

MUSEUMS AND LITERATURE: MARGUERITE YOURCENAR'S *MÉMOIRES D'HADRIEN*

ROSARIO ROVIRA*

Abstract.-

Mémoires d'Hadrien is one of the most famous historical novels. The writing process was long, it started when Marguerite Yourcenar travelled to Italy in the 20's and visited Hadrian's villa and it lasted until 1951, year of the publication of the book. To create, Hadrian's character, Yourcenar sought inspiration in the historical sources related to Hadrian but also in the objects she saw in several museums. Thanks to them she could put a face to Hadrian and the rest of characters in the book and start an interesting friendship with several members of the staff.

Resumen.-

Memorias de Adriano es una de las novelas históricas más conocidas. Su proceso de redacción fue largo, se inició durante un viaje de Marguerite Yourcenar a Italia en los años 20 durante el que visitaría Villa Adriana y se extendió hasta 1951, fecha de su publicación. Para crear el personaje de Adriano, Yourcenar se basó principalmente en las fuentes históricas de época romana pero también en los objetos que pudo ver en diversos museos. Gracias a ellos pudo poner rostro a Adriano y al resto de personajes que aparecen en el libro pero también entablar una fructífera amistad con el personal.

Key words: Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Literature, Museum.

Palabras clave: Yourcenar, *Memorias de Adriano*, Literatura, Museo.

* The British Museum, London. E-Mail: crovira@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

On the 24th of January in 1949, the day of Hadrian's birthday, Marguerite Yourcenar received a trunk with some of the possessions she had left in Europe before she had travelled to the United States 10 years before¹. The trunk contained several documents, letters and other possessions, most of which ended up in the fireplace but she also found some pages that started with the line "*Mon cher Marc*"; this would be the starting line of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. This was also the beginning of the final writing process of the book.

The adventure had begun in 1924 during a journey to Italy with her father, *Michel de Crayencour*, when they visited the villa that the emperor Hadrian had built in the outskirts of Rome, near *Tibur*, modern *Tivoli*. The young Marguerite who was 21 year old at the time, was so impressed with the site that she decided there and then that she wanted to write a book about Hadrian².

It was not going to be a smooth process and *Mémoires d'Hadrien* would only finally be published in 1951, but it became an immediate success both for the public as for the literary critics. It is one of the most popular historic novels and Yourcenar earned her reputation as a writer thanks to it. *Mémoires d'Hadrien* was her return to novel writing and at the same time marked a change from her previous works. If she had used a great deal of her personal experiences before, in her new book Yourcenar put herself in the shoes of a character very far from her in time and essence.

Hadrian would become for Marguerite Yourcenar something more than the subject of one of her books; Hadrian would accompany her during her whole lifetime, to the point that, when she and her partner Grace Frick got the news that the latter had only a few months to live, Yourcenar wrote in one of her notebooks that that day, 10th of July 1974, was the anniversary of Hadrian's death, 1736 years before³.

Yourcenar was born in 1903 in Brussels into an upper class family and following the tradition she was educated at home through tutors and by her own father, who infused her with a love for literature and art. It was he who tried to convince the 11 year

¹ The date appears in the notebook related to the year 1949, she would later change the date to 15 or 16 January 1949 or even November of December 1948 in the chronology and *Carnets de notes* of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* of the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*. For the arrival of the trunk from Switzerland see: Yourcenar, M., *Les yeux ouverts. Entretiens avec Matthieu Galey*, Éd. du Centurion, Paris 1980, 146-147; Yourcenar, M., *Ouvres Romanesques*, Éd. Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris 1982, XXIII (*Chronologie*) 524-525 (*Carnets de notes de "Mémoires d'Hadrien"*). For the changes of the date of arrival of the trunk see: Savigneau, J., *Marguerite Yourcenar. L'invention d'une vie*, Éd. Gallimard, collection Folio, Paris 1990, 277-278; Goslar, M., *Yourcenar. Biografia. Quanto sarebbe stato insipido essere felice!*, Aperia Editori, Roma 2003 (Italian edition of French original, *Yourcenar. Biographie. "Qu'il eût été fade d'être heureux"*, Éd. Racine, Bruxelles 1998), 203.

² Yourcenar, *Les yeux ouverts*..., 151.

