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Mythical magnitude: Selected short fiction of Marguerite Yourcenar

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Rice University, 1988

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MYTHICAL MAGNITUDE:
SELECTED SHORT FICTION OF MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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1988
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Mythical Magnitude: Selected Short Fiction of Marguerite Yourcenar
Patricia E. Frederick
Abstract

During the decade of the 1930's Marguerite Yourcenar's metaphysical thinking expressed itself through myth, and, as the writer herself affirms, many of her characters thus represent "figures of mythical magnitude". With the object of revealing this "mythical magnitude" or universal aspect of her short fiction, our study, which relies upon the theories of Mircea Eliade, Gilbert Durand and C. G. Jung, offers a symbolic reading of three of Yourcenar's early works, all originally published in the 1930's: the Nouvelles orientales, Le Coup de Grâce and "Anna, Soror..." (Comme l'Eau qui coule). Despite the worldwide recognition the author's novels have received, these examples of her early fiction have been largely overlooked by scholars. Included in the Nouvelles orientales (1938) are ten tales which share a great deal more than an Eastern orientation and whose particular positions in the collection are far from arbitrary. Linking all of the stories is the foundation of alchemical thought and mythical symbolism upon which they are all constructed, and their placement in the work is based upon a precise pattern of solar imagery. The concluding tale, revealing the disparity between Oriental and Occidental thought, leads to our examination of two longer narratives set in Europe, Le Coup de Grâce (1939) and "Anna, Soror..." (1934), both of which also rely upon Alchemy and Myth in their presentation of themes which parallel those found in the Nouvelles orientales. A central element in all three of these works is the contrast they present between a "diurnal" and a "nocturnal" conception of time, the former represented by
Western or Christian thought and the latter, by Eastern philosophy, mysticism or the hermetic sciences. In addition to disproving comments regarding the anti-feminist aspects of Yourcenar's writing, our study of her short fiction ultimately signals the fundamental originality of these early narratives and firmly establishes them as masterpieces of French literature.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, John and Hildegard Frederick, as an expression of my profound gratitude for their years of love and support.

My sincerest appreciation is also extended to the members of my thesis committee: Dr. Walter Isle and Dr. Patrick Brady, who kindly consented to read my work, and my director, Dr. Bernard Arésu, whose advice and encouragement throughout the entire course of this project were invaluable to me.
Introduction

Since her election to the Académie française in 1980, Marguerite Yourcenar has come to be widely known not only in Europe, but also throughout the United States, and her major works - Mémoires d'Hadrien and L'Oeuvre au Noir - have been the focus of numerous critical studies. Despite such recognition, many of the author's earlier works, including much of her short fiction, theater and poetry, have been overlooked by scholars who have shown an interest in her work. For instance, her Nouvelles orientales, a collection of ten short stories first appearing in 1938 and later revised and republished, have received only minimal critical attention in spite of the fact that it is rich in symbolism and myth. Very few of the individual tales have been adequately examined, Frederick and Edith Farrell's discussion of "La Veuve Aphrodissia"¹ being one of the few worthy of mention, and there exists to date no study of the interrelated themes of the work as a whole. Nonetheless, Germaine Brée mentions Yourcenar's "outstanding contribution" to the short story genre,² and Pierre de Boisdeffre calls the Nouvelles orientales "more fundamentally original" than Mémoires d'Hadrien.³ In fact, many of the major themes found in these tales as well as in others of the author's early works of short fiction

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appear in her later masterpieces, namely Mémoires d’Hadrien and L’Oeuvre au Noir. In addition, these early works frequently reflect a current trend in contemporary fiction, that is, an incorporation of mythical elements into modern themes and a turn towards Eastern Philosophy with its cyclical rather than linear view of Time.

The decade of the 1930’s was a time of intense productivity for Marguerite Yourcenar; nine works, in fact, were published during a ten year period. This was a time when the young author, after having rejected Christianity during adolescence, came to be influenced by Oriental philosophy, which allowed her to reconcile religion and her vision of the universe. Mentioning her brief religious formation and explaining her love for myth and ritual, the writer states that her readers have completely ignored the “sacred” aspect of her work:

My religious education came to an end very early, but I feel lucky to have had it, because it showed me the way to the invisible, or if you prefer, the “interior” world. People who have had no religious instruction, or whose education has been too badly secular or even Protestant, remain cut off from mythical truth, from the everyday manifestations of the sacred… All rites are beautiful, though I love ritual. My culture is built on a foundation of religion, something of which my readers are completely unaware – they don’t see it.

The word “religion”, rather than merely alluding to a Catholic upbringing, alerts us to the existence of the subtext of mythology and Oriental

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4 These works include: Alexis (1929), La Nouvelle Euridice (1931), Pindare (1932), La Mort conduit l’attelage (1934), Denier du rêve (1934), Feux (1936), Nouvelles orientales (1938), Les Songes et les sorts (1938), and Le Coup de Grâce (1939).

mysticism that underlies Yourcenar's work and reflects her spiritual vision. Profoundly affected by extensive travels throughout Greece and the Near East, the writer's metaphysical thinking during the 1930's came to be expressed through myth. She explains that "myth became the chief vehicle for expressing... humanity's constant closeness to the eternal", and that many of the characters in her early narratives thus represent "figures of mythical magnitude".  

With the object of revealing the "mythical magnitude" of Marguerite Yourcenar's short fiction, we will examine three of her early works, each of which was first published in the 1930's: *Nouvelles orientales*, *Le Coup de Grâce* and "Anna, soror..." (*Comme l'Eau qui coule*). Our treatment of the *Nouvelles orientales* will include a symbolic reading of each of the individual tales, encompassing a view of the collection as a whole based upon its common themes and images. In opposition to Jacques de Ricaumont, who states that the Orient is the only element common to all of the stories, we will reveal how the Imaginary and Alchemy, as well as symbols of light and the phases of the sun, dominate the entire work. We find in the *Nouvelles orientales* a symbolic pattern of solar imagery which structures the collection and serves as the basis for our division of the work into three chapters. The first three tales (Chapter 1 - The Pale Light of Darkness) are all dominated by the image of twilight, which metaphorically suggests an interface between Day and Night or Life and Death, while the following chapter (A Solar Rhythm) presents a complete

