

Hadrian's Practice of Freedom: Yourcenar, Beauvoir, and Foucault¹

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I have sometimes dreamed of elaborating a system of human knowledge based on the erotic, a theory of contact, in which the mystery and dignity of others would consist precisely in offering to the Self the point of access to another world. Pleasure in this philosophy would be a more complete, but also a more specialized form of this approach to the Other, an additional technique pressed into the service of the knowledge of that which is not us (Yourcenar 1982a: 296)².

The following article makes an argument about freedom and an argument about the reception of antiquity. It contends that there is a debate in postwar France about the nature of freedom, which should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the controversies surrounding French existentialism and its contentious relations with psychoanalysis, Marxism, and later structuralism. It argues that an important nexus of that debate

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2 — All translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.

can be seen by comparing Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien* with the work of her contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir. It makes the supplementary argument that one can shine a more focused light on this implicit dialogue between these two great women writers by observing the way in which Yourcenar's position anticipates the later arguments of Michel Foucault, which were themselves self-consciously and explicitly directed against the existentialist concept of man as ontologically possessed of, or even "condemned to", freedom. Both Yourcenar and Foucault turn to antiquity as a way of strengthening their argument and relativizing the construction of the modern normative subject. As will become clear, their concept of freedom as a set of practices exercised by the self on itself, which is derived from the ancient traditions of Stoic and Socratic philosophy, is firmly implicated in a simultaneous problematization of masculinist heteronormativity and the erotic. For Foucault, the care of the self and the spiritual practices that accompany it, offers a means to construct alternative forms of subjectivity and hence alternative forms of thought and pleasure. For Yourcenar, Hadrian's emphasis on the practice of freedom offers a means of contesting a philosophical ontology that he finds banal, even as Hadrian elaborates a vision of same sex eroticism and transcendence that stands in direct contrast the heterosexist norms of midtwentieth century France. Together, their readings of antiquity and its relation to gender and sexuality both respond and stand in contrast to that of Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and hence to the vision of freedom and subjectivity contained therein. Yourcenar, thus, both anticipates Foucault's critique and his turn to antiquity in ways that belie the more common picture of her as a classical stylist, scholar, and aesthete, and reveal her to be an engaged writer, perhaps not in the mode of Beauvoir, but nonetheless in surprising and significant ways.

In undertaking such an archeology of modern French thought, it would have, of course, been possible to focus on other figures, and indeed the current essay is part of a larger project that will examine the reception of antiquity in a variety of French women writers, including Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Sarah Kofman, (Miller forthcoming). This study is, in turn, a continuation of my previous work on the reception of antiquity in general and Plato in particular in French writers as diverse as Sartre, Camus, and Anouilh, as well as Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault (Miller 2007). It also follows in the wake of Miriam Leonard's *Athens in Paris* (2005). Clearly, the scope of this larger archive exceeds the compass of a modest article. But it is important to recall that the present argument stands in a synecdochic relation to both this past work, which is already published, and to new work, which is forthcoming. What I am are

offering here is a focused look at a particular nexus of texts and debates that are part of a much larger web of dialogic interaction.

I will begin with a brief overview of Simone de Beauvoir's knowledge of antiquity, then move to a direct comparison of her career to that of Marguerite Yourcenar. I will then examine the relation between Beauvoir's existentialist concept of freedom and transcendence, Hadrian's more practical and disciplinary concept of freedom as portrayed by Yourcenar, and Foucault's own concept as founded on his exploration of the ancient philosophical trope of the care of the self. I shall close by examining Hadrian's philosophy of the erotic and its relation to concepts of freedom and sexuality.

Labrousse says, To undergo something, doesn't mean to accept it stupidly; I would accept undergoing just about anything, precisely because I would always have the ability to undergo it freely.

- That's a funny sort of freedom, says Gerbert. You will no longer be able to do any of the things that interest you.

Labrousse smiles. You know, I've changed. (Beauvoir 1943: 322)

Simone de Beauvoir was on many counts extraordinary: a gifted novelist, philosopher, and political essayist; the lover and intellectual companion of Jean-Paul Sartre. At the time she passed the *agrégation* in philosophy, which was dominated by Plato and Aristotle (Leonard 2005: 17), she was the youngest ever, ranked second only to Sartre himself, and one of the very few women at this point. By her midteens, she had received a standard French classical education. She was strong in mathematics and Latin, eventually receiving certificates in both from the Sorbonne. Early on she displayed an interest in Roman archeology and history (Beauvoir 1958: 207, 236). She makes special mention of Lucretius and Juvenal in her memoirs, noting that she read both the same year she confessed to being an atheist to her very Catholic mother (Beauvoir 1958: 57, 239). She returned to Lucretius as a source of solace in the face of death during World War II (Beauvoir 1960: 511) and in her early years made her living in part from teaching Latin (Beauvoir 1960: 56, 170). Her knowledge of Juvenal and particularly of *Satire 6* on women is evident in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, as well as her reading of Tacitus, and a passing familiarity with Seneca, Martial, and the Younger Pliny (1949a: 22-23, 152-53, 176). *Le Deuxième Sexe* also features a lucid discussion of Roman marriage law and inheritance practices (1949a: 147-51).

Yet Beauvoir's real academic passion was philosophy, which she took for the first time during her final year in the *lycée*. While, as she says, the sky did not immediately open up, her interest grew after she began stu-

dying for her *license*. At that time, she began seriously reading Bergson, Schopenhauer, Leibniz, and Nietzsche, but also Plato. Aristotle she found too closely associated with the Catholic tradition of Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain and rejected him (Beauvoir 1958: 329). There is less information in her memoirs concerning her instruction in Greek than there is in Latin. Nonetheless, we know that at one of the *lycées* where she taught Latin she also taught Greek. She exhibits a casual and easy familiarity with Xenophon and, in 1940 when she began a systematic reading of Hegel, she also started reading Homer as a source of consolation after France's surrender and Sartre's captivity (Beauvoir 1960: 59, 317, 470, 472; cf. also 1949b: 543).

