault then insists that this shift in focus from the universal and necessary to the contingent, which we have also observed in Yourcenar's conception of the past, influences the way the subject sees its own constitution:

This entails an obvious consequence: that criticism is no longer going to be practised in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that led us to constitute ourselves and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking and saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method" (Foucault, 1984a:45-46).

The human subject is no longer to be seen and defined in terms of a metaphysical absolute, as a point conceived as being outside of history, but rather as taking form through contingent historical events. But how does the recognition of contingency allow for self-creation?

(...) this critique (...) will not deduce from the form of what we are what is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do or think. It is

seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom (Foucault, 1984a:46).

Liberated from a metaphysical imperative which transcends history and dictates what we should be, we can change the contingent discourse determining us and define ourselves.

2.3 Conceptions of the subject

Foucault's conception of history has important consequences for the way he saw the place of the subject, "man", in history. According to Foucault "man" as the object of knowledge did not exist before the end of the eighteenth century. "He is a quite recent creature, which the demiurge of knowledge fabricated with its own hands less than two hundred years ago (...)" (Foucault, 1970:308). Foucault also argues that in our age, man, as an epistemological construct, has again disappeared from the scene of history. With these provocative statements Foucault (1970: 342) wants to unsettle those "who wish to take him [man] as their starting point in their attempts to reach the truth", for man does not pre-exist language. The subject is born into discourse; through history, his/her being (even his/her sexuality) is (contingently) shaped and formed by the discourse of those who hold the power in society. The Foucauldian subject is decentred, in the sense that he/she can no more be the autonomous initiator of truth nor of a coherent world.

The Foucauldian perception of history and of the subject suggests a refusal of a humanist conception of history. According to Derrida (1992:18), humanism implies that "life-stories and history ought to tend toward completion as an interlocking of related but separate parts". Derrida (1992:19) also defines the underlying concept of the subject that steers narrative techniques of novels originating within a humanist paradigm. Such novels are characterised by

... narrative techniques of resolution and rich characterization which depend on [a] particular set of over-arching relations (...): a coherent individual completing his or her potential in a coherent and consensual society which, in turn, is to be regarded as having a specific place in a generalized, non-conflictual, and ultimately trans-historical, Humanity.

From what has been stated so far, Yourcenar's autobiographical endeavours seem clearly at odds with the humanist convention of writing a novel. Can one assume that the absent self of her autobiography is the result of an evolution in Yourcenar's oeuvre, of a conception of history that differs from conventional humanism, a move away from the belief that the subject is the coherent centre of a coherent universe?

Yourcenar's scepticism concerning the uniqueness of the individual may shed some light on this question: In the essay "Mishima ou la vision du vide", she states that individual existence is ephemeral, "scattered, contradictory, constantly changing, now hidden, then visible". Every individual existence is "an impenetrable secret" (Yourcenar, 1991:198). In her autobiography, based on the meticulous study of any archives containing information about her ancestors, she cynically observes that "... genealogy, this science so often used to serve human vanity, leads (...) to humility via the recognition of how little we represent among the multitudes (...)" ("... la généalogie, cette science si souvent mise au service de la vanité humaine, conduit (...) à l'humilité, par le sentiment du peu que nous sommes dans ces multitudes (...)" (Yourcenar, 1991:973). Contemplating the few possessions of her mother that her father kept, Yourcenar observes: "Nothing proves better how insignificant is this human individuality to which we cling so hard, than the rapidity with which the few objects supporting and sometimes symbolising it, become outdated, outworn or lost". ("Rien ne prouve mieux le peu qu'est cette individualité humaine à laquelle nous tenons tant, que la rapidité avec laquelle les quelques objets qui en sont le support et parfois le symbole sont tour à tour périmés, détériorés ou perdus") (Yourcenar, 1991:748).

Although these statements by Yourcenar may point strongly in the direction of a decentred subject, such a conclusion must be drawn with circumspection. The downplaying of unique individuality brings us to a crossroad: we have to acknowledge that Yourcenar's œuvre also steers away from Foucault's by the very central position given to the concept of the general and the universal. Every individual existence and every aspect of individual conduct are measured against, and defined by general categories. Is Yourcenar's thought in this respect diametrically opposed to Foucault's, when he rejects the universal in favour of the contingent? We will have to decide whether the lack of information on the subject's own history in this autobiographical text is due to a conception of decentred individuality, or whether it is a continuation of a classical (humanist) line of thought which prefers the general or the universal to the individual.

