Looking for Antinous in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Nigel Saint, University of Leeds

1. Introduction: Yourcenar, Antinous and Hadrian

In January 1952, while she was staying in Paris following the publication of *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar wrote to the Greek composer Louis Nicolaou about a ballet based on the Antinous sections of her book. Yourcenar suggested they meet to discuss the ballet, possibly at the Louvre: 'We could meet there on Friday evening at 9 o'clock, as the Greek and Roman rooms will be open; if you agree, I suggest we meet in the Antonines Room, which is easy to recognise because of the large head of Antinous in the middle of the room – opposite it there is a very handy bench.'[1] We do not know for sure if they met at the museum, but in any case it seems that Nicolaou's unbridled enthusiasm for Antinous alarmed Yourcenar, since she wrote to him again two weeks later: 'You worry me greatly when you start talking about inspiration, which is a word I fear. In my view, once you've been excited by a project, inspiration then comes from concentration, hard work, organisation and an alarm clock.'[2]

The ballet was a project initiated by the Chilean George de Cuevas, founder of a company in New York in 1944 and, after a spell in Monte Carlo, the director of the Paris-based ballet company bearing his own name. The ballet was premiered on 14th May 1953 at the Grand Théâtre de Bordeaux, with choreography by Victor Gzovsky, but the creation was short-lived. The relationship between Yourcenar, Cuevas and Nicolaou was not always easy and Cuevas became interested in other projects. We have an outline of the ballet in a letter from Yourcenar shortly before the first performance: its three scenes comprised of ceremonies and games in Athens, hunting in Bithynia and a festival on the banks of the Nile prior to Antinous's death.

Yourcenar was generally interested in collaborations with artists and musicians, but when it came to an opera proposed by Wells Hively in 1956, she declined to write a

[1] Marguerite Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien à Zénon: Correspondance 1951-1956*, édition établie par Joseph Brami et Michèle Sarde, notes de Maurice Delcroix et Rémy Poignault (Gallimard, 2004), p. 121. All translations from this volume of correspondence are my own.
[2] *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 129.

libretto since she argued that it would be impossible to get the dialogue right, an argument that she would develop in her essay 'Tone and Language in the Historical Novel'.[3] Furthermore she said that she saw the relationship between Hadrian and Antinous in epic rather than dramatic terms, so she considered an opera quite a challenge. But she also stated to Hively that Antinous was a subject open to everyone.[4] It was a subject that she herself had grappled with for over thirty years. She'd known Hadrian for even longer, first encountering him in 1914, when she was 11, in the bronze head in the British Museum, during the 14 months she spent in England, after fleeing Flanders with her father and half-brother.[5] However, Yourcenar first intended to write about the relationship between Antinous and Hadrian mainly from Antinous's perspective. A poem, 'L'Apparition', probably written when she was 16, features Antinous in the gardens at Tivoli.[6] Then between 1924 and 1926, in her early 20s, Yourcenar wrote a dialogue entitled 'Antinoos' and submitted it to the publishers Fasquelle, now partners of Grasset. The manuscript was rejected by Fasquelle and destroyed by the author.

Yourcenar would later say that she lacked the necessary experience of politics and couldn't at the time find the right perspective to frame Antinous; she also moved away from dialogue completely, as seen in her remarks to Hively. Her Antinous of the 1920s was reportedly a creature of aestheticised mysticism, closely linked to the idea of the Genius of Hadrian and the Orphic tradition.[7] She later wrote, again to Nicolaou: 'I fear in equal measure fake Greek, fake Roman and fake modern'.[8] Yourcenar was no Pessoa (she read his poem, but probably much later) and so encumbered as she was in the 1920s by an outmoded poetics, it was difficult to escape the stereotype of Antinous as beautiful boy, as he had appeared to writers before Yourcenar. Balzac engaged with this problem in various texts, including his short story 'Sarrasine'. In his commentary on the story Roland Barthes refers to the impasse of the reference to Antinous as a marker of beauty. First Balzac: 'Filippo, Marianina's brother, shared with his sister in the Countess's