The ancient world was a source of interest for both Sartre and Beauvoir throughout the thirties and forties. Aesthetically, this period in France witnesses not only the growth of avant-garde movements like surrealism but also a burgeoning neoclassicism, which was founded on the culture of both the writers and the educated public³. The ancient world was an assumed common inheritance. We need only mention Cocteau and Anouilh's versions of *Antigone*, Giraudoux's *Electre*, Dullin's productions of *Julius Caesar* and the *Plutus*, Camus' *Caligula*, or Barrault's production of the *Suppliant Maidens* in 1941, which inspired Sartre's *Les Mouches*, and Yourcenar's *Electre ou la chute des masques* (Beauvoir 1960: 295, 484, 499; Yourcenar 1971: 16-17).

Marguerite Yourcenar was in many ways the polar opposite of Simone de Beauvoir. Where Beauvoir was educated at the Sorbonne, associated with students at the *École Normale Supérieure*, and *agrégée* in philosophy, Marguerite Yourcenar never attended formal school, was largely educated by her father, and after deciding against receiving a *license* pursued her own intensive study of the classics and ancient artifacts (Yourcenar 1982b: xiv-xvi; Body 1995: 53; Gaudin 1995: 207-08). Where Simone de Beauvoir by the forties found herself at the center of Parisian intellectual life, trading polemics with and responding to everyone from André Breton and Georges Bataille to François Mauriac and André Malraux, the mature Marguerite Yourcenar alternated between traveling the world and living on a small island off Maine. And while she wrote prolifically, that island in many ways became a metaphor for her seeming isolation from the major currents of French intellectual life. Yourcenar was certainly known to the reading public, but she was never a surrealist, an existentialist, a collaborator, a communist, a structuralist, or a poststructuralist. She neither adhered to, nor visibly opposed, any of the many isms that dominated mid twentieth-century intellectual life. Her art, like

3 — See St. Aubyn and Marshall (1963: 9); Freeman (1971: 49-50); Contat (2005: 1259). For a fuller treatment, see Miller (2007: chap. 2).

her geographical location, seemed to offer a relative autonomy. Thus, while Beauvoir's fiction is often directly implicated in both her personal history and her intellectual and political engagements – in places *Les Mandarins* (1954) reads as if it were a first draft of her memoir, *La Force de l'âge* (1960) – Yourcenar's prose often seems to remain self-enclosed and marble-like, the product of an extensive program of erudition and painstaking revision. More than twenty-five years passed between the time Yourcenar began work on the *Mémoires* and the publication of the first edition in 1951 (Yourcenar 1982a: 519-41; Brignoli 1995: 83-84; Collington 2006: 99-100). The notion of reading *Mémoires d'Hadrien* as a *roman à clef* is preposterous in ways that are simply not the case for Beauvoir's *L'Invitée*.

These two women writers' relations to antiquity were also fundamentally different, even as it played a central role in the mature thought of each. While Simone de Beauvoir understood the importance of Plato to the history of modern philosophy and certainly felt the power of the ancient world⁴ – its beauty and that beauty's call to human freedom or *liberté* – she was in no sense a classicist, nor did she ever devote a literary work or substantial essay strictly to ancient life and thought per se. The study of the ancient world for her was a source of philosophical themes and historical documents, not a method of rethinking the present. Yourcenar, however, was a notable classicist. In addition to *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, with its formidable erudition and documentation⁵, she produced a critical volume on Pindar (1932), a set of plays on mythological topics (1971a), *Feux*, a collection of essays on and retellings of Greek myths (1982c), a substantial volume of translations of Greek poetry (1979), and a series of essays on ancient topics (1978, 1983). Her modernity is one that is always fundamentally interrogated by the ancient past. Lastly, while Simone de Beauvoir was clearly and unambiguously a woman of the left who openly sought to contest the structures of class, gender, and colonial domination in French society and was consequently a figure of controversy for most of her life, Marguerite Yourcenar was the first woman elected to the *Académie Française* in 1980, and though there was some resistance to her election, it was not owing to her unconventional life, but rather to what was mistakenly perceived as her conservative politics and to the simple fact of her gender (Yourcenar 1982b: xvi, xxxi; O'Sickey 2004: 11-15).

4 — Cf. Beauvoir (1949a: 19-22, 118-53, 189; 1960: 59, 278-81, 313-20, 470-72).

5 — See the "Note" from the 1951 first edition, and the subsequent "Carnet de Notes des *Mémoires d'Hadrien*" in the 1953 and most subsequent editions in which she documents her sources. For a complete bibliography, see the *Œuvres romanesques* (Bernier 1982: 1228-33). On the erudition of the *Mémoires*, see principally the massive study of Poignault (1995), but note also Collington (2006: 107).

Yet beneath the evident differences between these two intellectual and artistic giants, there remained in fact a profound interchange (if not a direct dialogue) on two central topics: first, the nature of freedom, and second, its relation to the ancient world. Thus, while Yourcenar may not have lived in Paris or directly intervened in the debates of the period, it does not mean she was uninterested in the personalities and issues of the time, or ultimately uninvolved. Thus, we know for a fact that Yourcenar saw her *Electre ou la chute des masques* as, in part, a response to Sartre's treatment of the Electra story in *Les Mouches* as well as to Giraudoux's *Electre* (Yourcenar 1971b: 17-20). Similarly, there are times when Hadrian in his *Mémoires* or when characters in certain dramas seem to address contemporary, or at least universal concerns, as much or more than simply those of the period portrayed. Thus the Minotaur, in *Qui n'a pas son Minotaure?*, is at least as much a figuration of the seething Freudian unconscious as it is a character from myth (Yourcenar 1971c; Garguilo 1995: 199-202). Indeed, Yourcenar often seems to anticipate later developments and her approach to antiquity recalls that of Michel Foucault thirty years later more than that of her immediate contemporaries. Her critique of Beauvoir and Sartre's concept of freedom is in many ways a precursor of Foucault's and derives, in part, from the same Stoic sources.