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7 Jacques de Ricaumont, "Inventaire", *Cahier des Saisons* 38 (1964), 299.
cycle of the sun's daily journey, beginning at Dusk ("Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi"), continuing towards the Black Sun ("L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides"), then towards Sunrise ("Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles") and returning to Sunset ("La Veuve Aphrodissia") to complete the circle. In our third chapter (A Broken Circle), the solar rotation seems initially to continue with the symbol of the Black Sun ("Kâli Décapitée") and a movement from Death to Dawn ("La Fin de Marko Krâliévitch"); however, the tenth tale ultimately breaks the circle, leaving the reader with a question about the future, uncertain as to whether there will eventually be a return to the image of twilight introduced in the beginning of the collection. The final nouvelle orientale, which takes place in Holland and is thus the only non-oriental story, serves as a turning point, leading to our final chapter (East Meets West), a study of two longer 'récits' both set in Western Europe. The first to be treated is Le Coup de Grâce, a first person narrative published in 1939 which, although seemingly austere in style and structure, reveals upon closer examination an entire network of interesting images and symbols. Special emphasis will be placed on the interplay of masculine and feminine principles, the symbol of the hermaphrodite, and the role of an intermediary between the celestial and the chthonian, between Life and Death. Included in this section will be a brief discussion of Volker Schlöndorff's film adaptation of this short novel. Next we will interpret the first novella in Comme l'Eau qui coule, "Anna, soror...", originally published in 1934 as part of a collection entitled La Mort conduit l'attelage. Here there will be a focus on the symbolism of incest, the theme of purification, and the cycles of nature. Le Coup de Grâce and "Anna, soror..." share with the last "oriental tale" not only a Western European setting, but also a number of
fundamental themes, the most notable being a contrast between Oriental and Occidental thought. Our interpretations of all of these early works will strongly call into question Linda Stillman's harsh criticism of Mme Yourcenar's writings, which she describes as being anti-feminist and even anti-women. Finally, a discussion of the relationship between these early works and the author's better known novels will be included in our conclusion.

This study relies upon the theories of Mircea Eliade, in particular those involving Alchemy, ritual initiation, and the notion of the Sacred and the Profane, while at the same time taking into account C.G. Jung's symbolic interpretation of the alchemical process. Frequent reference will also be made to the theories of Gilbert Durand, a cultural anthropologist who groups images into two distinct orders: the "diurnal mode", a negative view of Time and Death characterized by symbols of antithesis, aggression and opposition, and the "nocturnal mode", a euphemization of the threat of Chronos associated with symbols of synthesis, passivity and reconciliation. According to Jean Burgos, images are the starting points of any interpretation because they evoke symbols and "tissent la toile de l'Imaginaire", the "Imaginaire" being an important concept described by both Durand and Burgos, and one which serves as a basis for our critical study of Yourcenar's work. For both scholars, the "Imaginary" constitutes a


particular "espace orienté" and is defined, according to Burgos, by "l'échange incessant de forces opposées et complémentaires".\footnote{Burgos, \textit{Poétique} 88. See also Durand's discussion of the "Imaginaire" and of the Kantian term 'schème' which he defines thus: "Le schème est une généralisation dynamique et affective de l'image, il constitue la factivité et la non-substantivité générale de l'imaginaire". Durand, \textit{Structures} 61.}

Marguerite Yourcenar has herself often referred to her fascination with Alchemy and the Occult, and the most obvious example of the writer’s interest in the hermetic sciences is found in \textit{L'œuvre au Noir}. Her narratives, however, also reflect an alchemical foundation, and this important aspect of her early work has been entirely disregarded. In an interview with Patrick de Rosbo, Mme Yourcenar defines the "art" of Alchemy thus:

Il y a plusieurs manières de définir l'alchimie, qui demeure une science mystérieuse, puisque ce fut longtemps une science interdite, ou en tout cas secrète, "intériorisée". On discute encore si les formules alchimiques s'appliquent à des expériences authentiques sur la matière, ou s'entendent symboliquement des épreuves de l'esprit séparant lui-même. Sans doute était-ce à la fois l'un et l'autre. Il semble certain que nombre de traités alchimiques aient été écrits en code, consciemment, et par prudence; mais il faut bien se dire que ce torrent de métaphores, souvent admirables, qui constitue le langage alchimique, est hermétique \textit{ipso facto} sans même que la notion d'aliibl et de précaution interviennent, comme sont spontanément hermétiques tant de poèmes, qui s'efforcent de traduire des réalités par-delà des mots. L'Occident, qu'il soit scholastique et aristotélicien, ou cartésien ou voltairien plus tard, n'a jamais eu de vocabulaire adéquat pour certaines expériences mentales; les mystiques seuls ont essayé de s'en faire un, et il est également surchargé de métaphores: "la nuit obscure", "la nuit de l'âme" répond en quelque sorte, dans un autre contexte, à "l'œuvre au noir".

A une époque où le rationalisme scholastique triomphait, avec un monde de concepts extrêmement catégorisés, le bien d'un côté et le
mal de l'autre, le corps d'un côté et l'âme de l'autre, la vie d'un côté et la mort de l'autre, l'alchimie au contraire, nous ne savons pas par quelles obscures transmissions, a gardé vivantes certaines formes de la pensée présocratique, et semble avoir communiqué, nous ignorons comment, avec certaines formes de la pensée orientale, peut-être à travers l'alexandrinisme et la Kabbale juive. Parallèlement, en postulant un monde fluide, en état de perpétuel devenir, irrationnel *au moins en apparence*, les philosophes de l'alchimie ont préfiguré Hegel et les physiciens de nos jours; ce monde, en devenir, ils l'ont de plus audacieusement placé aussi à l'intérieur de l'homme.12

Clearly explaining the distinction between Western religion and Eastern philosophy, she further states:

Ancient and oriental civilizations were more sensitive than we are to the cycles of things; to the succession of generations, both divine and human; and to change within stasis. Western man is virtually alone in wanting to make his God into a fortress and personal immortality into a bulwark against time.13

The conflict alluded to in both of the above citations opposing Western/Rationalistic/Christian thought and Eastern/Cabalistic/Alchemical mysticism will assume greater significance in our study of Mme. Yourcenar's narratives, works which, often as hermetic as alchemical texts, must be deciphered before their metaphoric and symbolic meaning can be revealed.

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13 Yourcenar, *Eyes* 209.
Chapter 1 - The Pale Light of Darkness

I. The Twilight of Wang-Fò

The first of the *Nouvelles orientales* "Comment Wang-Fò fut sauvé", is certainly one of the most interesting in terms of its abundance of symbolism and imagery. Yet, with the exception of one Chomsky-based, linguistic study,¹ and a few general summaries of the text, this fascinating story has been virtually disregarded by Yourcenar critics. In our examination of the tale, which will bring to light a symbolic pattern of solar imagery, we will focus on the role of the artist as initiator and alchemist, the myth of creation, and the theme of immortality and rebirth.

The Role of the Artist

Based upon an ancient Taoist fable, this story paints the portrait of the artist Wang-Fò and his disciple Ling, who first meet at a tavern. It is here that Ling will begin to be initiated by Wang-Fò, just as, according to Mircea Eliade, ancient Chinese alchemists were ritually initiated by a master through communication of secrets:²

Grâce à lui, Ling connut la beauté des faces de buveurs estompées par la fumée des boissons chaudes, la splendeur brune des viandes inégalement léchées par les coups de langues du feu, et l'exquise


Before Ling’s eyes, Wang-Fô magically transforms the Profane (drinkers, meat, stains) into the Sacred (“beauté”/“fumée”, “splendeur”/“feu”, “exquise roseur”/“pétales”), uncovering for his disciple the domain of the Invisible and the realm of the Imaginary.

