

MARGUERITE
YOURCENAR



THAT
MIGHTY
SCULPTOR,
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This posthumously published collection of essays takes up such diverse subjects as the poet Oppian, Tantrism, the feasts of the Christian year, Durer, the Japanese studies of Ivan Morris, the erotic mysticism of the Gita-Govinda, the eternal spirit of Andalusia, and Bede's Ecclesiastical History. The title essay considers time's transforming effect on art, meditating on the erosion of a statue and the resulting production of a new, sublime work of art.

That Mighty Sculptor, Time Details

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Karenina says

una raccolta eterogenea di scritti di epoche diverse, alcuni molto interessanti altri meno; attribuisco soggettivamente alla prima categoria il saggio breve sul linguaggio nel romanzo storico e i due riguardanti il buddismo tantrico e il misticismo erotico dell'India; molto belle le elegie sepolcrali che chiudono il libro; ci sono poi accorati appelli in difesa degli animali, uno scritto sull'Andalusia nella storia, uno sulle feste nel corso dell'anno e varie riflessioni che hanno come comun denominatore l'inevitabile scorrere del tempo e la morte.

Una lettura piacevole da cui traspare l'erudizione dell'autrice che non è mai pedanteria e può fornire interessanti spunti per approfondimenti.

Edmond Dantes says

Raccolta di saggi/Articoli apparsi negli anni aventi come tema centrale il tempo e il suo scorrere, sulle persone e sulle creazioni artistiche dell'uomo.

Valore discontinuo anche perchè alcuni saggi sono troppo settoriali o per "adepti".

Innegabile, comunque, la bravura e lo stile della Yourcenar.

Bobparr says

Per apprezzare questo insieme di articoli e saggi, scritti in epoche diverse - ma sempre con uno stile raffinato ed una gentilezza d'altri tempi - bisognerebbe essere molto colti, conoscitori di arti e poesia, appassionati di storia e letteratura. Solo così' se ne potrebbero assaporare a fondo le riflessioni, gli aggettivi, gli indovinati accostamenti. Per chi, di cultura mediocre (come il sottoscritto), si voglia arrischiare a leggere queste meditazioni, si rende necessaria una non comune sensibilità e grande curiosità. In assenza di queste, rimane soltanto il senso della lontananza da una erudizione così profonda.

Eric says

“The marble fly,” the nickname Khlebnikov gave Mandelstam for his compound of vulnerability and righteousness (though sick, homeless and hounded, that prophet of Logos was unafeard to physically slap the plump well-fed cheeks of the sham Soviet intelligentsia, or to metaphorically tug at Stalin’s “cockroach whiskers”), I will borrow and apply to Yourcenar, who is exquisite and marmoreal even in a posthumous miscellany of reviews, tributes, editorials and responses to questionnaires. Every page—no, sentence—of *That Mighty Sculptor, Time* shows a graven dignity, and a poetic density of suggestion rare in works of much greater ambition and unity. Other than Borges I can think of no other modern writer whose slightest composition evokes as many landscapes and libraries, or poses so elegantly, and so eerily, the essential mysteries of our planet’s manifold vitality. Her abiding attention to humanity—its ties to other animals and to the earth, its various understandings and enactments of the sacred, the voices of its dead—unify these diverse journeys through time and space: to feudal Japan, for the suicide haiku of vanquished samurai; to

India, for the ripeness of Hindu reliefs ("It seems as though, if sliced, these torsos would present a homogenous, fleshy inside to the eye, like the pulp of some fruit. If cut off, these arms and legs would grow again like stalks or roots"); Islamic Andalusia, Tantric Tibet, New England towns on Halloween night; and, in the titular essay, the debris-strewn Mediterranean:

Some of these alterations are sublime. To that beauty imposed by the human brain, by an epoch, or by a particular society, they add an involuntary beauty, associated with the hazards of history, which is the result of natural causes and of time. Statues so thoroughly shattered that out of the debris a new work of art is born: a naked foot unforgettably resting on a stone; a candid hand; a bent knee which contains all the speed of the footrace; a torso which has no face to prevent us from loving it; a breast or genitals in which we recognize more fully than ever the form of a fruit or flower; a profile in which beauty survives with a complete absence of human or divine anecdote; a bust with eroded features, halfway between a portrait and a death's-head.

Margarida says

"Amar alguém não é simplesmente querer que ele viva, é também espantar-se que ele deixe de viver, como se morrer não fosse natural. E no entanto, ser é um milagre mais supreendente do que não ser..." - do ensaio *Cecchino Dei Bracchi*

Catarina Branco says

Good at some points but highly alienating during most of it

Hadrian says

This is the second volume of essays I've read by Yourcenar and the fourth book in total. I now know to have exceedingly high expectations for her writing, and this collection is consistent with that past quality.