For Beauvoir and Sartre, freedom is a form of transcendence. The transcendence imagined by Beauvoir, and that which lays at the heart of the Sartrean notion of *liberté* (1943: 496-99), is not the passage from one level of being to another. It is not the elevation of the soul from its earthly clime to the rarefied realms of the spiritual and the celestial, but it is precisely a *dépassement*: an act of moving beyond limits, of going beyond the given through a moment of negation or ontological lack⁶. Such transcendence represents less a metaphoric elevation than a shift or displacement, as the subject in its encounter with the other moves *beyond* the limits that had heretofore determined its existence. It is predicated on the subject's own radical insufficiency, its "manque à être" (Renaut 1993: 185-88, 218-19). Thus while the existentialist definition of freedom strives to be practical, it is ultimately based on an ontological postulate, and its theory of practice flows from there.

Beauvoir defines this existentialist transcendental perspective with remarkable clarity at the beginning of *Le Deuxième Sexe*:

6 — For a discussion of this concept of freedom and its relation to consciousness, from a Lacanian perspective to which it is often naively opposed, see Miller (2010) and Zizek (2006: 49, 78, 92, 106-07, 162-63, 168, 172, 177-78, 203-6, 243-44).

The perspective that we adopt is that of existentialist ethics. Every subject posits itself concretely through its projects as a *transcendence*; it does not achieve its freedom except through its perpetual movement toward other freedoms; there is no other justification of immediate existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Each time *transcendence* fall back into immanence there is a degradation of existence to the “in itself” of freedom, to facticity (Beauvoir 1949: 31, emphasis mine).

Existentialist freedom not only manifests itself through a series of concrete projects, but it is also an ontological state that one can only deny through bad faith, through the refusal to accept responsibility. The denial of this responsibility is precisely what constituted Beauvoir and Sartre's objection to what they perceived as the determinism of orthodox Marxism and psychoanalysis (Beauvoir 1960: 26), even if Beauvoir herself came to see the early Sartre's notion of freedom as overly idealistic and often indistinguishable from a type of Stoic resignation (1960: 448; cf. 1943: 322).

For Sartre, freedom per se is not a choice. It is not an action or a practice. It is that to which we are “condemned” (1943: 494)⁷, and hence it is in the nature of our being. Thus, Orestes in *Les Mouches* exclaims, after killing Clytemnestra:

All of a sudden, freedom had poured over me and penetrated me, nature had jumped back, and I no longer had any age, and I felt all alone ... like someone who had lost his shadow; and there was no longer in heaven, neither Good nor Evil, nor anyone to give me orders (Sartre 2005a: 182).

While this freedom is first experienced through the act of killing Clytemnestra (cf 1943: 493), it is in fact a state of being that has hitherto gone unrecognized and not an act per se. We are, we do not become, free. Freedom is lived less as a mindful practice of the self than as an “exile,” or destitution of the illusions that have clouded our vision (Sartre 2005a: 182; cf. Curtis 1948: 10; Aronson 1980: 181). Beauvoir wrote *Le Deuxième Sexe* not to contest this account, but so that woman too could recognize her own freedom, and thus become a subject in the fullest sense of the word, which is at once the condition of the possibility of her equality and the loss of her assured (if subjugated) place in the world.

Yourcenar does not address the existentialist concept of freedom directly, but rather responds through the voice of Hadrian. This act of ventriloquism produces a complex and overdetermined set of speech acts

7 — As *Huis clos* (2005b) makes only too clear.

that responds not only to the historical context of the author, but also to the fictional context of the character and his own historical context as understood by the author. There is in fact nothing in itself anachronistic in having Hadrian as a Roman emperor of the second century comment on *liberté*. *Libertas* had long been an important buzzword in Roman political life, often referring in essence to a concept of aristocratic freedom of speech. Under the empire, *libertas* also became increasingly associated with nostalgia for the republic (Wirszubski 1950; Syme 1939: 154-56, 320-21, 512-18). Yet it is not so much this notion of a political privilege, which inheres in a certain position within Roman society, or even a lost concept of political autonomy that Hadrian has in mind when he launches his critique, but rather precisely the type of ontological postulate that Beauvoir assumes in *Le Deuxième Sexe* and that Sartre purports to prove in *L'Être et le néant*⁸. Hadrian in this arena responds less to the concern of his own era than to Yourcenar's.

Two important discussions of *liberté* can be found in the novel. The first comes early on, and it contests any "philosophy of man as free": one could hardly imagine a more direct allusion to existential thought. And while existentialism became the dominant philosophy of postwar France and soon was popularized in the United States, there were always critiques from a number of quarters and these became particularly pronounced in the work of the next generation of postmodern philosophers. It is striking then that the first passage we shall look at from the *Mémoires* in many ways reads like a proto-Foucauldian response to Sartrean attempts to ground and theorize "freedom." In it, Hadrian rejects an ontology of "man as free" in favor of concepts of "practice" and forms of "training" derived from the very imperial philosophy that would form the bedrock of Foucault's own late work on ethics (cf. Foucault 1994: 711-12; Foucault 1984a: 35, 83, 92-94)⁹. Hadrian firmly rejects the use or the interest of any attempted ontology of human freedom.