3. Yourcenar and the universal

Generality and universality are attained in several ways in Yourcenar's text. One of her most frequently used generalising procedures is to present her ancestors' lives as the product of the social and historical circumstances of their time. Had this not been the case, the writer would not have seen any reason to explore their existence. In one of the

opening paragraphs to the second chapter of *Souvenirs Pieux*, Yourcenar declares: "Evoking the history of a family would have been of no interest, had it not served as a window opened onto the history of a small state in Ancient Europe." ("Il n'y aurait presque aucun intérêt à évoquer l'histoire d'une famille, si celle-ci n'était pour nous une fenêtre ouverte sur l'histoire d'un petit Etat de l'ancienne Europe") (Yourcenar, 1991:750).

In *Archives du Nord*, we find a similar statement on the tracking of her paternal lineage:

I am (...) not going to try to follow generation by generation the Cleenewercks, slowly becoming Crayencours. Family, strictly speaking, interests me less than the *gens*, the *gens* less than the group, those people having lived in the same place and at the same times.

(Je ne vais donc pas m'attarder à suivre génération par génération des Cleenewerck lentement devenu Crayencour. La famille proprement dite m'intéresse moins que les *gens*, la *gens* moins que le groupe, l'ensemble des êtres ayant vécu dans les mêmes lieux au cours des mêmes temps) (Yourcenar, 1991:974).

The use of the word *gens* is very significant, because ancient Roman biographies never tried to establish the uniqueness of the subject, but presented the subject's life as typifying that of the *gens*. Thus, when the author lacks detailed information on many of her mother's ancestors, she resorts to what she could find on the historical circumstances, beliefs and conduct of that era, in order to imagine a character's life shaped by these (i.e a typical *geistesgeschichtliche* methodology, as, for instance propagated by Wilhelm Dilthey, and therefore, in line with a traditional understanding of humanism [Bleicher, 1980]).

Although contingent historical data fill in the gaps in Yourcenar's knowledge about her ancestors, contingency is not framed in the same way as with Foucault. Unlike Foucault she does not consider historical events from the angle of relations of power, and the way they exclude certain ways of conduct and encourage others through history. Like the nineteenth century historicists, Yourcenar calls on a broad cultural historical knowledge about a certain age. From this she deduces a general way of living of which an individual life would be an example. But in line with historicist thinking, which Foucault radicalizes, Yourcenar is careful not to accord this generality any metaphysical status. She seems bent on recognizing such generalities, or historic universals, as the reconstructive work of the historian, and therefore, as the result of

historiographic discourse. In this she approximates Foucault again, but also keeps her distance.

Interestingly, this way of generalising the singular existence does not cause Yourcenar to neglect marginal figures, a fact that could again ask for a *rapprochement* with Foucault. But when the author demands respect for marginalised figures, it is not for the sake of their individuality, but because they are human. An example of this is seen in the depiction of the triangular relationship between Michel and the couple, Jeanne and Egon, which also sheds light on how Yourcenar went about writing her autobiography. Michel loves Jeanne and urges her to leave her husband who is homosexual. When Jeanne refuses to do so even after her husband is unfaithful to her (with a young man), Michel, beside himself with rage, accuses her of enjoying being part of a depraved set-up, even of being herself a lover of the young man. This reaction by Michel hurts Jeanne so much that she breaks up with him forever. Yourcenar, who was not present at this scene, imagines Jeanne's innermost feelings to have been the following:

What alienates Jeanne is not that he believes, or wants to believe that there is some sexual complicity between her and Franz (...), it is the peremptory tone of the man for whom any sexual impulse in a woman degrades her, unless, of course, it is intended for him, and for whom all sexual singularity [referring to Egon's homosexuality] disgraces a man.

Ce qui aliène Jeanne n'est pas qu'il croit, ou veut croire à une connivence sensuelle entre elle et Franz (...), c'est le ton peremptoire de l'homme pour lequel tout élan de sens dégrade une femme, à moins, bien entendu, qu'il n'en soit le bénéficiaire, et pour qui toute singularité sexuelle deshonne un homme (Yourcenar, 1991:198).