This collection of twenty four essays reminds me more of her novels. It still writes with authority and precision, but her tone is more melancholic and focused on the impermanence of things. Even so, Yourcenar still has remarkable range - she talks about the story of Shiva and Parvati, the meanings of Christian holidays, arguments for vegetarianism, the sounds of flowing water in her garden. She moves into prose-poetry on the Sistine Chapel, and concludes a study of historical fiction writing by citing Italian court records.

There is an abiding pathos in these books, more so being this is a posthumous collection. Yourcenar has a

preoccupation with personal mortality and the impermanence of things. For her, a statue is only temporarily a statue, first hewn from rock by the sculptor's hands, worn down again by sand, wind, and water, and soon identical to the quarry stones from where it came. But isn't it still beautiful?

Joana says

"Não é possível vivermos sem nos implicarmos."

LW says

Il tempo grande scultore

Una raccolta di scritti molto eterogenea ,sono 18 brevi saggi composti in periodi diversi.

C'è sì un fil rouge unificante , quello del tempo che scorrendo consuma, porta modificazioni , lascia segni - tanto sulle opere d'arte quanto su di noi e sul linguaggio- ma c'è pure una elevata varietà di temi affrontati (alcuni ostici senza conoscenze approfondite e specifiche, alcuni inattesi, per esempio una Yourcenar animalista per me inedita)

La parte centrale e finale del libro mi sono piaciute di più ,i saggi sulle Feste nel corso dell'anno, le elegie sepolcrali , un saggio che trae il titolo da V.Hugo *Questa sinistra facilità di morire*, breve ed efficace, quello sulle bestie da pelliccia,

il saggio che dà il titolo al libro *Il tempo, grande scultore* e poi quello sui temi erotici e mistici del Gita - Govinda , con molti spunti interessanti di riflessione sulla poesia dei sensi nelle differenti epoche e culture

La voluttà sarà volta a volta per l'europeo un piacere più o meno lecito, un grado mistico di conoscenza delle anime, un vergognoso appagamento della Bestia che fa piangere l'Angelo, un colpevole eccesso introdotto nella santa minestra del matrimonio, il sublime coronamento di un unico amore, un amabile passatempo, una tenera debolezza, un tema per facezie salaci e il manuale di ginnastica dei trattati dell'aretino.

Ognuno vi mette la sua parte:Sade i freddi furori, Valmont la vanità e la Merteuil il gusto per l'intrigo, gli amatori di complessi freudiani i propri ricordi d'infanzia, gli idealisti la loro ipocrisia

Una lettura certo impegnativa,
ma, pur nella sua difficoltà ,per temi e linguaggio erudito,consigliata ,soprattutto a chi ama la scrittura di Marguerite Yourcenar

Ignacio says

I really enjoy the variety of Mme. Yourcenar's interests, and her vast erudition. I reread some of the essays. Beautiful, thoughtful writing - particularly loved the one about Spain, "Andalusia, or the Hesperides," written around the time she was writing Memoirs of Hadrian.

Maurizio Manco says

"Mi sveglio. Ho dinanzi a me, dietro di me, la notte eterna. Milioni di anni, ho dormito; milioni di anni, mi accingo a dormire. Non ho che un'ora. Perché cercavate di guastarla con spiegazioni e massime? Mi stiro al sole, sul guanciale del piacere, in un mattino che non tornerà più." (p. 20)

Kelly says

My first Yourcenar since immersing myself in her *Hadrian*. Inevitably, his shadow haunted these pages. But I was not the only one who made it so. It was Yourcenar herself who ensured it. The protagonists of her two most well-known works, *Hadrian* and *Zeno*, pop up throughout these essays, as stray thoughts remind her of the whys and hows of how they came to be. It seems that Yourcenar kept them just under the surface of her maelstrom of thoughts across the years, and seemed to understand that her readers would as well. I thought it was a nice way of honoring the reason that many people would pick up these essays in an organic way, of establishing a bond between author and reader.

But *Hadrian* is not the focus here. Enough of what I loved about that volume is still here: the wounds, raw and healed over, the meditations, the quiet wisdom of years, and the immediate and sometimes indignant passion.