For my part, I have sought freedom rather than power, and power because in part it favored freedom. What interested me was not a philosophy of man as free (all those who have made the attempt bored me) but a *technique*: I wanted to find the hinge point where our will is articulated with destiny, where *discipline* follows, instead of restraining, nature. Understand well that it is not a question here of the harsh will of the Stoic, the power of which you [i.e., Marcus Aurelius] exaggerate, not of some abstract choice or refusal, which is an assault on the conditions

8 — It is indeed no accident that Sartre subtitles *L'Être et le néant*, *Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*.

9 — We have no evidence that Foucault read Yourcenar, but I am not the first to notice this rapprochement. See Gaillard (2004: 118-19).

of our full, continuous world, formed from objects and bodies. I dreamed of a more secret acquiescence or of a suppler good will. Life for me was a horse whose movements one weds, but only after having *trained* it as well as possible. In short, since everything is a decision of the mind, but a slow and unconscious one, which brings with it the *engagement of the body*, I tried to attain, by degree, this almost pure state of freedom or submission. (Yourcenar 1982a: 318, emphasis mine)

The first thing to note is that what is in question here is not *libertas* or “aristocratic free speech,” as traditionally defined by Roman political ideology, but rather “a philosophy of man as free” (*de l’homme libre*), which Hadrian is countering in a way that anticipates later Foucauldian formulations such as, “it is necessary to conceive that the relationship to the self is structured as a practice which can have its models, its conformities, its variants, but also its constraints” (Foucault 1994b: 617).

For Foucault, the self enters into a variety of self-relations, which constitute ethical practices of freedom, but which are also infinite in variety and consequence. Hadrian’s formulation of freedom as a series of “techniques,” “disciplines,” and forms of self “training,” echoes that found at the beginning of volume two of the *L’Histoire de la sexualité* and is directly and self-consciously opposed to Sartre’s concept of the subject as always and inevitably “condemned” to freedom (Foucault 1984: 92-94; cf. Nehamas 1998: 170). The subject, as Foucault would counter, is “not a substance. It’s a form and this form is most importantly not always identical to itself” (Foucault 1994b: 718-19; cf. Nehamas 1998: 177). Rather the subject’s self-relation is, in Hadrian’s words, “a decision of the mind ... which brings with it the *engagement of the body* ... to attain, by degree, this almost pure state of freedom or submission.”

Hadrian does not directly contest the ontology that underlies a philosophy of man as condemned to being free. That is not his interest. He is not concerned with the subject’s necessary lack of self-sufficiency (Sartre 1943: 495), but rather he imagines a practice of freedom and a disciplining of the mind that also trains the body. This practice of freedom is a form of self-care or self-conditioning. It is not in opposition to the will or to the flesh, as might be found in a later Christian neoPlatonism, but involves the exercise of power on the self, by the self, so as to produce a form of freedom, which is also necessarily a form of submission, as the self yields to its own power, and its will is articulated with that of the world around it in a series of tasks (Yourcenar 1982a: 318).

Hadrian’s definition of freedom as a set of practices exercised by the self on the self is, in fact, very close to the definition of ethics given at the beginning of Book 2 of the *L’Histoire de la sexualité*. Here Foucault defines philosophy as an “askesis,” an “exercise” of the self that seeks, through

thought, “to free the self from the self” and thus make possible new “arts of existence” and new “techniques of the self” (Foucault 1984a: 14-17).

Every ethical act, it is true, includes a relation to the real in which it is effectuated and a relation to a code to which it is referred; but it also implies a certain relation to the self; the latter is not simply “self consciousness,” but the constitution of the self as a moral subject, in which the individual circumscribes the part of himself that constitutes the object of this ethical practice, defines his position in relation to the precept he is following, fixes for himself a certain mode of being that will stand as his ethical self-perfection; and, in order to do this, he acts on himself, tries to know about himself, controls himself, tests himself, perfects himself, transforms himself (Foucault 1984: 35)¹⁰.

The work of ethics, for Foucault, is a practice of freedom, in which the self through its self-relation establishes an “aesthetics of existence” or a *techné biou*, which does not rest on any concept of lack or negation but simply on the self’s possibility to fold against itself, to establish a relation of care for the self based ultimately on the Socratic notion of *epimelia heautou* (Foucault 1984: 88-90; Foucault 1994c: 711-712; cf. Žizek 1991: 141; Vizier 1998). These are concepts, which Foucault derived from the Stoic and Platonic philosophy of the period in which Hadrian is ostensibly writing.

The importance of the parallel between Hadrian and Foucault is at least two-fold. First, it demonstrates the philosophical and political stakes of Yourcenar’s response to Sartre and Beauvoir. Second, it reveals the role a serious inquiry into antiquity played in articulating that response. Foucault’s engagement with Sartre is in fact much more direct than Yourcenar’s and part of a long-running polemic between the two philosophers and their supporters (Eribon 1994: 176; Jameson 2007: 228-29). It therefore provides a kind of magnifying glass that allows the issues involved in Yourcenar’s text to come into sharper focus. Foucault’s understanding of freedom is also directly linked with his sexual politics, which, as we shall see, is a concern for both Hadrian and Yourcenar.

The stakes for Foucault are clear. A universal, ontologized subject that purports to exist apart from the practices whereby it is constituted is also a normalized and normalizing subject. The ethical turn of Foucault’s thought, its increasing focus on the care of the self and the ancient texts, which describe a variety of practices, techniques, and disciplines (the very terms Hadrian uses), is designed to serve as a form of resistance to the

10 — Hadrian’s definition of freedom also closely approximates what Foucault terms a “spiritual practice” in his course at the *Collège de France* of the same period (Foucault 2001: 16-17; cf. Hadot 1995: 21-22).

forces of normalization. It seeks to make new modes of self-constitution available to previously excluded groups: the queer, the foreign, the criminal, the alien, and the self-alienated (Nehamas 1994: 168-69). As Frédéric Gros observes:

It is only in the 1980s that Foucault determines in a clean conceptual manner what must be opposed to the state and its managerial and normalizing, individualizing and identificatory aims. It is a question of practices of the self, taken in that relational dimension that he had so well described in his treatment of Roman Stoicism (2001: 524).