³ Houghton Library, bMS 372.2 (302). There is also a list with the deaths dates of members of Marguerite Yourcenar's family in which the deaths dates of her literary characters such as Hadrian or Zenon are included.

old Marguerite to read a bilingual Loeb edition of the *Meditations* of *Marcus Aurelius* as a way for her to learn English. Despite her interest in the Graeco-Roman world, this was a step too far and she made her father lose his temper who ended up throwing the book through the window, although the book would later have an influence on the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* in defining the way in which an emperor could talk about his experiences. The evocation of the past and of one's own life was an important aspect of the writing process of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, an idea that Yourcenar thanked to the influence of Proust, this influence helped her to make the book a reconstruction of the past rather than a collection of dates. Alongside Proust, Flaubert also was a modern influence on the book, with his idea that the Roman period was a period in which man was the main character in History as it was a period when religion was not as predominant as it was going to be with Christianity⁴.

Writing *Mémoires d'Hadrien* was not going to prove to be an easy task and Yourcenar would only finish the book in 1951, after having started it several times and having published several books and articles in the meantime. The book had several creative stages; it started as a series of dialogues in which the historical figures who had met Hadrian would speak but the author considered that it was only through the form of an autobiography that a wider picture of Hadrian could be provided. The character of the emperor would also change over the years, at the beginning he was going to be portrayed as a patron and artist but after long periods of research, the final version is far more complex and all the sides of Hadrian are shown, both the man and the emperor⁵.

Many years after the publication of the book, the author blamed the complexity of the subject, a man close to his death who reflects about his life, for the delay in writing the book; it was far too much for the abilities and experience of a 21 year old writer⁶.

When Yourcenar took up the final writing of the book again in 1949, she had been living in the United States 10 years, far from the intellectual circles she had frequented in Europe before WWII. She had not published a book for a long period and she had just been diagnosed with a heart disease; coincidentally the same type of illness that Hadrian suffered from. It is not difficult to imagine that in these circumstances the writer might have found the necessary inspiration and will to finish the book that would take her back to the literary scene and would make her the first woman to en-

⁴ For the influence of Proust see as an example the letter to Christian Murciaux: bMS 372.2 (4964) (7th March 1952) = Yourcenar, M., *D'Hadrien à Zénon. Correspondance 1951-1956*, Éd. Gallimard, Paris 2004. Most of the letters published in this volume are deposited in the Houghton Library in Harvard.

⁵ Yourcenar, *Les yeux ouverts...*, 152.

⁶ Yourcenar, *Les yeux ouverts...*, 152.

ter the French Academy in 1981. Yourcenar had changed Europe for the United States in 1937; escaping both from the political situation and her own complicated love life. She came back to Europe for a short period between April of 1938 and November 1939; after this she would not come back until the publication of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* in 1951. She would never live in Europe again but she would travel around the world for long periods until her death in *Petite Plaisance*, the house that she and her partner Grace Frick had bought in Maine.

Although *Mémoires d'Hadrien* is a historic novel it is based on the two main sources about Hadrian, the *Historia Augusta* and the work of Dio Cassio as well as in the epigraphic, numismatic and the rest of the documentation from Hadrian's period as can be seen from the *carnets* and in the long bibliographic note published as annexes in the following editions of the book. These historical sources would provide the facts but these were only the "bones" of Hadrian's life, "flesh" would be added by literary creation but also by museums; between their contents Yourcenar would find a face for Hadrian, Antinous and the rest of the characters that appear in the *Mémoires*. She did not only find iconographic inspiration but also shelter from the hard times she was suffering, as in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Yourcenar visited this museum often, not only because of her friendship with the director Arthur Everett Austin, who organised the theatre play written by her, *La Petite Sirene* in 1942, but also because in one of their rooms there was a view of the Pantheon painted by Bernardo Bellotto. This painting, originally attributed to Canaletto⁷, was a shelter for the writer in a period of her life where she had lost the inspiration to write. She was also inspired in this period by Piranesi, of whom she bought four engravings because they reminded her of the time in which the last Romans may have seen Villa Adriana, before the site was devoured by the archaeologists⁸.