Similarly, the painter teaches Ling to overcome his fear of thunderstorms by making him admire “la zébrure livide de l’éclair”. Lightning, a masculine symbol associated with celestial fire or semen, having the capacity to fertilize or lead to spiritual illumination, is seen as a positive force by the master, who communicates to Ling the secrets of its fertilizing powers in relation to the darkness of the sky. Using the word “livide”, derived from the Latin livere meaning bluish, he further suggests a blending of the light with the color of the sky surrounding it. The bolt of lightning is no longer considered an ominous manifestation of light, an image of destruction and division, but a generative force, associated with synthesis and a reconciliation of opposites. Thanks to his master, Ling also learns to overcome his fear of insects. Gilbert Durand describes the chaotic “fourmillement” of insects as the projection of man’s anguish when faced with the threat of Time. Thus, when the artist calls Ling’s attention to “la marche hésitante d’une fourmi”, he is showing him that the passage of time is not to be feared, but accepted as part of a

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3 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Œuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982) 1140. This is the edition used for our study. All future references will be placed in parentheses after the citation.

perpetual cycle. Ling, realizing that his master has given him the gift "d'une âme et d'une perception neuves", renounces his worldly possessions to accompany his master throughout the kingdom of Han. Later, Ling's initiation will be completed when, at the Emperor's palace, he is beheaded -- a ritual initiatory death -- and then returns to life to join his master on their final journey.

The painter Wang-Fô appears alternately as an initiator of alchemical secrets, a wise man, a sorcerer and a shaman: "Les prêtres honoraient Wang-Fô comme un sage; le peuple le craignait comme un sorcier" (p. 1142). Furthermore, the text seems to parallel the Chinese painter's mysterious talents with those of the writer: "... Wang-Fô ce soir-là parlait comme si le silence était un mur, et les mots des couleurs destinées à le couvrir" (p. 1140). This image of a wall resembling a blank page ready to be filled with words emphasizes the role of composition in the work of a writer or painter and reminds us of Modernist and Post Modernist trends in literature, that is, of attempts to make the reader conscious of the medium and to represent the work of art as being conscious of itself or in the process of writing itself. The "mots des couleurs" are the fundamental tools of both the Chinese painter and the writer Marguerite Yourcenar, and the latter's skillful use of images -- her 'words of colors' -- will assume greater significance in our study of her work.

Wang-Fô was also thought to have the power to bring his paintings to life by adding to them a last "touche de couleur". Here again he resembles the alchemist who was said to be capable of the transmutation of metals into gold and who, in fact, was engaged in a spiritual quest of achieving eternal life. According to Eliade, the alchemical operation sought
"to imitate the perfection of nature which is, in the final instance, its absolution and its liberty".\textsuperscript{5} Wang-Fô, in his attempts to perfect nature through his art, will ultimately succeed in freeing himself from the confines of time. In a note following her examination of the theme of Alchemy in \textit{L'Œuvre au Noir}, Geneviève Spencer-Noël briefly mentions the possibility of an alchemical reading of "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé", stating: "On peut tenter une ébauche de lien entre l'achimiste ('l'artiste') et tout artiste".\textsuperscript{6}

We learn that "Wang-Fô aimait l'image des choses, et non les choses elles-mêmes". This line introduces a recurrent theme in the collection, the role of the Imaginary, which constitutes the central focus of our symbolic reading of the work. This theme and the blending of illusion and reality will play a major role in the conclusion of the tale when the Emperor, complaining that the illusion of Wang's art has made the reality of his life inadequate, orders him to complete one of his early paintings. As the artist paints, the work comes to life, its waters filling the palace walls until finally the master and his disciple actually enter the work and their boat disappears on the horizon. The Emperor's description of the original painting reminds us not only of the constant interplay of illusion and reality, but also of the well known \textit{mise-en-abyme} effect of Van Eyck's \textit{The Arnolfini Wedding}:

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Eliade, Forge} 114.

Je possède dans ma collection de tes œuvres une peinture admirable où les montagnes, l'estuaire des fleuves et la mer se reflètent, infiniment rapetissés sans doute, mais avec une évidence qui surpasse celle des objets eux-mêmes, comme les figures qui se mirent sur les parois d'une sphère (pp. 1146–47).

Illusion and infinity are both clearly expressed by the mirroring effect described here, and the fact that it is the natural elements that endlessly reflect one another further suggests the Eternal Return of Nature.

This painting can be considered as a mise-en-abyme of the story as a whole in that it is a work within the work, reflecting all its principal themes and images. As Wang-Fô's sea becomes reality, Ling, reborn after his initiatory death into a higher state, leads his master onto the boat occupying "tout le premier plan" of the completed masterpiece, and commands: "Partons, mon maître, pour le pays au-delà des flots". Like the objects in the original painting, their rowboat shrinks in size, becoming an imperceptible dot in the paleness of twilight, and finally the painter and his disciple disappear forever "sur cette mer de jade bleu que Wang-Fô venait d'inventer". The following sections of our study of this story will attempt to point out how the themes of creation, initiatory death and the alchemical quest for immortality are reflected in this version in miniature of the entire tale.

The Myth of Creation

The writer expresses the theme of creation in such universal, mythological terms that her story can be interpreted as a reenactment of
the creation of the world, a ritual which is an essential part of both the alchemical process and primitive initiation.

When Ling brings Wang-Fô to his home, the artist, who had been dreaming of painting a princess playing the lute under a willow tree, uses Ling as his model for this portrait because no woman is "unreal enough" to serve this purpose. Similarly, when Wang-Fô speaks of painting a young prince shooting an arrow under a cedar tree, Ling's wife must pose for this portrait because no man would be "sufficiently unreal" to serve as a model. The images evoked in each of the two portraits just described suggest respectively the feminine and the masculine principles. In his quest to achieve perfection, Wang-Fô has Ling and his wife exchange sexual roles. This blending of the sexes initiated by the artist brings to mind the fascinating symbol of the hermaphrodite and the division and subsequent union of opposites characteristic of the *mysterium conjunctionis* of alchemical operations. According to Eliade, "The mingling of the two 'sexes' is indispensable to fruitful union". This scene is thus the first step in the ritual reenactment of creation which Wang-Fô will undertake.

The theme of a union of opposites is further developed when Wang-Fô and his disciple are arrested and taken to the imperial palace whose violet-colored walls immediately suggest a mysterious secret. The color violet,

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7 On the one hand, a princess, the idealization of woman, playing the lute, an instrument used primitively in China to eliminate excesses of Yang, and the willow tree, an image of grace often used to describe the female form and thought to radiate fertility. On the other hand, a prince, the heroic ideal, shooting an arrow, an act which in China was thought to prove a prince's merits, and a cedar tree, generally associated with great strength and size. See Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Robert Laffont/Jupiter, 1982).