[3] M. Yourcenar, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, translated by Walter Kaiser in collaboration with the author (Henley-on-Thames: Aidan Ellis, 1992), pp. 25-53.
[4] M. Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien à Zénon*, pp. 546-7.
[5] This story is included in the Yourcenar section of the 2008 British Museum *Hadrian* exhibition catalogue: see Thorsten Opper, *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* (London: British Museum Press, 2008), pp. 28-30.
[6] M. Yourcenar, *Les Dieux ne sont pas morts* (Paris : R. Chiberre, 1922).
[7] M. Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1988), p. 144.
[8] M. Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien à Zénon*, p. 258.

marvelous beauty. To be brief, this young man was a living image of Antinous, even more slender.' Barthes comments: 'Young Filippo exists only as a copy of two models: his mother and Antinous: the biological, chromosomatic Book, and the Book of statuary (without which it would be impossible to speak of beauty: Antinous, whose mention Balzac preceeds with 'to be brief, he was the living image of A': but what else is to be said about Filippo? and what then is to be said about Antinous?).[9]

We have an extraordinary story – we need to bear in mind that it is a story – of the genesis of *Memoirs of Hadrian* in Yourcenar's 'Reflections on the Composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian'*, published in November 1952 and expanded in 1958.[10] We learn that the text emerged after an alchemical process involving the destruction, displacement and recovery of manuscripts in the 1920s and 30s, during which period Yourcenar made many journeys around Europe, writing novels, stories and essays, including a study of Pindar, on her way. When she left Europe for America in October 1939, Yourcenar had therefore been working on her Antinous and Hadrian project for nearly two decades, but she crossed the Atlantic armed only with some notes made at Yale in 1937, a map of the Roman Empire at Trajan's death and a postcard bought in 1926 of the bronze head of Antinous in the Archaeological Museum in Florence. Wartime and adjustment to life in America, including the need to work to earn money, largely interrupted the project.

After the war she destroyed the notes from Yale, but the following year, in December 1948, Yourcenar received a trunk of personal effects from Switzerland. She threw out old letters to people whose names she sometimes didn't recognise and eventually came across a typed letter beginning 'My dear Mark' – 'mon cher Marc' – and after a few moments realised that it was Marcus Aurelius: this is of course the beginning of *Memoirs of Hadrian*, which takes the form of a long valedictory letter to Marcus Aurelius, whom Hadrian named as his next successor after Antoninus. On finding this four-page typescript Yourcenar felt obliged to complete her book. We note this important aspect of Yourcenar's work on Antinous and Hadrian: for a writer intent on

[9] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 37. I am indebted to my colleague Andy Stafford (Dept. of French, Leeds) for this reference and for access to Barthes's seminar notes where he discusses 'tautology' in the Antinous tradition: see Stafford's forthcoming edition of the *S/Z* seminar (Paris: Seuil, coll. 'Traces écrites', 2009).
[10] First published: 'Carnet de notes des *Mémoires d'Hadrien'*, *Mercure de France* 1071, 1er novembre 1952, pp. 415-32. They were included in French editions from 1953 and the translation from 1963.

reviving the past for the present, it was necessary to visit all the museums but also partially to loosen the hold of scholarly details on her imagination.[11] In an often quoted remark in the 'Reflections', Yourcenar said that she proceeded with 'one foot in scholarship, the other (...) in that *sympathetic magic* which operates when one transports oneself, in thought, into another's body and soul' (RC, 328-9).[12] Intensive reading, research and writing occupied the years 1949-1951.