Although Hadrian's villa was the spark that started the book, Yourcenar had seen Hadrian for the first time in a museum, during a visit to the British Museum between 1914 and 1915 with his father, at the time that they were living in London, trying to escape from WWI. This first Hadrian was a bronze head that had been found in the Thames in 1834; it is possible that the statue may have been made to commemorate the visit of the emperor in 122 AD⁹. There is also a bronze arm that comes from the same place and it perhaps could have belonged to the same statue. Although this is not yet confirmed, Yourcenar considered that they belonged to the same statue and published them together in illustrated editions of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. This portrait

⁷ This painting was considered as a work of Canaletto for many years, only recently it was attributed to Bernardo Bellotto, nephew of Canaletto. Beddington, C. "Bernardo Bellotto and his circle in Italy. Part I: not Canaletto but Bellotto": *The Burlington Magazine* 146, October 2004, 665-674.

⁸ Yourcenar, *Les yeux ouverts...*, 52

⁹ Potter, T.W., *Roman Britain*, London 1997², 54, fig. 36.

of Hadrian, along with a head now in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria, were the base of the iconographic image of Hadrian as she wrote to Jean Ballard in 1951¹⁰.

The bronze head from Alexandria comes from Dendera and it was bought in the antiquities market in 1930 for the NY Carlsberg Glyptotek of Copenhagen but when the *Service de Antiquites* opposed the exportation of the object, it ended up in the Graeco-Roman museum in Alexandria¹¹.

Yourcenar did not visit Egypt until 1982 so, unlike with the bronze head from the British Museum, she might only get to know this piece through the bibliography she used for *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, probably though the book of Paul Graindor, *Bustes et Statues-Portraits de l'Égypte Romaine* that she mentions in the bibliographical note. Graindor underlined that both the Alexandrian bronze and the British Museum one share some similarities, as the simplification of the beard and the wavy hair, a stylisation that would be characteristic of the work of a provincial artist¹². Despite the bronze from Alexandria is no longer considered a Hadrian portrait anymore but a pseudo Hadrian, the portrait of a man with a beard following the fashion of the time. Graindor considered that the bust was of Hadrian, despite the stylisation, because of the type of beard and eyes. The type of beard would indicate that it was made before Marcus Aurelius, when the fashion for longer beards started. Also the type of eyes would indicate an early chronology because the glass eyes disappear after *Septimius Severus* period. He also suggested that in the area where the hair finishes there would be a crown of radial rays similar to the one that the emperors have in Alexandrian coins after Nero. Nevertheless, Poulsen, the director of the NY Carlsberg Glyptotek of Copenhagen had already doubted in 1937 that the head of Alexandria could be identified as Hadrian¹³. Yourcenar was on good terms with the institution as we can see in some letters from 1954 to Raissa Calza, from the *Museo di Ostia*, where she offers herself as an intermediary to obtain photographs for Calza, not only from the NY Carlsberg Glyptotek but also from some other museums in England (she does not provide any details) or even the *Musée du Louvre*¹⁴. In the bibliography of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* she even mentions a book by Poulsen, *Greek and Roman Portraits in English Country Houses* published

¹⁰ Letter to Jean Ballard (7th October 1951) (Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien*..., 78-80).

¹¹ Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria, Inv. 22902.

¹² Graindor, P., *Bustes et statues-portraits d'Égypte romaine*, Le Cairo 1937.

¹³ Poulsen, F. "L'art du portrait en Égypte romaine": *REA* 39, 4, 1937, 387. Lahusen, G./ Formigli, E., *Römische Bildnisse aus Bronze. Kunst und Technik*. München 2001, 209-210, n. 125; Evers, C., *Les portraits d'Hadrien. Typologie et ateliers*, Bruxelles 1984, 284; Grimm, G., "Paulina und Antinous. Zur Vergoettlichung der Hadrianschwester in Aegypten": *Festschrift Kl. Parlasca*, Erlangen 1990, 38, Taf. 22.2.23; Kiss, Z., *Études sur le portrait imperial romain en Égypte*, Paris 1984, 59, abb. 120/ 121; Zanker, P., *Provinzielle Kaiserporträts*, München 1983, 14, n. 28; Jucker, H., "Römische Herrscherbildnisse aus Ägypten": *ANRW* II.12.2, Berlin-New York 1981, 714.