8 Eliade, *Forge* 36.
as the *Dictionnaire des symboles* explains, is the symbol of Alchemy because it is the result of a perpetual exchange between celestial blue and chthonian red, between Heaven and Earth through the cycle of death and rebirth. The palace's interior clearly evokes the symbolism of the hermaphrodite: the shape of its square or circular rooms "symbolisait les saisons, les points cardinaux, le mâle et la fémelle, la longévité, les prérogatives du pouvoir" (p. 1143). The seasons, the cardinal points, the male and female principles, all of these elements indicate the harmony of a union of opposing forces, calling to mind both the Jungian "mandala" concept and Eliade's definition of the *axis mundi*, or center of the world. The Emperor himself is associated with a reconciliation of antithetical principles: Called "Dragon Céleste", an image combining the serpent as chthonic principle and the bird representing the celestial principle, he is dressed in a robe that is "bleue pour figurer l'hiver et verte pour rappeler le printemps" (p. 1143). According to alchemical thought, recalling in this respect Plato's myth of the androgyn, God, originally a hermaphrodite before the creation of the world, divided into two opposing beings and it was their subsequent union which led to creation.

The alchemical transmutation will be carried out in the conclusion of the story when Wang-Fô's unfinished work begins to be transformed. As the

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9 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 1020.

10 According to P. D. Ouspensky, the origins of all hermetic or occult sciences can be found in Platonic thought, which he contrasts with the logic of Aristotle. Ouspensky explains that Plato's philosophy, derived from the Egyptian Hierophants and Hermes Trismegistus, was "always more or less occult, in the sense that it was always cloaked in mystery and passed on its teaching only under the cover of enigmas, allegories and symbols". See P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, trans. under author's supervision (New York: Random House, 1971) 196.
sea is painted, the floor becomes damp and soon the water rises to
shoulder-level until it reaches "le niveau du coeur impérial". The dark water,
representing the chaotic, unconscious condition of the uncreated world,
suggests the initial stage of the alchemical process, that is, a reduction to
the *prima materia* or *nigredo* stage which, as both Eliade and Jung
explain, is attained through a *regressus ad uterum* or return to a
primordial state. This stage is usually associated with death: here the
deaths of Ling and the Emperor are significant. Ling, reappearing after his
initiatory death, seems to be navigating inside a grotto, another image
evoking the inner depths of the maternal womb where the alchemical
transformation will take place. According to Paracelsus, "the whole world
must enter into the mother, which is the *prima materia*, the *massa confusa*,
the *abyssus*, in order to achieve eternity".\(^{11}\) The Emperor emerges thus:

> Les tresses des courtisans submergés ondulaient à la surface comme
des serpents et la tête pâle de l'Empereur flottait comme un lotus (p.
1148).

Two alchemical processes are carried out here: First the "putrefaction",
involving a complete dissolution and separation of the *prima materia*, and
then the "solution", corresponding to the color white of the matter in its
most purified state. The snakes surrounding the lotus can of course be seen
as the two most basic elements into which the matter has been
separated, that is, male sperm and the female sexual organ. However, the
complex archetype of the snake appears primarily as the source of life, as
the bringer of the world, while the white lotus, floating *in illo tempore* on

\(^{11}\) *Eliade, Forge* 54-5.
the immensity of the primordial waters and clearly symbolizing purity, perfe-
tection and cosmic harmony, represents the first appearance of life eman-
ating from the chaos and blooming at its surface, like the "Oeuf du monde" or the "embryo of immortality" of internal alchemy.\(^\text{12}\) Finally, Ling leads his master onto the small rowboat, and as the boat moves into the distance, their faces no longer visible, Ling's red scarf is still seen floating in the wind. This "étrange écharpe rouge" which first appears around Ling's neck after his rebirth brings to mind the \textit{rubedo} or "conjunction" of the alchemical process, the color red indicating regeneration and a union of opposites. Thus Ling not only successfully completes his initiation, but also emerges as a kind of \textit{filius philosophorum}, defined by Eliade as "the androgynous being ('Rebis') which promises the imminent attainment of the Philosopher's Stone".\(^\text{13}\) In the concluding paragraph, the author writes: "Une buée d'or s'éleva et se déploya sur la mer". This golden mist clearly evokes the \textit{opus magnum} or "Grande Oeuvre" of the alchemical operation, the ultimate stage of "sublimation" which corresponds to gold, the color of the sun, indicating possession of the Philosopher's Stone and attainment of Eternal Life and Absolute Knowledge.

The Theme of Immortality

The theme of immortality is also evoked in the text by certain elements, stones and colors as well as by light and the phases of the sun. The central


\(^{13}\) Eliade, \textit{Ferge} 161.
role we have attributed to Ling in the conclusion of the text is supported by certain references made in the beginning of the story. It is significant, for instance, that Ling's father was a "changeur d'or" and his maternal grandfather a jade merchant because of the importance of both jade and gold in Chinese Alchemy. Jade, like gold, was identified with the Philosopher’s Stone and it was also believed that pure gold was composed of "kín" (gold) and "yu" (jade). Therefore Ling’s family background, by offering him a certain familiarity with both of these elements, prepared him for his initiation into the 'art' of alchemy.

The fact that Ling’s house is "peinte de cinnabre" reveals another interesting aspect of the character’s background. In Chinese Alchemy, he who produces or absorbs into his body "the divine cinnabar" acquires immortality and becomes like the gods. Thus when Ling first brings Wang-Fó home and the artist calls his attention to the special color of the house, a color Ling had never particularly noticed, the alchemist is revealing to his disciple the importance of cinnabar, which, according to Eliade, "conceals the mysteries of regeneration by death".

As we have noted, the Emperor’s palace resembles an axis mundi, a center where the alchemical transformation will take place. In her descriptions of the palace's interior, the author frequently refers to its abundance of jade, emphasizing in particular the mirroring effects of the jade pavement and ceiling. For instance, the "Dragon Céleste", seated upon his jade throne, lifts his hand, which "les reflets du pavement de jade

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14 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 528.

15 Eliade, Forge 116.
faisaient paraître glauque comme une plante sous-marine . . ." (p. 1144). Later, as the artist paints, it is the jade floor which becomes damp, and when Ling reappears "le plafond de jade se reflétait sur l'eau de sorte que Ling paraissait naviguer à l'intérieur d'une grotte" (p. 1148). Here color symbolism is significant, the antithetical colors of blue and green evoked earlier in the description of the Emperor's robe now reflecting one another and seeming mysteriously to unite.

Finally, both gold and jade appear in the story's last paragraph, where we see the image of the golden mist rising and spreading over Wang-Fô's sea. The latter, previously described only as blue, now becomes in the concluding sentence "cette mer de jade bleu que Wang-Fô venait d'inventer". Thus the artist's "invention" involves a mysterium conjunctionis, a sacred marriage of the cosmological Yang evoked by jade and the Yin of the archetypally feminine image of the blue sea.