In an entry in the composition 'reflections' that begins 'Experiments with time', Yourcenar continues to evoke her methods for crossing the 18 centuries between Hadrian and herself: 'Eighteen days, eighteen months, eighteen years or eighteen centuries. The motionless survival of statues which, like the head of the *Mondragone Antinous* in the Louvre, are still living in a past time, a *time that has died*.' (RC, 321) Statues could nonetheless help Yourcenar overcome time, as Rémy Poignault has argued, since she aimed to 'redo from within what the archaeologists of the 19th C. had done from without' (CN, 327).[13] The historical novel for her should be 'a plunge into time recaptured, taking possession of an inner world' (CN, 331). Hence she adds: 'Time has nothing to do with it. My contemporaries, who consider that they have mastered and transformed space, always surprise me by not realising that one can contract the distance between centuries at will' (CN 331). Yourcenar felt connected to Hadrian when she was invited to handle the Marlborough Gem by its owner Sangiorgi in 1952; in her view it is the one object which we can be sure Hadrian himself handled. She also writes in the 'reflections': 'Every being who has gone through the adventure of living *is* myself' (RC 342). History for Yourcenar is man's condition illustrated, largely from the perspective of a single individual.[14] At the same time and as a logical extension of her desire to mobilise the past, the resulting text was not fixed: Yourcenar made corrections in subsequent editions,

[11] Yourcenar also makes this point in an interview given to Peter Conrad for the BBC2's 'Horizon' in 1984.
[12] M. Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, translated by Grace Frick in collaboration with the author (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963). All quotations are from this edition, although I have occasionally modified the translation of the 'Reflections' (RC), in which cases the page reference is given to the 'Carnet de notes' (CN) in the French edition I have used: *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1977).
[13] Rémy Poignault, *L'Antiquité dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar: Littérature, mythe et histoire*, 2 vols (Brussels: Latomus, 1995). See also R. Poignault, 'Antinoüs: un destin de pierre,' in *Marguerite Yourcenar et l'Art. L'Art de Marguerite Yourcenar* (La Flèche : Société Internationale d'Etudes Yourcenariennes, 1990), p. 108.
[14] See Françoise Gaillard and François Wasserfallen, 'La modernité de Marguerite Yourcenar,' in F. Wasserfallen (ed.) *Marguerite Yourcenar*, special issue, *Equinoxe : revue romande de sciences humaines* 2 (automne 1989).

added to the composition notes and revised her lengthy bibliographical notice, taking into account suggestions and criticisms.

Yourcenar recorded early in those composition notes the significance for her of the following passage from Flaubert's correspondence: 'The melancholy of the antique world seems to me more profound than that of the moderns, all of whom more or less imply that beyond the dark void lies immortality. But for the ancients that 'black hole' was infinity itself; their dreams loom and vanish against a background of immutable ebony. No crying out, no convulsions – nothing but the fixity of a pensive gaze. With the gods gone, and Christ not yet come, there was a unique moment, from Cicero to Marcus Aurelius, when *man* stood alone. Nowhere else do I find that particular grandeur.'[15] Yourcenar's Hadrian has both the melancholic outlook and 'the fixity of a pensive gaze'. In her notes Yourcenar glosses Flaubert's sentence by stating that she would spend a large part of her life trying to define and then depict this man on his own, who was also, as she adds, 'connected to everything'. Thus the idea of the gods having completely departed is not born out by *Memoirs of Hadrian*: being connected to everything, 'relié à tout', involves religion, of which Hadrian and Yourcenar herself have many. This aspect of the 2nd Century was emphasised as well during the Antinous study afternoon at the Henry Moore Institute in July 2006.