¹⁴ BMS Fr 372.2 (4341) = Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien*..., 321.

in London in 1923 but she did not know of the review that had appeared in REA in which he doubted the attribution of the bronze head of Alexandria.

This lack of knowledge of the bibliography available was one of the remarks in one of the few negative reviews of the book, the one written by Charles Picard and published in the *Revue Archeologique* in 1954¹⁵. The archaeologist, who did not like historic novels, reproached Yourcenar, among other things that she did not know anything about the social structure of *Italica*, as in the book Hadrian says that there were not Greek statues and that Hellenism was unknown in the area. He complained also about the lack of bibliography on Antinous statues and also the lack of images. Obviously this last issue was about to be solved with the new illustrated editions of the book, although the quality of photography is not exceptional. Yourcenar felt terribly offended by this negative review as she mentioned to her friends the princess Schakhovskoy¹⁶ and to Alexis Curvers, Belgian poet and editor of a magazine where Yourcenar would publish some articles. The writer thought that there were some other reasons behind the review, not only archaeological reasons. She thought about writing an answer to the review but it was never published and only a draft is kept in the manuscript of *Journal de Mémoires d'Hadrien* still unpublished.

Yourcenar liked these two bronze portraits because in them, she saw the brutal emperor (in the case of the Hadrian from the British Museum) but also the thoughtful man (in the bronze head from Alexandria) and both of them allowed her to evoke the complexity of the emperor. Despite the erudition of Yourcenar and her knowledge of the evidence of Hadrian's period we can see in the election of these objects a gap between literary creation and archaeology. Both pieces are excellent examples of provincial art but they can not compete with other sculptures of Hadrian found in Rome.

Something similar happens in the case of Antinous since the favourite images of the writer were the Marlborough gem and the relief with Antinous-Silvanus found in a villa in Lanuvium, not far from Rome¹⁷. What Yourcenar liked of these two objects was the human element in them; the possibility that Hadrian could have been the owner of the gem while in the case of the relief, the fact that the name of the sculptor, *Antoninianus*, is preserved.¹⁸ These details added warmth to the objects that was more difficult to find in other pieces of greater artistic value such as the Antinous Mondragone found in Frascati and now in the *Musée du Louvre*, another favourite of

¹⁵ Picard, C., "L'empereur Hadrien vous parle": RA XLIII, Janvier-Juin 1954, 83-85. *Mémoires d'Hadrien* did not prove to be very popular between ancient historians as also Ronald Syme and Evaristo Breccia wrote negative reviews of the book. Syme, R., "Fictional History Old and New: Hadrian", in: *Roman Papers VI*, Oxford 1991, 157-181; Savigneau, J., *Marguerite Yourcenar...*, 347 (for Breccia).

¹⁶ bMS Fr 372.2 (5156) = Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien...*, 365.

¹⁷ Meyer, H., *Antinoos. Die archäologischen Denkmäler unter Einbeziehung des numismatischen und epigraphischen Materials sowie der literarischen Narichtern*, München 1991, 155, IC3.

¹⁸ Meyer, *Antinoos...*, 96-98, I75 (with earlier bibliography).

Marguerite Yourcenar. Again the evocative power of the objects supersedes their artistic value. Nevertheless it was a postcard of the Antinous of the Uffizi in Florence that accompanied Yourcenar along her journey to the United States; one of the few objects that helped her maintain a relationship with Hadrian during the first decade in America.

After the immediate success of the book following its publication in 1951 it was decided that a *de luxe* new edition with images would be published for which Yourcenar would personally choose the images. The search for these images would create a correspondence between the writer and the museums. In many cases the letters only refer to commercial transactions or relate to the rights of publication of the images as it happens with the British Museum, but in the case of the *Musée de Avenches* and the *Museo di Ostia* the correspondence is much more fruitful and it helps us to understand the writing process of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*.

Yourcenar's relationship with the *Musée de Avenches* dates back to the research period for the book and gave her the confidence enough to write to them, especially if the queries were related to numismatics. A relationship that we can call of an academic nature¹⁹.

