

A Tribute to Marguerite Youcenar

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On March 6, 1980 as Marguerite Youcenar, aged 77, was about to leave France on a cruise to the Caraïb Islands, she heard that she had just been elected to the prestigious Académie Française in Paris. Paying tribute to her on that same day in Beirut, thirteen years later, is, in a way a symbol of a continuity in the history of women across time and space. Marguerite Youcenar used to say that she experienced a constant participation in "that which had been". She also spoke of a "sympathetic magic" which operates when one transports one's self, in thought, into another's body and soul. In such inner states of "sympathetic magic", one can, indeed, "contract the distance between centuries at will".

Presently, I shall try to "contract the distance" between Youcenar and my humble self as I am reading the historical novel which made her famous in 1951, **Memoirs of Hadrien**, in a seminar with my students at AUB, and falling once again under the spell of a great writer.

Youcenar certainly entered the Academy as a writer not as a woman, although the fact that she was a woman put off the majority of the male academicians who were known as the "immortals" in France. Even as Claude Levi-Strauss wondered how the members of "the tribe" would allow a lady to walk ahead of them, and in what kind of costume she would do so?! Others said they all grew old amongst themselves at the Academy and would be at a loss



Marguerite Youcenar in 1936

when faced with an aging woman! But Youcenar herself was not at a loss! She just took her election in her stride for she had not even advanced her candidacy, to start with, as was the tradition.

A citizen of the world, Youcenar

was born in 1903 in Brussels, of a French nobleman and a Belgian mother. As a child she read aloud, with her father, the classical writers in Greek and Latin, and later all Shakespeare, Tolstol and Dostoevsky. She widely traveled throughout her life and wrote



regularly since her teens. Novels, memoirs, autobiographies, great translations from Antiquity, Japanese and modern Greek poetry, from the Negro spirituals of the American Black singers, form the rich variety of her Opus. Youcenar spent the last forty years of her life in Maine by the

Atlantic, where she lived with her faithful friend and translator, Grace Fricks. Fully engaged in the main struggles of her century, she devoted a great part of her energy to defend the rights of women, blacks, ecologist, etc.

Deeply humanistic, with a universal mind, Youcenar perpetuates in her writings a classical tradition with great lucidity, rigor, and vigilance. She always stressed the concreteness of things and bodies, going from shapes, sounds and colors to catch the invisible which weaves the fabric of life.



Among the Academicians after her election in 1981

The human substance and structure (she writes) hardly change: nothing is more stable than the curve of a heel, the position of a tendon, or the form of a toe. But there are periods when the shoe is less deforming than in others. In the century of which I speak (Hadrien's, second Century A.D.) we are still very close to the undistinguished freedom of the bare foot.

In her notes to **Memoirs of Hadrien**, Youcenar quotes Flaubert who writes "Just when the gods had ceased to be, and Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone." She adds that she devoted a great part of her life to try to define, and then to portray that man exists alone and yet is closely bound to all beings.

Youcenar belonged to the five or six best writers of her time. The Academicians knew it since they were ready to break the rules of a 350-year old institution. It always takes a beginning! Today, the Academy hosts two other eminent women, the classicist Jacqueline de Romilly, and the great specialist on Russian politics Hélène Carrère d'Encausse •

* Portraits of Marguerite Youcenar taken from Magazine *Littéraire*, No.283, December 1990.

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