2. Looking for Antinoüs in *Memoirs of Hadrian*

By kind permission of the publisher, what follows is adapted from the chapter I devoted to Memoirs of Hadrian *in* Marguerite Yourcenar: Reading the Visual *(Oxford: Legenda, 2000), pp.54-90.*

I would now like to turn to the text of *Memoirs of Hadrian*. In her portrait of Antinous, mediated by Hadrian's memory, Yourcenar worked by a process of synthesis to overcome contradictions or differences between textual sources and between impressions given by statues. The following description is the result of one such crystallisation of contradictory impressions: 'I marveled at his gentleness, which had aspects of hardness, too, and the somber devotion to which he gave he gave his whole being' (155). This conflation was if anything encouraged by the multiplicity of versions of Antinous:

[15] Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters: 1857-80*, vol. 2, translated by Francis Steegmuller (London: faber & faber, 1984), p. 20.

Yourcenar made a necessary step in view of the difficulty sometimes of distinguishing the busts, as she wrote in May 1952 to the archaeologist Raïssa Calza who had sent her a series of photos of Antinous: 'The only problem, and it is a serious one, is that the provenance of the statues is not given on the back, just a reference number, which means that I cannot tell for sure whether I'm looking at a bust from Leningrad, Dresden or London.'[16] Yourcenar found it useful to think of a likeness with Rimbaud the case of a head in the Palazzo Massimo (10.2.54) and Nijinski when looking at several images together in order to retain a sense of the impact the images had had on her.[17] The illustrated edition of 1971 places the head from Olympia alongside the first mention of Antinous after the meeting in Bithynia. Then one of the first descriptions of Antinoüs may well refer to the Palazzo Massimo relief: 'This graceful hound, avid for both caresses and commands, took his post at my feet' (155).

The many facets of Hadrian that fascinated Yourcenar are presented from Hadrian's perspective, through Hadrian's voice: we listen to him recalling his strategic successes, overbearing thoroughness and also weaknesses as an emperor; his passion of Greek culture and for architecture; his love for Antinous; his eclectic philosophy, his mysticism, hedonism; his poetry; his travels; and his concern for his legacy. Michel Tournier describes Yourcenar's Hadrian as 'a harmonious cosmos', a man wise enough 'to renounce nothing'.[18] After the opening account of his wisdom, equanimity and his health near the end of his life at his Villa, accompanied in the illustrated edition by the Farnese Antinous, with an orb definitely showing (see Stephen Bann's talk on Symonds), for a passage about love and sex, Hadrian treats us to five sections in broadly chronological order.[19] The text is nonetheless more evocation than narration, as Michel Tournier noted, producing a striking breadth of vision and solemnity of tone. The sequences are more photographic than cinematic, in Tournier's view, so it will be interesting to see how John Boorman's film of the book turns out, if it is ever made: Hadrian recalls mainly fixed images of the people he has known, a predicament that is

[16] M. Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien à Zénon*, pp. 151-2. I'm not sure which bust she means when she includes Dresden here.
[17] M. Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 153.
[18] Michel Tournier, 'Gustave et Marguerite,' *Marguerite Yourcenar*, special issue, *SUD* (1984), p. 76.
[19] M. Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (Gallimard, 1971). Illustrated edition; sometimes it has different images from the illustrated Farrar, Straus & Giroux edition of 1963 (see n. 12 above).

brought into sharp focus when Hadrian tries to resurrect Antinous. He experiences considerable difficulty trying to find the right perspective. He is challenged by the power of images of the self and others to fix memory's gaze. Very soon after Antinoüs's first 'live' appearance in the text, in the 'Golden Age' section, Hadrian embarks on a process of mythologisation involving seeing Antinoüs as an Ovidian hunter, as a (silent) sculpture and as a version of Hadrian's own self-image.

Hadrian admits that he lacks originality as a writer; it is true that we have a very literary evocation of the time with Antinoüs. The latter is cast as a youthful hunter: 'There was Bithynia and its sea of trees, the forests of cork-oak and pine ; and the hunting lodge with latticed galleries where the boy, once again in familiar haunts, would cast off his dagger and belt of gold, scattering his arrows at random to roll with the dogs on leather divans' (156). Hadrian sets the scene in the mysterious forests of Asia Minor, with phallic emphasis on the strong, thick oaks and slimmer pine trees. In these scenes the youthful hunter has conquered the emperor with the arms of the goddess of Love. Antinoüs can be seen as both male beloved and female vanquisher, as ideal image and object of desire. This dual role assigned to Antinoüs is repeated in further mythological associations.