The reader will never know if Yourcenar invented the whole of these reflections attributed to Jeanne or if Jeanne confessed them to her in the interview they had when Yourcenar was twenty years old. What is certain here is that Jeanne is elevated to a position where she represents woman in general, and the narrator claims recognition for her equality with the male, an equality which she is still denied at that stage of European civilisation. Egon becomes the other, scorned and marginalised because of his sexual preferences. Yet for him also the narrator demands respect through Jeanne's refusal to leave him for Michel. Michel, in his turn, is the incarnation of the prejudices firmly rooted in the mentality of the society of his time. It is exactly this generality superimposed by the narrator onto her father's individual experience, which makes the reader suspect that it is Yourcenar's preferences, felt at the

moment of narration, that dominate this passage, rather than the real reactions of Michel and Jeanne. For the author herself, in *Archives du Nord*, admonishes the reader to be patient with her during her genealogical meanderings, because "[w]e shall always arrive fairly quickly at the individuals situated close to us, of whom we believe, rightly or wrongly, that we know almost everything: we always arrive quite quickly at ourselves" ("Nous arriverons toujours assez vite à ces individus situés près de nous, sur lesquels nous croyons à tort ou à raison presque tout savoir; nous arriverons toujours assez vite à nous-mêmes") (Yourcenar, 1991:974).

Another universalising procedure links human existence to all other forms of life and suggests that the soul existed before inhabiting a specific body. *Archives du Nord*'s final chapters again focus on the baby Marguerite, briefly project her existence onto the screen of the history of humanity and then move out more widely, to link this little baby's life with the whole of nature, and the beginning of time. The baby looks, and is, in fact, very old: "(...) either through the blood and genes of her ancestors, or through the unanalysed element that we, using a beautiful and ancient metaphor, call the soul, and by which she travelled through the centuries." ("(...) soit par le sang et les gènes ancestraux, soit par l'élément inanalysé que, par une belle et antique métaphore, nous dénommons l'âme, elle a traversé les siècles") (Yourcenar, 1991:1178).

Yourcenar's genealogical labyrinth opens up beyond history and has no boundaries: "The point where we find ourselves gapes behind us to infinity" ("l'angle à la pointe duquel nous nous trouvons bée derrière nous à l'infini") (Yourcenar, 1991:973). The epigraph to the first volume, *Souvenirs Pieux*, "What did your face look like before your mother and your father met?" "Quel était votre visage avant que votre père et mère se fussent rencontrés?" (Yourcenar, 1991:705), suggests the possibility of existence before historical incarnation. Simone Proust takes this concept of infinite broadness even further, claiming to see an influence of Buddhism on Yourcenar's thought. In consequence, she suggests that the reader will not find the subject of the Western tradition of thought in this autobiography because everything, the human subject included, is taken up into the "Great Whole" (Proust, 1997:167). This, in effect, is an alternative to classical humanism's strategy of universalization. One could argue that Yourcenar's position on this point may be ambivalent: either she rejects the humanist procedure, or she wants to broaden its scope by alluding to Buddhism's respect for the whole.

Contrary to Foucault, contingency in Yourcenar's work has a limited place within a three-layered notion of time. Yves-Alain Favre, in an article on time and myth in her oeuvre, distinguishes the following three levels:

the first is human life, short and ephemeral, swallowed up in the immensity of history, which is the second level, while historical time itself becomes engulfed by cosmic time, which constitutes the third level. This cosmic time, explains Favre (1990:181), "possesses an unlimited and undifferentiated character". Favre links these notions of time to the importance of mythological references in Yourcenar's oeuvre as a whole, and concludes that the author has recourse to myth ("holy time") (Favre, 1990:182), to rescue human existence from being ephemeral and fragmented, to restore dignity and value to it. Although Yourcenar uses fewer references to mythology in her autobiography than in the rest of her work, she does resort to mythology occasionally to give a generality or dignity to an individual existence⁷.

4. "What kind of writing is this?"

All the above considerations lead to a possible answer to Elena Real's question, quoted on the first page of this article, as to what kind of writing *Le Labyrinthe du monde* could be, since it is an autobiography that does not really speak of the self. If Foucault's histories are fictions intended to analyse the present instead of accurately recording the past, Yourcenar's partly self-created genealogy could also be seen as tracing an oblique portrait of the narrator at the moment of narration, instead of merely reconstructing the lives of her ancestors truthfully. The famous painting by Velasquez, *Las Meninas*, which significantly fascinated both Yourcenar and Foucault⁸, is interpreted by Sally White (1994:259-265) as a visual metaphor of Yourcenar's endeavour. It represents the painter at work, together with the subjects he is painting, other paintings against a wall and a mysterious onlooker. Foucault sees this painting as a self-conscious reflection on representation. The painting immediately arouses the curiosity of the onlooker who wonders what the painter is painting, because one can see only the back of his canvass. Further examination of the picture reveals that the subject of the painter's attention is King

7 For example, when Egon de Reval finally realises the depravity of his male lover, he still does not reject him, and this acceptance is suggested by a metaphor drawn from mythology: "For the first time it seemed to Egon that something entirely insolent and subhuman manifested itself in him [Frantz, the lover]. But there are also subhuman gods, a sacred goat, an Egipan, an Anubis who alternatively bites and licks" (Favre, 1990:1407).