As we shall see shortly, it is precisely in opposition to the managerial state and its particular forms of freedom and oppression that Hadrian, however anachronistically, will oppose his own Roman understanding of *libertas* and enslavement.

In the final analysis, for Foucault though, the theorization of “governmentality” and hence of resistance must pass through the self’s relation to itself in all its manifold variety, and in this way Foucault’s genealogies of modernity open new possibilities of self-constitution, self-relation, and self-fashioning, which a philosophy of “man as free” in its normalizing stance is unable to articulate (Foucault 1994d: 214; 2001: 241-42; cf. Kremer-Marietti 1985: 251, 278; Gros 2003: 12). Indeed, it is only within a genealogy of the practices of the self that the full panoply of technologies of the self and modes of subjectification becomes visible and hence available for investigation, appropriation, and modification (Foucault 1994a: 612; 1994c: 415; Benatouil 2003: 43; Jaffro 2003: 80). The *liberté* Hadrian discusses, like the ethical practice of Foucault, is not a simple freedom to do whatever one wants. It is not the self-negating freedom of the Platonic tyrant who becomes a slave to his own anxieties and desires (cf. Plato *Gorgias* 491d-495a; *Republic* Bk. 9 573b-578a; Foucault 1984a: 94), but a “freedom of acquiescence,” “a freedom of submission,” as the self establishes a regime, to which it self-consciously and lucidly conforms (Yourcenar 1982a: 319; Wyss 1995: 488).

Through Hadrian’s statement, Yourcenar not only makes a response to the existentialism of Beauvoir and Sartre, but she also makes it using terms derived from the philosophy of the imperial period. The result is that her fictive speech act works on at least two levels, first addressing the internal fictional audience of the *Mémoires*, but second, the external audience of contemporary French readers. The latter, to the extent that they fully engage with the text, are then forced to rethink their assumptions and philosophical postulates from a radically different historical perspective: the present is addressed by the past. Thus not only does Yourcenar respond to the existentialists, but Hadrian does as well.

The second discussion of *liberté* appears toward the middle of the novel. Here the question becomes, if freedom is a practice rather than a state of being, what are the uses to which it can be put. In the first passage, Hadrian was primarily referring to his own process of self-formation. But in the second, the emphasis has changed. Now freedom is something that can be granted or taken away from others. The passage begins with a story that Hadrian recounts of how, when touring a mining region in Spain, he was attacked by a knife-wielding slave. His response, after disarming him, was not to have the slave executed, as the law demanded, but to hand him over to his doctor and have him treated kindly, whereupon he became a faithful and useful servant. As the passage continues, Hadrian states that this slave, is in fact like “most men,” who, if offered “a wisely understood freedom” – which is clearly not the same thing as the ancient legal status of being a free man – can be rendered “harmless through goodness,” whereas most men currently alternate between periods of excessive submissiveness and pointless violent outbursts (Yourcenar 1982a: 374). *Liberté*, as used in this passage, is neither a recognition of moral responsibility nor an incitement to take history into your own hands but rather a momentary slackening of the reins, a strategic decision to allow a certain space of nondetermination, which permits the subject in turn to master itself.

Freedom defined in this fashion takes the form of self-surveillance and discipline. It is not the abstract freedom of an ontological state, but a set of actions that can be deployed both by those in power, to render their subjects “harmless,” and by those in a position to shape themselves for the deployment of power and/or resistance through the application of a chosen discipline to themselves. Indeed, as Hadrian acknowledges, such freedom can, in fact, become the worst sort of slavery: a servitude of the spirit. In a passage that looks forward to, or perhaps even responds to, Foucault as well as the critique of the culture industry and of consumerist society set forth by the Frankfurt school (cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 1973)¹¹, Hadrian envisages a dystopia that resembles nothing so much as our own world of late capitalist alienation:

I am capable of imagining forms of servitude worse than our own, because more insidious: either by succeeding in transforming men into stupid and satisfied machines, who believe themselves free when they are enslaved, or by developing in them a taste for work as fanatical as the passion for war among the barbarian races. To this servitude of the spirit, or of the human imagination, I prefer our servitude of fact (Yourcenar 1982a: 375).

¹¹ — Yourcenar was in the United States during the war at the same time as Adorno and Horkheimer and was active in intellectual circles in New York and around Yale, but whether she was ever exposed to their work either directly or indirectly cannot be said.

In this reflection, ostensibly on the part of Hadrian, the temporal frame of the narrative breaks, and the alienation of modern industrial society seeps through, embodied in a type of prophetic voice, which one cannot help but identify with the author's own.

Yourcenar's prose is in fact less the gleaming surface of polished marble it first appears, than an ironic prism that refracts the present through the past so as to address it from the outside. The *Mémoires* are engaged in a multi-voiced dialogue with the present, which in some ways is more complex than that found in the more direct engagement offered by the novels of Beauvoir (cf. Collington 2006: 109-13). One voice is formed from the author's formidable classical erudition deployed in the service of creating a fictional world that is congruent with what we know of Hadrian's (Gaudin 1995: 216-17; Van der Starre 1995: 419). It is a voice of the past as understood by the present and is presented as in dialogue with other voices of that past. This first voice, then, is not simple but is already internally differentiated, speaking both to our current reconstruction of the past and to the past itself as dramatically represented in the narrative.