Her relationship with the *Museo di Ostia* is much more personal. At some point during the return of Marguerite Yourcenar to Europe when *Mémoires d'Hadrien* was published she must have visited Ostia and got to know Raissa Calza, the secretary and archaeologist in charge of the photographic archive. Raissa Calza was an interesting character who shared with Yourcenar an upper class origin and an eclectic mixture of interests. Raissa was born in Odessa but would move to Italy with her father after the Russian Revolution. She would meet her second husband, the surrealist painter De Chirico in Rome when she was the first dancer in the play *Niobe* in Pirandello's company. They both moved to Paris in 1925 when she started to study archaeology with Charles Picard, the author of the only negative review of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. When they divorced in 1930, she would return to Italy and started to work in Ostia; in 1946 she married Guido Calza, director of the excavations of Ostia. This marriage would secure her position in Ostia which was quite fragile due to the impossibility at providing a degree certificate and her poor Italian. Raissa Calza published numerous books about Roman sculpture and some guides of Ostia until her death in 1979²⁰.

¹⁹ See: bMS Fr 372 (858) = Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien...*, 59, a letter to J. Bourquin, curator of the *Musée d'Avenches* to whom she thanks for their help with Hadrian objects from the museum and at the same time that she joins the *Société Pro Aventico*.

²⁰ About Raissa Calza's life: Nicotra, L., *Archeologia al femminile*, Roma 2004; Fagioli, D., *Ricordando Raissa*, Roma 1989. Her main publications are: Calza, R. (ed.), *Scavi di Ostia 5. I ritratti. 1, Ritratti greci e romani fino al 160 circa d.C.*, Roma 1964; Calza, R. (ed.), *Scavi di Ostia. 9, I ritratti. 2, Ritratti romani dal 160 circa alla metà del III secolo d.C.*, Roma 1978; Calza, R. (ed.), *Iconografia romana imperiale: Da Carausio a Giuliano (287-363 d.C.)*, Roma 1972.

She would help Yourcenar to get many of the images she would need for the illustrated edition as the ones she had were not good enough. It seems that during a conversation with Yourcenar, in which they were looking at photographs of Antinous that the writer had collected because she liked to study the different representations of Antinous; Calza reached the conclusion that Antinous's role in antiquity was similar to the one that Nijinski had had in the Russian ballets of beginnings of the XXth century: the right person in the right moment. Nijinski had been for Diaghilev, choreographer and owner of the Russian ballets the pinnacle of his aspirations as a scene director and this may have been what Antinous had been for Hadrian, a "human ideal", to use Yourcenar's own words²¹.

In one of the letters that Yourcenar wrote to Calza, she would later write that the statue of Antinous from the Museum of the Diocletian's baths was very similar to Rimbaud. Antinous was as Rimbaud was in his own time and even now a symbol of adolescent beauty; a type of beauty that was, according to Yourcenar, one of the characteristics of the Ancient World²². Despite the comparison between Antinous and Rimbaud, a parallel comparison between Hadrian and Verlaine was never suggested although both men were equally able to combine ruthless actions with the most refined actions either in architecture or poetry.

Adolescent beauty had been an important influence on her first novels where it was linked to passion and passion was one of the aspects of Hadrian she felt more fascinated with. Antinous was, in fact, a usual topic in her work, from a first book that was turned down by different publishing houses to several conferences that were given after the publication of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*.

Marguerite Yourcenar would keep a close relationship with museums along all her life, during her childhood they were a place to learn, a place to discover the human body and where she first met one of the men who would shape her life, Hadrian. Museums would become places of shelter and meeting points with people who share with Yourcenar similar approaches, not only to art but to life.

²¹ Yourcenar, *Les yeux ouverts...*, 162.

²² BMS Fr 372.2 (5640) (Paris 10th February 1954) = Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien...*, 313. A letter where she asks for some photographs of statues of Antinous that she will be using in a conference about *Le portrait d'Antinoüs*. Other letters to Raissa Calza that always regarded images: bMS Fr 372.2 (5640) (24th May 1952) where Yourcenar mentions her visit to Italica; bMS Fr 372.2 (4th July 1952) = Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien...*, 169-172; bMS Fr 372.2 (4341) (Paris, 1st March 1954); bMS Fr 372.2(4341); (Paris, 15th March 1954) = Yourcenar, *D'Hadrien...*, 338.