8 Yourcenar's biographer Savigneau recorded this fact in *Marguerite Yourcenar: L'Invention d'une vie* (1990:280), while Foucault devotes several pages to this painting at the beginning of *Les Mots et les choses* (1966). The latter work's English title is *The Order of Things*. For the purposes of this article, the English translation is used.

Philip IV and his wife Mariana, but one can only see their reflection in a mirror against the wall, in the back of the room represented in the painting (Foucault, 1970:3-16). It is indeed an enigmatic self-portrait, which, by foregrounding an apparently absent subject (the king and the queen), gives an oblique presentation of Velasquez at work and places the artist within a certain artistic tradition. Thus Yourcenar, apparently absent from her autobiography, reveals herself indirectly through what she chooses to tell about her ancestors and the way in which she tells it. The writer's identity is hidden behind the figures of all the ancestors she discovers in her labyrinthine autobiography (Sperti, 1986).

If the "narrated I" seems nearly absent from the text or only obliquely represented, the narrator, the "narrating I" (Rousset's terms [1993]), takes up a lot of space in the text. The reader is constantly aware of a strong presence, the unifying voice of the narrator, a "leader of the game" ("maître du jeu") as Gaudin calls it. The artist at work and the narrator clearly coincide in the self-reflexive passages where the problems of writing an autobiography are discussed. Moreover, the text abounds in judgements, formulated by the narrator as general truths, presented as a kind of universal wisdom. These deeply seated convictions on the part of the narrator betray her position as an educated person of the 20th century. For instance, like her contemporaries, she is strongly against overpopulation and goes as far as to judge her grandparents severely for having had ten children. She does not, however, present her moral judgements as being typical of, and limited to, a specific historical moment. They are formulated as being part of a universal, generally accepted wisdom (perhaps evoking the stance of a classical humanist?). Recounting the invention of cars and aeroplanes, she questions the benefits of technological progress: "We have subsequently seen so many new technological triumphs that have not changed man at all, and have not always improved the human condition, that such enthusiasms⁹ have left a bitter aftertaste". ("Nous avons vu depuis tant de nouveaux triomphes technologiques qui n'ont en rien changé l'homme, et pas toujours dans le bon sens la condition humaine, que ces enthousiasmes aujourd'hui ont un arrière-goût amer") (Yourcenar, 1991:1202).

The universal, moral dimension built into the text through these personal judgements contributed to Yourcenar's reputation as a moralist and a humanist in the classical tradition. They constitute the aspect which most

9 Yourcenar refers here to people like Marcel Proust revelling in the first aeroplanes at the beginning of the century.

strongly opposes her thought to Foucault's. The narrator becomes a Theseus, who pits her will against "the great cosmic folly"¹⁰ and enters the labyrinth of her ancestral past firmly holding onto the thread of a sharp moral consciousness.

To conclude, we can state that one finds an interesting dichotomy in Yourcenar's three-volume autobiography. For all its lack of *bios*, it stays a very "centred" text, but "centred" in a way that is unconventional for an autobiography. The overall impression is that of an essay in which a woman of reason reflects on the past. And yet all the features shared with Foucault, like discontinuity, fragmented identity, creating the self, absence of the self, allow us to believe that Yourcenar was more influenced by intellectuals like Foucault and the Parisian avant-garde of the seventies than generally accepted¹¹. She followed to some extent the new historiographical trends which are evident in her treatment of the autobiographical subject, but apparently she retained something of the classical humanist stance toward universal moral judgement.

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10 This is an expression used by Foucault when he explains the world view of the Greeks. According to Foucault the world for them was "divided between the realm of will and the great cosmic folly" (Foucault, 1984b:88).

11 I find support for this conclusion in Luc Rassin's article "Yourcenar postmoderne?" (1993).

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Key concepts:

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Kernbegrippe:

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