I think my favorite continuity between the two pieces, however, was Yourcenar's dedication to beauty, the wonder and awe that she was able to bring to life in both small and epic ways, just as she did in the *Memoirs*. Perhaps the best example of this is the "prose poem" she writes to Michelangelo- from his perspective, from those of what we take to be his subjects, viewers and students. It simultaneously offers a dose of odd reality jolted into the marbles of *Michel Ange*, and a reminder of the reasons behind why it is so easy to fall in love with that beauty to begin with:

"To love someone is not only to want that person to live, it is also be astonished when he ceases to live, as if death were something unnatural. And yet, being is a more astonishing miracle than non-being; if you think about it, it is before the living that one must bow and kneel, as before an altar. I suppose nature gets tired of resisting nothingness, just as man tires of resisting the enticements of chaos. In my existence, which, as I grow older, is plunged into more and more crepuscular periods, I have continually seen the forms of perfect life strive to give way to others more simple, closer to primitive humility, in the way that mud is older than granite, and whoever carves statues only hastens, after all, the crumbling of mountains. The bronze of my father's tomb becomes coated with verdigris in the courtyard of the village church; the picture of that youth of Florence will begin to flake off the vault I have painted; the poems I wrote for the woman I loved will, in a few years, no longer be understood- and for poems that is a form of death. The wish to immobilize life is the sculptor's damnation."

She also offers small, *hors d'oeuvre* sized, slightly off-kilter and random thoughts in *Written in a Garden*, isolated notes, played and heard and record, I would imagine, over the course of an entire season. My favorite was her repeated returned to the idea of water falling as freedom:

the exquisite, artificial beauty of the fountain. Hydraulics oblige the water to behave like a flame, to renew ceaselessly within its liquid column its ascent to heaven. The forced water rises to the apogee of the fluid obelisk before regaining its liberty, which is to fall.

A surprising and lovely interlude was Yourcenar's short essay series, *Festivals of the Passing Year*. I was not surprised to find her eloquent and incisive as I could wish about the Days of the Dead:

"Once in Finland I was shown some signposts and nameplates bearing the names of isolated houses and farms which had been moved or shrouded with opaque material so that the ghosts, disoriented, could not come and install themselves again in their former lodgings. The rites of the Day of the Dead are as much about fear as love... It is an unadmitted and almost inadmissible fact that even the most beloved dead, after several years or even several months, would, were they to return, be intruders into the existence of the living, whose circumstances have changed. This is decreed not so much by men's egotism or fickleness as by the exigencies of life itself."

And on Halloween:

"On the roads, people put direction signs in the wrong place or turn them around, as the superstitious Finnish peasants do, for reasons best known to themselves. By another unconscious return to one of the world's oldest rites, a tree (always the same) in the center of the village where I live is covered with streamers by boys who climb it; they hang from every branch and wave in the wind, but conveniently-because one has it at hand, or perhaps out of some scatological intention- masses of unrolled toilet paper replace the bits of cloth or rice paper of other civilizations. What once was fervor has turned into derision. In this great country that thinks of itself as materialist, these ghosts and carnival skeletons of autumn do not know what they are: spirits of the escaped dead that one is willing to feed in order to chase them away with a combination of fun and fear. Rites and masks are more powerful than we.

But I had not expected Yourcenar to be such a passionate defender of the "true meaning" of Christmas and Easter, such a devotee of the Passion stories. She takes a moment to *"extract from the sacred texts which are read (but not always heard) in church those elements which would strike us if we read them in Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or in some biography or other account of a life of a great man or a great victim. In short, the unfolding of one of the world's most beautiful stories."* She then proceeds to retell the story in such a way so that I wish that it actually would be read that way in church one Easter Sunday. I'd like to see any monseigneur argue with what she's saying. I don't think they would even try.

My favorite essay of all, however, was entitled *Mirror Games and Will-o'-the-Wisps*. It was about a novel that Yourcenar meant, for the longest time, to write and never did. It offers what conceptualization and ideas that she had about a novel that was meant to contrast the fates of three Elizabeths, a saint, an empress and a mass murderer, strung along the spectrum from salvation to purgatory to damnation, tracing their paths alongside each other until the end. But the essay is as much a meditation on the motivations behind writing. Why, when she failed to write this novel over the course of so many years, was she still so motivated to pursue it? Why did she choose that topic initially over all others? It is a meditation on the writing that finds us, that we *need* to write and think about, or seem meant to write, as much as it is about anything else:

"What continues to cause us to dream, however, is the number and intensity of obscure impulses which direct us in this way towards one name, one fact, one character, rather than another. There we enter into a pathless forest.

Something new for me was the essays that brought Yourcenar entirely into focus as a woman of her era, apt to sometimes express herself in ways that I found sometimes slightly dated and naive in an unfortunate way.