In the beginning of the tale Yourcenar tells us that the artist "s'emparait de l'aurore et captait le crépuscule", thus introducing another important aspect of this tale: the symbolism of light and the phases of the sun. Associated with knowledge, purity and alchemical gold (called the sun of metals), the light of the sun is intimately linked with Wang-Fô, appearing here as one of his possessions. Yet the word "crépuscule" dominates in the text. The artist paints Ling's wife at twilight "parmi les nuages du couchant", a moment when light blends into darkness, these two opposing principles seeming to unite, while at the same moment the alchemist, Wang-Fô, attempts an intermingling of the sexes. The realization that her husband prefers Wang-Fô's portrait of her to reality leads Ling's wife to commit suicide. Found hanging from the branches of the
pink plum tree, she appears "pure comme les belles célébrées par les poètes des temps révolus" (p. 1141). Her act must be seen as a sacrifice, a method used not only in Alchemy but also in numerous primitive rituals to ensure the Eternal Return of Nature. Supporting this idea is the fact that Wang-Fô paints her at twilight, symbolizing the end of a cycle as well as a preparation for renewal, and that the plum tree, a frequent image in Chinese painting, blooms at the end of winter and thus signals a rebirth. Indeed, not long after this sacrificial death, "le printemps venait de naître, et le sol de terre battue était encore gelé" (p. 1142).

The master and his disciple arrive at the area surrounding the imperial city at sunset. As we have already noted, the Emperor's palace evokes a union of opposites, and the image of its violet walls looming up "en plein jour comme un pan de crépuscule" now both reinforces the idea of a hermaphrodite and announces a new beginning: within the walls of this "enceinte" the world will be recreated and the artist and his disciple reborn.

Describing to Wang-Fô the effect the artist's paintings had upon him in his youth, the Emperor explains: "Les couleurs de tes peintures s'avivaient avec l'aube et palissaient avec le crépuscule" (p.1145). However, Wang's early unfinished seascape does not yet reflect the sense of melancholy evoked by twilight, an image describing a suspended instant between light and dark, between life and death:

Tout y attestait une fraîcheur d'âme à laquelle Wang-Fô ne pouvait plus prétendre, mais il y manquait cependant quelque chose, car à l'époque où Wang l'avait peinte, il n'avait pas encore assez contemplé de montagnes, ni de rochers baignant dans la mer leurs flancs nus, et ne s'était pas assez pénétré de la tristesse du crépuscule (p. 1147).
In this painting, which we have called a *mise-en-abyme* of the entire tale, the mountains and the sea refer to the contrast between the masculine and feminine principles. As Gilbert Durand explains:

Dans la culture chinoise la peinture, qui a un sens philosophique profond et sert de support matériel à la méditation cosmologique, se définit comme 'chan-chouei', c'est à dire 'montagne et eau', ces deux symboles renvoyant respectivement aux deux principes sexuels constitutifs de l'Univers: le Yang et le Yin.\(^{16}\)

What is lacking in the original painting is a blending or uniting of the two principles; incorporating this into the work and thus completing it will take Wang-Fô and Ling through a reenactment of the creation of the world and ultimately lead to their rebirth. In the concluding paragraph their boat becomes a tiny speck in the paleness of twilight, this faint light linked with that of the image immediately following - the golden mist which rises over the sea - and both images evoking immortality and a reconciliation of opposing forces. The text continues: "Enfin la barque vira autour d'un rocher qui fermait l'entrée du large; l'ombre d'une falaise tomba sur elle". Here the two opposing principles of the universe join, the Yang of the rock filling up the opening to the Yin of the sea, and the word "entrée" suggests a new beginning. It is into this union, "cette mer de jade bleu", that the artist and his disciple will enter and finally disappear for eternity.

Eliade tells us that the goal of Chinese Alchemists involved a search for distant and mysterious islands inhabited by Immortals, sometimes called

\(^{16}\) Durand, *Structures* 142.
"supernatural islands in the midst of the Eastern sea".\textsuperscript{17} Wang's sea seems to represent this primordial image of a paradisal land and when he and his disciple disappear on the horizon, they have transcended Time to reach what Ling refers to as "le pays au delà des flots", or the mysterious "Land of the Immortals" of Chinese Alchemy.

It is surprising that this short story, so skillfully written and so rich in symbolism and imagery, has been neglected by Yourcenar critics. Its principle theme -- the quest for perfection, absolute knowledge and immortality -- plays an important part in \textit{Mémoires d'Hadrien}; and, as Geneviève Spencer-Noël's indepth study clearly demonstrates, \textit{L'Œuvre au noir} -- like "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé" -- is entirely structured around the theme of Alchemy. In addition, its emphasis on Oriental philosophy establishes a contrast with the last tale in the collection, which will present a contradictory vision of the universe, this opposition being a central theme in Yourcenar's early narratives. Serving as a foundation for "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé" is the myth of the Eternal Return, which Joseph Campbell calls one of the most fundamental notions "basic to Oriental life", explaining that "The dreamlike spell of this contemplative, metaphysically oriented tradition, where light and darkness dance together in a world creating cosmic shadow play, carries into modern times an image that is of incalculable age".\textsuperscript{18} As reflections of this universal cycle of


Time, the gods are said to "come into existence with dawn and dissolve with the twilight". In "Comment Wang-Fō fut sauvé", the Eternal Return is closely related to this point of interface where the pale light of day meets the darkness of night, to this image of twilight: Evoking the end of a cycle and a new beginning for the artist Wang-Fō, it signals the conclusion of this short story, serves as an introduction to the solar imagery of the next two tales, and finally suggests new horizons for the reader of the *Nouvelles orientales*.

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II. Marko's Circular Journey

The second tale in the collection, "Le Sourire de Marko", is examined briefly by critics such as Pierre Horn and Jean Blot in their treatment of the entire corpus of Yourcenar's work. Although Blot admires the story, he does nothing more than summarize it, merely concluding: "Le rapprochement du désir et de la torture va de nouveau s'orienter vers le sadisme l'érotique douleureuse de Yourcenar". His comment reveals a very superficial reading of the text, and in fact, there exists to date no other study of this short story worthy of mention. An archetypal reading of "Le Sourire de Marko" would indeed clearly reveal, through its abundance of imagery, its symbolic relationship with the preceding tale, "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé", a universal relationship transcending the differences in setting and the diegetic individuality of the two stories. The central element which firmly establishes the existence of a sturdy imaginal fabric running through all the nouvelles orientales is the symbolism of the solar cycle, seen predominantly here, as in the previous tale, as the half light of dusk. Special emphasis will be placed on the theme of Alchemy, the fundamental image of the circle, the symbols of the mountain, the sun, and the sea, and finally, the role of initiation.