In Hadrian's psychological portrait and personal narrative, drama and epic largely take over from any direct attempt at ekphrasis. Hadrian will occasionally employ this strategy but he instead uses sculpture as a metaphor for aspects of his relationship with Antinous. Hadrian is able to record his awareness of the changes in Antinous over time: 'The boyish limbs lengthened out; the face lost its delicate childish round and hollowed slightly under the high cheekbones; the full chest of the young runner took on the smooth, gleaming curves of a Bacchante's breast; the brooding lips revealed a bitter ardor, a sad satiety. In truth this face changed as if I sculpted it day and night' (155-6).

Yourcenar's Hadrian is preoccupied by the re-birth of Antinoüs. At the culmination of the first series of visits to mythological sites, the sanctuary dedicated to Neptune is placed in the womb of a new temple. Hadrian thereby returns the god of the sea to his origins and, adopting the role as symbolic mother, thanks Neptune for the 'birth' of his beloved. A column is erected to commemorate Epaminondas and a young companion; Hadrian's parallel draws on his own experience of recalling a mythologised

past of idealised male love: ‘a column whereon a poem is inscribed was erected by my order to commemorate this example of a time when everything, viewed at a distance, seems to have been noble, and simple, too, whether tenderness, glory or death’ (158).

In the ‘Golden Age’ section, Hadrian brings together Cupid and Narcissus in his account: ‘We were drawn by the hunt to the valley of the Helicon, then in its last bronzed red of autumn; at the spring of Narcissus we paused, near the Sanctuary of Love; there the pelt of a young she-bear fixed by golden nails to the temple wall was offered a trophy to Eros, the wisest of the gods’ (158). Narcissus is closely associated by Hadrian with his story following the meeting with Antinous, with Narcissus signifying both Hadrian’s search for himself in his past, and his view of Antinous as a beautiful young man with the fragility of a flower. The sacrificial bear is the female victim offered up to Amor: the sacrifice in love, which Hadrian argued for uncynically in the opening meditative section of the text, is transferred onto the ritual of sacrifice.

Antinoüs's voice, meanwhile, is never heard when he is alive. In distinction to Echo, his is an embodied silence figuring in Hadrian's personal world of mythology. Hadrian is the master and Antinoüs the silent companion: ‘I have been absolute master but once in my life, and over but one being; (…) His presence was extraordinarily silent: he followed me like some animal or some familiar spirit’ (155). Again Hadrian finds it difficult to retrieve a picture of the whole of Antinoüs, but he does manage a profusion of details: ‘But the faces which we try so desperately to recall escape us: it is only for a moment…’ (155). Hadrian asserts that the ‘truth’ of their time together was that Antinoüs embodied the ideal form of beauty; this is another example of Hadrian confronting the problem of fixing an image of his lover, and encountering the problem later evoked by Barthes. It is his memory, which has to rely on recollections of parts of the body, that releases Antinoüs from being a sculpted essence: as the Henry Moore Institute exhibition of 2006 also argued, we see that it is a misreading of sculpture to treat it as essentialist.[20]

Hadrian considers how his interpretation of events controls the access the reader has to the thoughts ascribed to Antinoüs in the text. The discourse concerns master, sculpture and masterpiece: ‘Even my remorse has gradually become a form of

---

[20] See *Antinous: The Face of the Antique*, essay and catalogue of exhibits by Caroline Vout (Leeds: HMI, 2006).

possession, though bitter, and a way of assuring myself that, to the end, I have been the sorry master of his destiny. (…) In taking upon myself the entire fault I reduce the young figure to the proportions of a wax statuette which I might have shaped and crushed, in my hands. I have no right to detract from the extraordinary masterpiece which he made of his departure: I must leave to the boy the credit for his own death' (172-3). As Rémy Poignault has put it, 'Hadrian no longer casts himself as a sculptor if it will ease his conscience'.[21] Two forms of manipulation occur however: first, Hadrian's fear of losing his happiness, coupled with his investment in familiarity with the mythical figure he has made of Antinoüs, leads him to protect himself by turning sadistically on Antinoüs; and second, the arrangement in his narrative of the series of hunts, religious rituals and sacrifices functions as an inexorable drive towards the death of Antinoüs.

