

Marguerite Yourcenar

Reflections on the Composition of The Abyss

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Note

These "Reflections"¹ were compiled by me from the *Notes on the Composition of The Abyss* that Marguerite Yourcenar had turned over to me in the summer of 1984 so that I could present a descriptive analysis of them at the first colloquium of Tours on her work to be held in May of the following year. Like other persons who had the opportunity to pursue this manuscript on a visit to «Petite Plaisance,» I had noticed that on the reverse side of its usually typewritten pages (about two hundred in all) there were handwritten notes which could be used to compile a series of "Reflections" similar to those on the composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *Electre ou la chute des masques*. The author of course was aware of their existence, but when I asked her why she had not seen fit to prepare them for publication, she replied that she simply did not have the time to do so. Thereupon, I volunteered to undertake the job myself, as I had just done for *Les Charités d'Alcippe* which came out that fall but whose publication date had been delayed for the same reason.

A few months later, in October, I submitted to her a first text of forty-five pages. In addition to the handwritten notes, my text included various passages extracted from the typewritten *Notes* as well, the gist of which suggested they might be suitable for inclusion. The initiative I had taken was not without its audacious side, and I fully expected Marguerite Yourcenar to disclaim it. Such was not the case. In fact, she at first left the text in its entirety, merely modifying the first sentence and a dozen others here and there, replacing about twenty words, and shifting five pages from the beginning to the end, where she felt they properly belonged. In May of 1985, while working on the second version, she decided this time to suppress eight pages that she found too didactic in tone. Essentially they consisted of a long

parallel between *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *The Abyss*, which fell by the wayside during the second revision. Otherwise, she did not change the text in any way, and once the suppressed pages had been removed the text began to take on a definitive cast.

Then how to explain the long delay between that time and the present publication date of the "Reflections?" First of all, the end of 1985 and part of the following year were very trying times for Marguerite Yourcenar for serious health reasons. It was not until May of 1987, when we were studying the possibility of redoing the "Chronologie" of the Pléiade, that I mentioned the "Reflections" again to her. She replied that after rereading them she was of the firm conviction that certain passages definitely had to be "loosened up" before submitting the text for publication. Unfortunately, she was not to have the time to carry out these final corrections. Like the file on *The Abyss* whose documents were gathered *after* the novel's completion, most of the notes comprising these "Reflections" were written between 1965 and 1968, when the author was waiting for the outcome of the legal action between Plon and Gallimard. But there are others as well which come after this period, and which are occasionally dated. In any case, the important thing to remember on reading these pages is the fact that Marguerite Yourcenar intended to modify them in several places because she was not completely satisfied with them. Nevertheless, the immutable fact remains that henceforth we must accept the *Reflections on the Composition of The Abyss* just as they are.

Yvon Bernier

¹The *Reflections on the Composition of The Abyss* which follow have not been published before now. In keeping with Marguerite Yourcenar's wish, they will subsequently be incorporated into future editions of her novel. The latter won the *prix Femina* in 1968, awarded by unanimous vote for the first time. French version: *Carnets de notes de l'Oeuvre au noir*, in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* nos 452 et 453 (septembre et octobre 1990), p. 38-53 et 54-67.