The Alchemical Quest

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2 Blot, *Yourcenar*, 93.
The theme of Alchemy, which, as we have shown, is an important part of "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé", appears here in a somewhat different manner. Inspired by a medieval Balkan ballad, the text begins with a description of the Slavic region serving as a background to the story, emphasizing in particular its sharp contrasts and "mysterious unity". The opposition between East and West, between Christianity and Islam, is evoked by the scenery: "Les formes humbles et ramassées des maisons, la franchise salubre du paysage étaient slaves, mais la fierté nue du ciel faisaient encore songer à l'Orient et à l'Islam" (p. 1150). Thus the contrast of West and East seems to reflect a number of conflicts: Order/Disorder, Consciousness/the Unconscious, Passivity/Agression, Light/Dark. A sense of conflict and disharmony is introduced in the first two sentences of the story by the following images:

Le paquebot flottait mollement sur les eaux lisses, comme une méduse à l'abandon. Un avion tournait avec l'insupportable vrombissement d'un insecte irrité dans l'étroite espace de ciel encaissé entre les montagnes. (p.1150)

The two sentences are in direct opposition to each other, the first suggesting complete passivity and the second, intense activity and aggression. Both images, the jellyfish-like liner and the insect-like plane, are extremely negative. The French word "méduse" recalls the Medusa, suggesting the terrifying aspect of the feminine principle and of the nocturnal world, as well as the drives and perversions of the Unconscious which oppose harmony. The plane, buzzing aggressively, represents the negative aspect of the diurnal regime, and its chaotic, anarchical movements within a cramped space, the projection of man's anguish when
faced with the threat of Time. In these introductory sentences of the tale, we also find the two contrasting elements of Wang-Fô’s original painting: the masculine image of the mountains and the feminine image of the sea.

Despite its aura of conflict, the region reflects a certain harmony. The narrator explains that “dans ce vaste continent humain, l’infinie variété des races ne détruit pas plus l’unité mystérieuse de l’ensemble que la diversité des vagues ne rompt la monotonie majestueuse de la mer” (p. 1151). Thus the country somehow succeeds in reconciling the conflict between East and West, and its “unité mystérieuse” brings to mind the alchemical *mysterium conjunctionis*. A product of this mysterious union, Marko, the central character, is himself associated with a blending of opposing principles. A Serb possessing heroic strength, great size, and at the same time the beauty of a woman (p. 1152), he is able to form “des relations secrètes en pays infidèle“. He is further linked with the “Sainte Montagne”, which, as we shall later show, is an *axis mundi* or meeting point of Heaven and Earth. Marko Kraliévitch thus embodies the “mysterious unity” of his country.

In order to escape from the Turkish soldiers who have followed him to the home of his Moslem mistress, Marko dives from her balcony into the sea below. The sea, later referred to as “l’abîme” and “la mer qui lave les ordures” (p. 1154), can be considered as the *prima materia* or *abyssus* of the alchemical process into which all things must enter to achieve eternal life. The notion of the sea cleansing or “washing away debris” clearly indicates a purification and a return to the state of innocence of the maternal womb, which are both characteristic of the initial stages of the alchemical *opus*.
After Marko is captured, he is brought onto the beach, where he will feign death and then be tortured by the Turks. In their attempts to determine if he is truly dead, they place hot coals on his chest:

Les bourreaux prirent de la braise dans le fourneau d'un calfat, et ils tracèrent un large cercle sur la poitrine du nageur glacé par la mer. Les charbons brûlèrent, puis s'éteignirent et devinrent tout noirs comme des roses rouges qui meurent. Le feu découpa sur la poitrine de Marko un grand anneau charbonneux, pareil à ces ronds tracés sur l'herbe par les danses de sorciers... (p.1155)

The use of hot embers taken from a furnace immediately reminds us of the alchemist who utilized fire to control the passage of matter from one state to another. The fact that Marko does not flinch when subjected to this ordeal by fire also recalls the ancient smiths and alchemists who were said to be 'masters of fire'.

Furthermore, the burning of coal represents the realization of the alchemical transmutation, which involved a progression from black to red. It is interesting that these coals are compared to red roses, because roses were used in alchemy (called "rosiers des philosophes") and associated with the "pierre au rouge" or Philosopher's Stone.

In Christian iconography, the rose symbolizes Christ's wounds or blood and generally indicates a mystical rebirth. A mandala or mystic Center is brought to mind by the image of the rose, as well as by the ring of coals engraved on Marko's chest, which resembles the circles of sorcerer's dances. In addition, the rose, which corresponds to the lotus in Eastern mythology,

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3 Elisde, Forge. 171.

4 Chevalier, Dictionnaire. 824.
evokes the first manifestation of life which emerges from the primordial waters, like the "oeuf du monde", representing perfection and harmony. All of these symbolic interpretations of the rose signal the rubedo stage of the alchemical process, indicating regeneration and a joining of opposites. However, at this point in the text we must consider the attempt at transmutation unsuccessful in that the coals ultimately return to their original black color.

The image of the circle is of fundamental importance in this story. Evoked by the rose and the ring of coals, it reappears in the next scene when the girls of the village are ordered to "danser en rond" around Marko's body. When they begin to dance, the girls join hands, thus creating a perfectly closed circle, having no beginning or end. In the text, the various circles -- "roses", "anneau", "ronds" -- and circular movements -- "danse" -- suggest the perfect, immutable, never-ending movement of Time. At the center of the round of dancers is Marko, appearing like the sun surrounded by the planets. The circle is generally seen as the manifestation of its central point and the relationship between the center and the circle is compared to that between God and the creation. Thus Marko's role resembles that of the Emperor in the preceding tale: he is a divine, androgynous being who undergoes a reenactment of the creation of the world involving a reduction to the prima materia and a purification which will ultimately lead to a mysterium conjunctionis, a rebirth and attainment of Eternal Life.

Haischë, the leader of the dance, stands out because of her superior height and dark beauty. She is "comme le chevreuil qui bondit, comme le

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5 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 822.
faucon qui vole" (p. 1156). The roe deer is a nocturnal creature which plays the role of psychopomp in many cultures, and the falcon is an archetypal symbol of ascension, embodying the celestial/solar/diurnal principle. Therefore Haisché too presents us with an image of perfection and totality in that she is associated both with death/earth/darkness ("chevreuil","sa tête brune") and with life/sky/sunlight ("faucon", "son cou blanc", her height). When Marko sees her, he cannot help but smile, and in order to protect him by concealing his mouth from the sight of the executioners, the beautiful dancer drops her red scarf onto Marko's face. This red scarf, reminiscent of Ling's "étrange écharpe rouge" in the previous tale, again signals the alchemical rubedo or "l'oeuvre au rouge", indicating that the transmutation is now complete and attainment of immortality imminent.

Marko's smile, called "cet euphémisme exquis", is yet another image of a circle, the circle formed by the mouth representing one of the most perfect of shapes. Jean Chevalier explains the symbolism of the mouth as the following:

La bouche dessine aussi les deux courbes de l'oeuf primordial, celle qui correspond au monde d'en haut avec la partie supérieure du palais, celle qui correspond au monde d'en bas avec la mâchoire inférieure. Elle est ainsi le point de départ ou de convergence de deux directions, elle symbolise l'origine des oppositions, des contraires, des ambiguïtés.7

Thus the hero's smile is an "exquisite euphemism" for the sacred marriage of opposing forces which has been carried out through the alchemical

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6 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 238.

7 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 141.
operation.

Thanks to Haisché, Marko is ultimately able to escape his enemies. We are told that after his death his body is transported in a boat to the "Sainte Montagne" where he will be buried, a story which, according to its narrator, is reminiscent of "la dernière traversée d'Arthur". Marko's last journey is an archetypal "Night Sea-Crossing", like that of Osiris, which describes a god's death and his subsequent resurrection; the hero of Yourcenar's second tale achieves the goal of the opus magnum in that he is reborn and finally succeeds in transcending the confines of Time.