The first process is veiled in Hadrian's sculptural metaphor. A passage from 'Patroclus or destiny' in Yourcenar's 1936 text *Fires* (*Feux*) also deals with silence and the lover-beloved visualisation: 'The secret hatred that dwells deep inside love predisposed Achilles to the role of sculptor: he envied Hector for having completed this masterpiece, since he alone should have removed the last veils of thought and gesture remaining between Patroclus and himself, thereby uncovering Patroclus in the sublime nakedness of his death'.[22] Sculpture enables Achilles and Hadrian to fix the form of Patroclus and Antinoüs respectively. It is only possible to see the Other completely after death, therefore in retrospect.[23]

In one stage in the process of looking back over his life with Antinoüs, Hadrian can be seen to apply his knowledge of the conclusion to the story by retrospectively punishing Antinoüs for abandoning him. In turning Antinoüs into an art object, Hadrian risks reducing him to an impoverished image. Hadrian's abandonment of certain beliefs and of his tranquillity voices his melancholic state. Firstly, there is Hadrian's loss of faith in myth. Although Hadrian espoused Greek legend in his own writing earlier in the text, where a succession of evocations proceeded from mythical place to mythical story in eulogy and commemoration, Hadrian now understandably distrusts the evocation of

---

[21] R. Poignault, 'Antinoüs: un destin de pierre,' p. 112.
[22] M. Yourcenar, *Feux* (1936), in *Œuvres romanesques* (Paris : Gallimard/Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1982), p. 1074.
[23] For a critical discussion of this topic, see Colin Davis, *Ethical Issues in Twentieth Century French*

literary predecessors. At the tomb of Hector, ‘Antinous stood dreaming over Patroclus’s grave but I failed to recognize in the devoted young fawn who accompanied me an emulator of Achilles’ friend : when I derided those passionate loyalties which abound chiefly in books the handsome boy was insulted and went bright red’ (177-8). Later he will re-discover the relevance of the myth, but at this point he is succumbing, as he admits, to the Roman disgust for passion, considered as ‘a shameful folly’ (178).

Hadrian focuses on Antinoüs's forehead and eyes in a passage of fixating gazes and punishment: ‘Dangerous whims and sudden anger shaking the Medusa-like curls above that stubborn brow alternated with a melancholy which was close to stupor, and with a gentleness more and more broken. Once I struck him; I shall remember forever those horrified eyes. But the offended idol remained an idol, and my expiatory sacrifices began’ (178). The stylised motifs of whim, anger, melancholy and tenderness cannot hide the trouble experienced by Hadrian in sustaining the look of and from Antinoüs. Following one of the versions of the story of Medusa, Antinoüs's locks of hair have become serpent's coils, signalling the transformation that has occurred following the violation of the sacred aura of their love when Hadrian mocks Antinoüs's identification with Patroclus. The sight of Antinoüs has Medusan power and Hadrian can only break that stare through violence. Shortly afterwards Hadrian and Antinoüs attend an orgy of self-emasculation in honour of ‘Cybele’.