In fact, the notion of *liberté* elaborated by Hadrian, while certainly at variance with that found in traditional Roman political discourse is firmly rooted within the imperial period. It closely recalls that elaborated by the Neronian Stoic satirist Persius in his fifth satire. Traditional *libertas* or aristocratic freedom of speech had been the watchword of Roman *saturna* from its republican beginnings. It is a genre that claimed the license to indict vice, lampoon miscreants, and attack political adversaries (Horace, *Sermones* 1.4, 1.6, and 1.10). But under the conditions of empire, the tradition of aristocratic free speech had mutated (cf. Miller 2005: introduction). Beginning with Horace, *libertas* is understood less as the ability to attack one's enemies than as a sense of personal autonomy. Freedom is not the ability to speak one's mind without fear of retaliation. It is the ability to be left alone, to pursue one's pleasure in peace.

In Persius *Satire 5*, *libertas* is given a new internalized, philosophical sense. "Freedom" is not the ability to call a spade a spade, but to define and shape oneself. The primary project of philosophy, we are told, must be *libertas* (5.73). But this *libertas* is neither civic freedom, nor freedom of speech, nor even the freedom to do as one pleases (5.75-85). Rather it is the freedom to make internal distinctions, to exercise power over the self, to practice the art that makes one human (5.100-15). Hadrian's concept of "liberty," then, is in the first instance a direct and thoughtful response to imperial Stoicism's efforts to redefine this concept in the context of a changed world. This Stoic understanding would in turn provide the basis for Foucault's own concept of the "care of the self": freedom is the practical relation of the self to itself.

Hadrian, however, not only addresses his fictional contemporaries, he equally speaks to postwar debates in French philosophy and politics on the nature of freedom and the responsibilities that inhere in it. In the aftermath of Nazism, Vichy, the continuing power of Stalinism, and the growing fear of American imperialism, the postwar existentialists' concern with the meaning and nature of *liberté* was not just academic, as becomes clear to anyone who has read the Dostoevskian discussions of these topics in Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* (1954), a bestseller and winner of the *prix Goncourt*. It would be hard to imagine anyone reading the *Mémoires* in 1951 Paris without recognizing the contemporary political and philosophical resonances of these discussions. Yet at the same time, the narrator of the novel addresses these issues *as* Hadrian, and every word he speaks also bears the mark of a radically different dialogic context from that of France at the beginning of the fifties¹².

Yourcenar, then, does not so much practice a strict historicism or antiquarianism in writing the *Mémoires* (Van der Starre 1995: 424-27), but rather through a concentration on getting the history right, she is able to produce a work that transcends both its temporal and its narrative frame, to unveil the radically new. History becomes a means of engaging the present, not simply through a process of allegorization – the past as the present in costume, e.g., Anouilh's *Antigone* – but through a reframing of the present by engaging with the specificity of the past (Pageaux 1995: 334-35, 340; Poignault 2007: 152-55)¹³. Again the analogy with Foucault is striking. The past does not so much become our model as a way of thinking differently, of engaging the present from a fundamentally new perspective (Veyne 1997; Gros 2001: 502-03, 511-12; Gaillard 2004: 124). The analogy can certainly be pressed too far, because Yourcenar is not a strict constructionist and in places imagines the past, and mythology in particular, as a universal and transhistorical language in ways that Foucault would have found unacceptable (Brignoli 1995: 83; Garguilo 1995: 197). Nonetheless, it is precisely because of her commitment to a detailed and patient reconstruction of the past as

12 — For an excellent example of the ways in which the study of antiquity took place in a highly overdetermined political and philosophical context during this period, see Leonard (2005: 61-69).

13 — It would be worthwhile to compare the *Mémoires* in this regard with Gore Vidal's *Julian* (1964). In the very different context of America in the early 1960s, the primary dialogue is not with contemporary understandings of philosophy, but with religious controversies: Christianity in the United States, as in the Byzantine court, serving as the primary medium through which concepts of freedom, ethics, and politics are articulated, unlike in postwar France. Gore heightens the dialogic effect through the annotations of the philosophers Libanius and Priscus that accompany what purports to be the Emperor Julian's autobiography. Vidal like Yourcenar portrays the widespread practice of pederasty with a kind of offhand casualness that was even more shocking in the moralistic States than in what was still a very heteronormative France.

our intimate Other that she is able to produce her own complex dialogic response to an existentialist philosophy of freedom, which she sees as insufficiently historicized and, at the limit, another form of slavery (cf. Nehamas 1998: 177). Through the specificity of her commitment to the past, she unveils a fundamentally new relation to the present that is fully assimilable to neither.

It is from this same complex, dialogic perspective, in turn, that Yourcenar comes to examine the issues of erotic transcendence and the gendering of power. As we have already seen, questions of sex, power, and gender, were intimately interrelated for both the author of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and that of *L'Histoire de la sexualité*. While throughout most of her career, these were not issues with which Yourcenar was engaged in the same polemical fashion as either Beauvoir, who was explicitly and directly involved in feminist politics and philosophy, or Foucault, nonetheless issues of gender and sexuality were hardly matters of indifference to Yourcenar. As her *discours de réception* for the *Académie Française* demonstrates, she was more than aware of the precedent her election represented as well as of the many women who should have preceded her (O'Sickey 2004: 14).

By the same token, while it would be anachronistic to use labels such as "out lesbian" to characterize Yourcenar, her long relationship with her American translator, Grace Frick, was anything but a secret. It is not surprising, then, that we find asides such as the following in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, which is clearly addressed more to a contemporary audience than to Hadrian's reading public. "It goes without saying that I do not incriminate the sensual preference – banal in the extreme – that determined my choice in love" (1982a: 420). For the educated Roman of the second century CE, the notion of the criminalization of gender preference in sexual object choice per se would have seemed bizarre, and consequently such a statement would have truly gone "without saying", whereas in postwar France it only should have (cf. Jacobée 1989: 12). This, of course, does not mean there were not sexual taboos in the Roman world, or indeed elaborate forms of reflection on appropriate conduct. Adult free males were not to be penetrated by other males. Adult males were not to submit themselves to women through performing oral sex. Having sexual relations with the children of other free citizens outside the context of citizen marriage was criminalized. But the fact that a male could and would feel erotic attraction to another male, literally went without saying (while lesbianism was simply invisible in most Roman accounts)¹⁴.