The Mountain, the Sea and the Sun

The analogy between Marko's final voyage and "Arthur's last crossing" reveals the importance of "la Montagne Noire" where Marko will be buried, associated here with the island of Avalon of Arthurian legend, a paradisal land which represents a primordial, spiritual center. Marko's final resting place also reminds us of "le pays au delà des flots" described by Ling: the alchemical "Land of the Immortals" symbolized by Wang-Fô's sea. "La Tzernagora" or black mountain from which the country, Montenegro, takes its name is clearly described as a mystical center. Called "la Sainte Montagne où rien ne change depuis le Moyen Age" (p.1151), it is a sacred space as well as an axis mundi or meeting of Heaven and Earth. Marko Kriliévitch, who is described as "un chêne de la montagne", has a close affinity with this mystical mountain where he will find his final refuge. When in the midst of a violent storm he swims to escape the Turkish soldiers, Marko seems to become one with the mountains: "Des montagnes
roulèrent sous lui; il roula sous des montagnes". (p. 1153) Thus he participates in the sacred: ascending and descending the mountains, he reaches their central point and escapes profane Time. The verb 'rouler' further indicates the rotating movement of a wheel and thus reintroduces the notion of a circle with a mystical center.

The Serbian hero is also clearly linked with the mysteries of the sea. The unity of the land of which Marko is a part is compared with the "majestic monotony of the sea", unbroken by the diversity of the waves. In the beginning of the story, the text stresses the importance of the port of Kotor, or "les bouches de Cattaro" as it is called, which is described as being "la bien cachée". This emphasis on the hidden mouths of Cattaro must be interpreted as a foreshadowing of the conclusion of the story in which we see Marko's mouth being concealed by Haisché's red scarf. Again the symbolism of the circle, a fundamental element in this tale, is evoked by the image of the mouth, the mouth of the sea being linked with that of the hero. Similarly, we are told early in the tale that it was becoming necessary for Marko to "s'aboucher directement avec ses complices", the verb 's'aboucher' reinforcing his link with "les bouches de Cattaro", signaling the importance of the circle in the text, and suggesting a fusion of East and West.

Marko's affinity with the sea is expressed explicitly throughout: we are told, for instance, that he charms the waves just as he charms women:

Marko charmait les vagues; ... Il charmait aussi les femmes: les chenaux compliqués de la mer le conduisaient souvent à Kotor, au pied d'une maison de bois toute vermoulue qui haletait sous la poussée des flots; ... Elle [the widow] frottait d'huile son corps glacé par les baisers mous de la mer. (p. 1152)
In Greek legend waves were personified by the Nereids, representing the passive principle which, however, is at times as violent and as dangerous as uncontrollable action. Waves have also been compared to dragons, symbolizing the sudden irruptions or drives of the unconscious. Marko not only charms the Nereids, but is linked with the sexual drives represented by the waves whose thrusts cause the widow's house to gasp. The hero's affinity with the waves becomes more and more evident as the story unfolds. For example, as he swims through the stormy sea to escape his enemies, Marko is compared to both the waves and the wind. Here again the emphasis is on his mouth: "... les accès du vent leur semblaient le rire de Marko, et l'insolente écume son crachat sur leur visage" (p.1154). The wind also acts as his protector by turning the soldiers' arrows away from him. Earlier, at the widow's house, the North wind begins to "souffler la révolte parmis les vagues du golfe", evoking Jean Burgos' "schème de révolte" which is characterized by images of expansion, ascension, multiplication and domination.\footnote{Burgos, \textit{Poétique} 126-7.} Here the wind announces the dangers to come, warning Marko of what will take place if he remains. When the troupe of soldiers "encerclait la maison, en bloquant toutes les issues" -- this description again evoking the image of a closed circle -- Marko goes to the balcony, where he will leap into the violent waves below. Now compared to thunder in the sky, "les vagues bondissantes se fracassaient sur les rochers avec le bruit de la foudre au ciel" (p. 1153).

It is interesting that not long before, after having criticized the goat meat which the widow had prepared for his dinner -- calling it "la vieille
chèvre centenaire" and its meat "coriace comme ta viande de sorcière" --, Marko kicks the plate containing the goat through the open window into the sea below. In Greece, goats symbolized lightning or announced storms, and in ancient times, they were frequently sacrificed to the gods of thunder.9 Thus Marko's action can be seen as a sacrificial offering to the thunder gods: when he himself dives into the sea, it is the storm which will help him flee the Turks because he has the ability to charm the violent thunder as he charms the waves. Gilbert Durand states that the waves in the sea, like scientific undulations and the waves of the hair, are linked with Time.10 According to this theory, Marko resembles the alchemist, who was not only a "master of Time" but also put himself in the place of or acted as a substitute for Time itself.11 In addition, Marko's link with thunder reminds us of the most ancient alchemists, who believed that their models -- "the divine-smiths" -- forged lightning and thunder as weapons for the celestial gods.12

Yourcenar uses a metaphor to describe the greenish wave under which the Serbian hero appears and disappears in his attempts to flee from the sight of the Moslem soldiers: Marko "disparaisait, puis reparaissait sous la même meule verte" (p.1154). In this image of the green millstone, we once again find the rich symbolism of the circle, and this time the circle takes the form of a rotating wheel. Like the circle, the universal archetype of the

9 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 238.
10 Durand, Structures 108.
11 Eliade, Forge 169.
12 Eliade, Forge 100.
wheel represents cyclical time and perpetual renewal, and the color green further signals the Eternal Return of Nature. According to the *Dictionnaire des symboles*, the terms millstone and noria wheel were used in Taoist alchemy to indicate a return from the circumference to the Center. The alchemical symbolism of the wheel is described as follows:

... la roue est l'héroglyphe alchimique du temps nécessaire à la coction de la matière philosophale et, par suite, de la coction elle-même. Le feu soutenu, constant et égal que l'artiste entretient nuit et jour au cours de cette opération est appelé pour cette raison feu de roue... cette signification symbolique de la roue est bien... celle du véhicule kratophanique qui va et vient entre ciel et terre, unissant le divin et le profane.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus Marko, who can be assimilated to an alchemist, is again associated with Time, and his 'va et vient' within the wheel-like wave, like the earlier description of his 'rotations' around the mountains, indicates a movement between Heaven and Earth towards a union of the two opposing principles at their mystical Center.

The wheel, with its spokes radiating from the central axis, is often considered a solar symbol. An important image in "Comment Wang-Fō fut sauvé", the sun plays an interesting role in this text. In the first paragraph of the tale, there is an emphasis on the darkness of the region:

On n'était pas encore qu'au tiers d'une belle après-midi d'été, et déjà le soleil avait disparu derrière les arides contreforts des Alpes monténégriennes semées de maigres arbres. La mer, si bleue le matin au large, prenait des teintes sombres à l'intérieur de ce long fjord sinueux bizarrement situé aux abords des Balkans. (p. 1150)

\(^{13}\) Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 828.
Here the sun is beginning to set; as it disappears, the mountains are left in the foreground and the color of the sea reflects the oncoming darkness.