The public feature of Hadrian's reaction to the death of Antinoüs is to displace his grief onto other people. Although the organisation of a cult has to be simple and grandiose in order to have any chance of finding a place among the many cults of the Roman Empire, the cult of Antinoüs as presented by Hadrian is at times over-determined in Yourcenar’s text. Hadrian plans exactly how Greece, Asia and Egypt will worship: ‘Egypt, who had witnessed the death agony, would have her part in the apotheosis: it would be the most secret and sombre part, and the harshest, for this country would play the eternal role of embalmer to his body’ (198). Hadrian's careful strictures enact his desire to lay down every detail of ritual.

Although the idea of the metamorphosis from statue to flower means that the memory of Antinoüs in human form risks being supplanted by statuary and by literary

---

Fiction: Killing the Other (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 117-130.

versions of transformation, Hadrian is attempting to create differences within his eclectic picture of Antinoüs. The metamorphosis resulting from a statue is spelt out more explicitly in comments on the marble piece by Papias of Aphrodisias: 'There is that marble where Papias of Aphrodisias has outlined a body tenderly nude, with the delicate resilience of narcissus' (133). Again Narcissus appears alongside the reference to love in the name Aphrodisia, both a town and an island where Venus was worshipped; the narcissus flower figures Hadrian's preoccupation with transformation, guilt and literature.

In the cult of Antinoüs respected in private at the Villa, Yourcenar's Hadrian is for extended periods unable to escape from the unsettling vision of repeated doubles and elusive essences: the statues at Hadrian's Villa were cold simulacra, repetitive images, ghostly white figures. Hadrian has been entranced by the images in his search for Antinoüs and he struggles to control them: 'I had cast a spell over stones which, in their turn, had spellbound me; nevermore would I escape from their cold and silence, henceforth closer to me than the warmth and voices of the living' (230).

Unsatisfied, he orders another statue that is a better likeness. As it was in the sculpted life of Antinoüs, so it is in the statues commemorating him. In search of the essential form of Antinoüs, Hadrian is comparable to Michelangelo in Yourcenar's 1931 text 'Sistine'. The artist ponders his statue of a dead friend: 'His beauty, which so many thoughts and gestures had, while he lived, fragmented into expressions or movements became more intact, absolute, eternal: one would have said that he had composed his body before leaving it'.[24] In the practice of his private cult of worship for Antinoüs, Hadrian is caught by the cold gaze from the repetitive representations. This repetition, according to Lacan, belies any attempted mastery and instead reveals the radical vacillation of the subject.[25] Hadrian's criticisms of colossal Egyptian statues can be read an ironic parallel to his own encouragement of colossal statues of Antinous, in the passage cited in the Henry Moore Institute exhibition catalogue: 'I wanted those images to be enormous, like a face seen at close range, tall and solemn figures, like visions and apparitions in a terrifying dream, and as overwhelming as the memory itself has remained' (132).

---

[24] M. Yourcenar, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, pp. 21-22.

[25] Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 239.

In both its public and its private expressions Hadrian's mourning is imprisoned by his desire to fix an image of Antinoüs in the context of a set of myths, a set of rituals and civic memories, and a series of unsatisfying statues. In the final part of *Memoirs of Hadrian* we see how the experience of mourning brings about a less fixed translation of these dreams and visions. In the chapels and temples dedicated to Antinoüs, Hadrian provides a space in which to allow his mourning to occur. There is no pre-established cult for others to worship, nor a manipulation of myth. Memory and stone now combine differently in these places of visitation and meditation: 'The chapels of Antinoüs and his temples were magic chambers, commemorating a mysterious passage between life and death; these shrines to an overpowering joy and grief were places of prayer and evocation of the dead ; there I gave myself over to my sorrow' (…) Each building-stone was the strange concretion of a will, a memory, and sometimes a challenge. Each structure was the chart of a dream' (127-8). Hadrian equates Antinoüs with the gods of the passage between this world and the next and fuses his thoughts for Antinoüs with his own impending death. Thus, although he relies on repeating the invocation several times over and on the knowledge that the worship is also being conducted elsewhere, the association with Hermes and Bacchus is personalised in the context of how Hadrian now remembers Antinoüs: 'At Delphi the youth has become the Hermes who guards the threshold, master of the dark passages leading to the shades. Eleusis (...) now makes of him the young Bacchus of the Mysteries, prince of those border regions which lie between the senses and the soul' (286).