It is always a risk, although I generally believe that pulling the curtain is better than not pulling the curtain, that the memory of the wizard's power will not be enough afterwards. But in this case, although I could place the means and the material she chose squarely in a certain place and time and find it wanting now, I could still understand it. Especially after writing and re-creating Hadrian (finally) at the time she did- I can understand why she would harken to the Ancients, to a time of supposed innocence, when we "had the excuse" of not knowing better. I could understand why a person who has witnessed so much carnage and destruction and could do nothing would be so earnest about stopping the slaughter of animals and about adopting spiritual beliefs that addressed the soul as a thing connected to but not of the body. Even her surprisingly fervent devotion to tantric yoga and the culture of the far East (particularly Japan) made sense for someone who saw the West go down in flames and lived through an era where it seemed it might blow itself up again at any time. Yourcenar, after all, spent years on an isolated island in Maine, as far from the madding crowd and everything that went with it as she could get. I was surprised and touched by a small moment that she related where she and another writer friend went to go see a Zen master located not far from where she lived in Maine, who taught farming and Zen techniques to young students- a man who, despite an appointment and despite them waiting, refused to see them for no apparent reason. To find such a powerful intellect and aesthetic sense as hers doing such a thing and finding such a common place rejection- it was sad, but also reassuring in a way. In the end, I connected to the why of it enough to understand.

Overall, this collection contains beauty and wisdom, sadness and regret. It is personal and scattered, notes to the side of the thing itself, moments that lead to the thing itself and stopped short. Some of it would have, perhaps, been better kept in a private diary, but much more of it I was very grateful to have had a chance to peek into. Yourcenar's sensibilities and the way she translates that into prose are still gorgeous and profoundly align with my own way of thinking. Her priorities are in order and I could not ask for more transparent honesty on many subjects. I don't regret any minute I spend on her prose, and I don't know what higher recommendation I can give than that.

The Dark Brain of Piranesi is my next Yourcenar, followed by *The Abyss*.

Francesca says

4.5/5

Maria Beltrami says

Il tempo è un grande scultore, lascia i suoi segni sulla pietra e sulla pittura, così come sull'animo umano, e soprattutto sul linguaggio.

Alcuni dei saggi che compongono la raccolta assomigliano a racconti, altri sono vere e proprie invettive. I più belli, a parer mio, sono gli studi sul linguaggio che compongono la prima parte del libro, in particolare il lungo brano intitolato "Tono e linguaggio nel romanzo storico", una dettagliata e appassionata analisi del testo da parte dell'autore che lo ha scritto, e, nello stesso tempo, una precisa indicazione per chi vuole scrivere.

Emilio Berra says

Il tempo e le cose

"Il tempo, grande scultore" è una raccolta di scritti d'argomento vario, forma di saggistica con l'impronta d'autore, in cui il vasto sapere e la saggezza che Marguerite Yourcenar ha accumulato negli anni sono, per così dire, rivestiti dello splendore di una meravigliosa scrittura, tanto da destare nel lettore un godimento estetico non inferiore a quello proprio dei capolavori letterari.

Per non disperdere l'analisi in tanti rivoli, mi limito a parlare del testo che dà il titolo al libro.

Non c'è alcuna statua dell'antichità nella condizione in cui i contemporanei la conobbero. Anche le sculture più ammirate hanno subito un processo d'invecchiamento e deterioramento a cui tutti andiamo incontro.

Attraverso gli agenti atmosferici, le peripezie cui sono state sottoposte o le sferzate della Storia, il tempo "grande scultore" le ha significativamente modificate.

La scrittrice s'inoltra in questo mondo attraverso il quale la creatività del passato e il fluire del tempo ancora ci comunicano emozioni che solo l'arte emana.

Non pensiamo quindi all'azione del tempo esclusivamente come deturpamento. Anzi, "talune di queste modificazioni sono sublimi" ; statue spezzate, dai cui frammenti nasce una forma diversa di bellezza : "un piede nudo che non si dimentica (...), una mano purissima, un ginocchio piegato in cui si raccoglie tutta la velocità della corsa" ; i leoni di Delos hanno perduto le loro sembianze feline per assumere il candore dei fossili, "ossa al sole in riva al mare".

Alcune sculture pare che, proprio grazie alla mano invisibile del tempo, siano diventate emblemi di bellezza: "la Vittoria di Samotracia è diventata meno donna e più vento di mare e dell'aria".

"Certe opere minori (...), abbandonate (...) ai piedi di un platano, sul bordo di una fontana, acquistano nel tempo la maestosità o il languore di un albero o di una pianta; quel fauno villoso è un tronco coperto di muschio; quella ninfa reclina somiglia al caprifoglio che l'abbraccia".

Con tali suggestioni, non è difficile immaginare la nostra autrice mentre vaga fra i ruderi e le meraviglie della Villa di Adriano a Tivoli, traendo ispirazione per il suo celebre libro sull'Imperatore.