14 — There is an extensive and growing bibliography. Cf. Foucault (1984a: 56, 96-98; 1984b: 217-66); Grimal (1986: 103, 121); Edwards (1993: 6-81); Konstan (1994: 116-22); Walters (1997);

Sexuality and gender, then, are hardly ignored by Yourcenar. And the frankness and openness with which she deals with Hadrian's love for Antinous stands in sharp contrast to earlier nineteenth century novelistic treatments (Goldhill 2011: 232-34). Yet the position from which Yourcenar addressed sexual preference and the gendering of power in the *Mémoires* was not that of a political polemic. Such a stance would have forced her to engage directly with the contemporary definitions of these issues, definitions which severely limited women's intellectual and cultural power, and which prohibited same-sex desire. Neither was her discursive position that of the antiquarian pedant, in which case she would have sought to reconstruct Hadrian's world solely for its own sake. Rather what Yourcenar did construct, through her combination of erudition and artistic imagination, was a dialogic space that was able to introduce into the present the fundamentally new by means of a strict engagement with the distant past. The *Mémoires* neither address the world of 1951 Paris intellectuals in the manner of *Les Temps modernes* or *Le Deuxième Sexe*, nor do they speak a language strictly intelligible to a Roman of the second century CE. The novel is after all written in modern French and bears with it the tastes, smells, and contexts of enunciation in which that language was current. Rather, the novel in its temporal ambivalence introduces a fundamentally new reality addressed to the present but predicated on the past. The author, in Heideggerian fashion, simultaneously creates and unveils an object that constitutes an invitation to the reader to participate in, and make possible, that unique moment of unveiling (Pageaux 1995: 335)¹⁵.

Thus where in *Le Deuxième Sexe* a certain understanding of antiquity and a vast amount of reading and erudition are marshaled to make a philosophical statement about the ways in which "one is not born but becomes a woman" (1949b: 13), that is to say, about the ways in which gender and the erotic are implicated in fundamental and historically determined structures of oppression, in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* it is the very framework, which makes a statement such as Beauvoir's meaningful and pertinent, that is quietly deconstructed. Rather than address the question of the status of women¹⁶, sexuality, or same-sex eroticism

Parker (1997); Hallett (1997); Veyne (2001: 112-13). On the general acceptance of homoeroticism, when practiced within the constraints just acknowledged, and the quasi divinization of Antinous as Hadrian's lover throughout the empire, see Vout (2007: 52-56, 64-66, 113-21)

15 — "Écrire, c'est faire appel au lecteur pour qu'il fasse passer à l'existence objective le dévoilement que j'ai entrepris par le moyen du langage" ["To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he make enter into objective existence the act of unveiling that I have undertaken by the means of language"]. For obvious political reasons, it is often not realized how fundamentally Heideggerian Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?* is (1948: 59).

16 — Nonetheless, he is quick to vaunt his contributions to the legal emancipation of Roman women (1982a: 374-75).

directly, Hadrian approaches all these topics in terms of concrete practices and his own obsessions. In an analogous way to what we have already seen concerning the problem of freedom, it is less the ontology of love that is in question than its practice. On one level, this is portrayed as simply a replay on his part of the Ciceronian chestnut of the superiority of Roman practicality to idle Greek theorizing (cf. 1982a: 314, 372). On another, it is a method of fundamentally rethinking the relation of the erotic to freedom and transcendence in a way that can neither be accounted for by contemporary categories of thought nor simply ignored as having no basis in reality.

Indeed, as the first quotation at the beginning of this essay makes clear, erotic transcendence is one of Hadrian's fundamental concerns. He seeks to elaborate a system of knowledge, a philosophy, that would describe the way "in which the mystery and dignity of others would consist precisely in offering to the Self the point of access to another world" (1982a: 296). Love is a Mystery, a form of initiation that gives access to a world beyond, a thought from the outside (Brignoli 1995: 87-88). It is difficult not to hear in this quotation a recollection of Diotima's discourse in the *Symposium*.

'Try to pay attention to me', she said, 'as best you can. You see, the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature... It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change. So when someone rises by these stages through loving boys correctly, and begins to see this beauty, he has almost reached his goal.' (*Symposium* 210e-211c; Nehamas and Woodruff 1997: 493)

Nor is that the sole such echo, there are other allusions to both Diotima's and Alcibiades' speeches from the dialog. The same passage begins with an evocation of the "mysterious game" whereby we progress from the "love of a body to the love of a person." Love for Hadrian is not simply, in Poseidonius's formulation, the rubbing together of two pieces of flesh, but the process whereby we move from an attraction to this "red cloud" of "muscles, blood, and skin" to the "soul" or the "flash" that enlivens the body (Yourcenar 1982a: 295; cf. Plato, *Symposium* 210a-d). Sensual experience itself is best compared to a Mystery religion, in which the initiated, like Maenads and Corybantes, are introduced into a

“different universe,” a comparison that recalls Alcibiades’ description of Socrates’ discourse (Yourcenar 1982a: 296; cf. Plato, *Symposium* 212e1-3, 215d7-e3, 218b2-7)¹⁷.

Thus while Hadrian is certainly not himself a practicing Platonist, and indeed he sees the philosophy of his period as “confused” and “limited,” his discourse is throughout inflected by and constructed in the awareness of Plato’s influence. Typical of most Roman Hellenophiles, he sees Greece as the home of all that is that is “human” and “lucid,” but Rome as the home of the practical reason that turns the dream into reality. He celebrates Plato’s *Republic* for having “glorified the idea of the just” but notes that it was left to the Romans to perfect the machinery of state (1982a: 458-59).