The Canopus is one of the chapels at the Villa where it used to be thought that Antinoüs was celebrated. In the 'Reflections on the Composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*', Yourcenar relates how she came across Piranesi's etching of the Canopus. She applauds its insights into the emperor's mind: 'The genius of Piranesi, almost mediumistic, has truly caught the element of hallucination here: he has sensed the long-continued rituals of mourning, the tragic architecture of an inner world' (RC 324). Piranesi's wide view of the chapel opens up the dome to the spectator, allowing us to look, from a distance and inside, at the private world of Hadrian. In 'Sistine', Michelangelo sees a split between his work and nature's: 'It is in that respect perhaps that all my work is contrary to nature. At every instant the marble in which we think we have

preserved a form of perishable life returns to its place in nature, through erosion, patina, and the play of light and shadow over planes which thought they were abstract but are in fact only the surface of a stone'.[26] The split is healed for the architect-emperor when he is no longer anxious about the nature of the form he has created. Hadrian has built the structure but it is nature's work and a fresh approach to myth that produces the return of Antinoüs.

We have seen how the concentration on fixed images of Antinoüs led to a fragmented picture of him for the mourning emperor. Under the influence of melancholia, Hadrian is unable to advance beyond the need to manipulate myths in his remembrance of Antinoüs. Hadrian lies at 'that sinister crossroads between what was and what will be, and what exists eternally' (290). Pursuing his enquiry into knowledge of the next world, Hadrian ponders the spectral form taken by Achilles in Arrian's letter. The provincial governor and author Arrian had recounted how Achilles appeared to sailors in their dreams, with Patroclus alongside him: Arrian knows Hadrian will think of Antinous. He has given up trying to specify the origin of the phantom of the Other, content to accept it as a feature of the confluence of ideas at the crossroads: 'it matters little to me whether the phantoms whom I evoke come from the limbo of my memory or from that of another world. My soul, if I possess one, is made of the same substance as are the specters' (289).

Processes of visualisation are necessarily an important part of Hadrian's recollection of his life – and of his acceptance of death. Yourcenar needed Hadrian to find her own perspective on Antinous, so the argument made by some critics that the *Memoirs* are a suppression of Yourcenar's true interest in Antinous are worth considering but tend to underestimate the complexity of the passionate relationship represented in the text that we have. Tracing the role of sculpture in Hadrian's memoirs allows us to see how Yourcenar completed a project that had been with her for over 30 years, engaging with the particular challenge of representing her desire and empathy for both Hadrian and Antinous. Alongside her distinctive approach to the past, Yourcenar could call on the most influential figure for her project since Symonds, namely Proust, with his crucial example of the recreation of a consciousness through memory.

[26] M. Yourcenar, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, p. 21.

Hadrian’s ultimate goal in these memoirs, as he lies dying at the Villa, is to articulate a detached wisdom that seeks to incorporate both life and death. In a review of Josyane Savigneau’s biography of Yourcenar, Edmund White quotes from Yourcenar’s essay on Cavafy: ‘We are so used to seeing in wisdom a residue of dead passions that it’s difficult to recognize in it the hardest and most condensed form of ardor, the grain of gold pulled from the fire, not from the ashes.’[27] Yourcenar aimed to convey the truth of both Hadrian’s rule and his passions.

[27] M. Yourcenar, *Présentation critique de* Constantin Cavafy 1863-1933*, suivie d’une traduction des* Poèmes *par Marguerite Yourcenar et Constantin Dimaras* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 41; cited in Edmund White, *The Burning Library: Writings on Art, Politics and Sexuality, 1969-1993* (London: Picador, 1995), pp. 350-1.