Hadrian practices a philosophical eclecticism that was common to the period: embracing an epicurean universe of atoms in the void without a stable center and speaking in the same breath of the Mysteries at Eleusis and astrology (1982a: 401). In his travels, he sees himself as following in the footsteps of Plato and Pythagoras (1982a: 382, 410), yet his best friend was a disciple of the Stoic Epictetus. His own beloved, Antinous became a disciple of the philosopher Chabrias, a Platonist¹⁸ and hence a philosopher of the transcendent powers of love (1982a: 411). Lastly, Hadrian sought a well-ordered world governed by the *Pax Romana*, whose ideal, he claimed, could be summed up in the word “beauty” (1982a: 390-91).

Antinous becomes the emblem of both erotic transcendence and its failure in the *Mémoires*. As Hadrian recalls the Golden Age of their passion, he tells us that his life was transformed:

My life in which everything arrived late, power, happiness too, acquired the splendor of midday, filled with sunlight like the hours of the siesta when everything bathes in an atmosphere of gold, the objects in the bedroom and the body stretched out along our side. Passion fulfilled has an innocence almost as fragile as any other: the rest of human beauty became a mere spectacle and ceased to be the prey of which I was the predator. This adventure that started commonly enough enriched but also simplified my life: the future counted little; I stopped posing questions to oracles; the stars were no more than admirable designs on the vault of heaven (1982a: 406).

17 — On the importance of the Mysteries and their initiatory rites as a structuring device in the *Mémoires*, see Brignoli (1995: 85-86). Poignault has already shown that Yourcenar alludes to these passages in her earlier work (1995: 130n.13, 142n.86, 515).

18 — A detail that was invented solely for this purpose. Otherwise Chabrias is but a name in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. See Yourcenar (1982a: 544).

Antinous comes to incarnate the very ideal of erotic transcendence: “the universality of love in the beloved being” (Vasquez de Parga 1995: 445)¹⁹. Yet, incarnation is always a tricky thing. Antinous the individual was not a transcendent ideal of universal love and beauty, but very much flesh and blood and subject to the limitations thereof. As Hadrian looked back after Antinous’s suicide, he recognized that he was guilty of precisely having assimilated him to certain mythic paradigms, of having reduced him to a “wax statuette” whose individual desires and whose freedom were ignored (Yourcenar 1982a: 420-21). And though he possessed that recognition, he continued in the attempt to immortalize the beloved’s beauty: saturating the empire with his image; designing every detail of Antinoia, the Egyptian city dedicated to his memory and his cult (1982a: 387-89). Nonetheless, as Hadrian came to recognize:

The apotheosis was empty: these very public honors served only to make the child into a pretext for baseness and ironies, a posthumous object of covetousness and scandal, one of those half rotten legends that piles up in the dark corners of history. My grief was but a form of excess, a crude debauch: I remained the one who profits, the one who enjoys, the one who experiences: the beloved delivered his death to me (1982a: 447).

Antinous was for Yourcenar’s Hadrian not a god, not an erotic ideal. He was a confused but beautiful boy, very much out of his depth in the world of the imperial court. Yet, he also changed that world. His “mystery and dignity” offered to the most powerful man in it “the point of access to another world” that could only be revealed through his otherness and his finitude. This duality of his existence, like the duality of love itself from a Platonic perspective – as both rooted in the immediate and pointing to its beyond – is from a structural point of view homologous with the voice of the novel itself. Hadrian addresses his internal fictional audience, yet his concerns also, at times explicitly, transcend the limitations of that temporal frame to interpellate the present from an outside or elsewhere that cannot be firmly situated within the interpretive horizon of postwar France. At the same time, if we try to fold Hadrian’s discourse seamlessly back into the author’s, the authenticity of his voice, its historical and gender specificity, insure that the authorial voice does not precisely coincide with the narrative voice and yet this Yourcenarian voice, which hovers behind Hadrian’s, is never directly addressed to its contemporaries but always to an other, an elsewhere that opens the possibility of “another world”, of a *liberté* that comes to dwell in the interstitial space such a rigorous aesthetic, and ultimately erotic, practice creates.

19 — On “immanent transcendence” in the *Mémoires*, see Brignoli (1995: 89).

In the end, Marguerite Yourcenar's approach to antiquity is unlike Simone de Beauvoir's extensive discussions in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Yourcenar does not make an argument about sexuality and freedom using the past as evidence. She reconstructs the past so as to speak to it from the present and have the past speak to us from its own perspective. This complex dialogic construct constitutes not only an intervention, but also serves as a genealogy of the present. Yourcenar does not engage in philosophizing in the abstract, but rather envisions a history of practices: erotic, governmental, and literary. She envisions a history of sexuality and a practice of freedom that in many ways anticipates that of Foucault thirty years later. This history and this practice stand in opposition to a Sartrean ontology of freedom, which in the view of Foucault and implicitly of Yourcenar is either merely banal – freedom as an empty category – or normalizing – freedom as the autonomous subjectivity's permanent responsibility to adhere to a set of ethical, moral, and political norms.

In the final analysis, Yourcenar is less concerned with the theoretical and the ontological than the practical. Freedom is not what we are condemned to but a practice of the self on the self, a form of discipline. That discipline creates a space of the self that can be both liberating and repressive. It is a set of tactics with a variety of valences. Eros too is a form of practical transcendence, grounded both in desire and its constitutive delimitation. Antinous may incarnate “the universality of love in the beloved being”, but he is also very much flesh and blood and subject to the limitations thereof. Hadrian's *Mémoires* attain to this same concrete solidity, addressing the present from the specificity of the past and thus always refusing the reduction of its voice to a mere moment of abstraction. Its dialogic complexity always continues to elicit our response.

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