On the day Marko is planning to leave the widow's house, it is at daybreak, "au point du jour", that the North wind begins to "blow revolt among the waves". The half light of dawn, like that of dusk, representing a dividing line which both joins and separates the opposing principles of Light and Dark, marks "un état de tension spirituelle où l'événement primordial advient", 14 as well as describing any object suspended between Heaven and Earth. 15

Later that same day, "aux heures brûlantes du jour, il [Marko] se recoucha pour la sieste" (p. 1153). The sun at its zenith has a negative role in that it makes Marko sleep rather than leave. Unlike the wind and the waves, which seem to warn him of the imminent danger, the midday sun has the effect of dulling his sensibilities. When he awakens, "il s'étirait paresseusement devant les fenêtres, protégé contre le regard des passants par des persiennes compliquées", and through these blinds he sees the scintillating light of the Turkish soldiers scimitars. Still under the effects of the afternoon sun, Marko acts lazily, but the reflected light of the swords has a positive effect upon him, warning him of the approaching danger and thus allowing him a chance to escape. Whereas the straight Western sword is generally a solar, masculine symbol, the Oriental scimitar, being curved, is

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14 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 86.

lunar and feminine. Here again we see the "exquisite euphemism" of Marko's hidden smile in the curved shape of the scimitars partially concealed by the "persiennes compliquées", and these blinds also serve to protect the hero from the sight of those outside. Associated with thunder and lightning and called "l'épée des philosophes" by alchemists to symbolize the purifying fire of their furnaces -- fire, for them, being "an element which operates in the centre of all things" -- the sword was thought to cut through darkness and ignorance. Therefore, the image of the scimitar, linked with the symbolism of the circle and Marko's smile, also reinforces our perception of the hero's direct relationship with thunder, fire and alchemy.

In the conclusion of the tale, we are told that "grâce au lent obscurcissement du crépuscule", the executioners do not notice Marko's smile. Finally, the narrator observes:

Regardez: le soir tombe; on pourrait presque imaginer sur la plage de Kotor le petit groupe de bourreaux travaillant à la lueur des charbons ardents, la jeune fille qui danse et le garçon qui ne résiste pas à la beauté. (p. 1157)

The only light described here is that emitted by the hot coals, the latter being thought to contain the force of the sun concealed within them and thus to symbolize occult energy or "hidden fire". Marko's hidden smile is

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16 Cirot, *Dictionary* 308. We also read here that the sword frequently reflects sexual duality and that in China, the sword was a symbol of "l'arme du Centre", while for the Scythians, it was "l'axe du monde" (Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 408).


18 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 211. This image of fire hidden in black coal describes the alchemical concept of spirit contained within matter.
perhaps suggested here again by the fire/passion/spirit which is concealed
inside the black coal/matter. Just as in "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé", the
second story concludes with the image of twilight, indicating the end of a
cycle as well as the promise of renewal and rebirth. Whereas the direct
light of the sun at its peak in the sky is harmful and negative for Marko, the
half light of dusk -- representing a suspended moment between Life and
Death -- as well as the reflected light of the sun -- depicted by the lunar
image of the curved scimitar -- are positive forces for the Serbian hero.

Marko's Initiation

The idea of a rebirth and a new beginning evoked by the image of twilight
in the conclusion of this tale refers not only to the theme of alchemy but
also to that of initiation, which plays a central role in the text. We will
attempt to point out how "Le Sourire de Marko" describes the ritual
initiation of its main character, involving a rite of passage into a superior
state of being.

Already in the beginning of the tale Marko appears as a special being of
considerable strength and size. He is compared, for instance, to "an oak of
the mountain", a symbol of great height and strength as well as an axis
mundi, and we are also informed of "la longueur démesurée de son ombre" (p.
1152). As we have already mentioned, the Serbian hero personifies the
'mysterious unity' of his land. Because of his unusual power and mystical
affinity with the natural elements, Marko's experience can be interpreted as
a shamanic initiation which is distinguished from ordinary tribal initiations.
by the ecstatic experiences and the increased number of symbolic deaths the
initiate undergoes.19

Marko's first initiatory ordeal is both a "descent into Hell" and a
regressus ad uterum: he enters into the Chthonian Mother of the sea, where
he charms the monsters/dragons of the waves. Marko's voyage through the
labyrinth of the sea with its "chenaux compliquées" and dangerous "écueils"
-- reminiscent of the "Symplégades" encountered by the Argonauts -- is an
exemplary initiatory rite, characterized by a perilous journey through a
vagina dentata. Marko successfully emerges from this first stage of his
initiation when he is captured and brought to shore.

He is caught in a "silk lasso", like a fish trapped by a fisherman. This
comparison between Marko and a fish brings to mind symbols of Christ as
well as the last sign of the Zodiac, Pisces, which indicates the end of a
cycle leading to renewal. When the Turks bring Marko's body onto the beach,
the hero plays dead, imitating a trick used frequently by animals:

...ses cheveux salls par l'écume collaient à ses tempes creuses; ses
yeux fixes ne reflétaient plus l'immensité du ciel et du soir; ses
lèvres salées par la mer se figeaient sur ses mâchoires contractées;
ses bras abandonnés pendaient ... (p. 1154)

This imitation of death, Marko's second symbolic death, resembles Eliade's
descriptions of certain shamanic ecstatic experiences or "sicknesses".20
Marko, like the Emperor in the preceding tale, retains traces of the sea --

19 Mircea Eliade, Shamanism, trans. Williard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books,
1964) 64-5.

20 Eliade, Shamanism 53-5.
the "Great Mother" -- from whence he came, the sea salt on his lips suggesting both birth and purification. In addition, the image of salt is directly linked -- in both religious and alchemical thought -- with the concept of physical and spiritual transmutation. Finally, we are told that the hero's eyes no longer reflect the immensity of the sky and the sea, indicating that he is no longer part of the living, nor confined within the limits of birth -- "ciel" -- and death -- "soir".

The Turkish soldiers immediately compare Marko's body to "une taupe pourrie" and "un chien crevé" while they consider throwing him back into the sea "qui lave les ordures". The chthonian symbol of the mole is explained as follows in the *Dictionnaire des symboles*:

La taupe apparaîtrait comme le symbole de l'initiateur aux mystères de la terre et de la mort... le symbole permet de passer au plan spirituel, celui du maître qui guide l'âme à travers les ténèbres et les détours du labyrinthe souterrain.\(^{22}\)

This notion of a guide through the Kingdom of the Dead is also evoked by the "chien crevé", as the dog is a universal archetype of the psychopomp, a companion of the dead on their "Night Sea-Crossing", and as such is also associated with resurrection. It is understandable that after he emerges as if born anew from his initiatory Descent into Hell through the perilous labyrinth of the sea, Marko is associated with death and viewed by the Turks

\(^{21}\) According to Japanese mythology, Izanagi formed the first "central island" with salt extracted from the primordial water and the same Izanagi, after returning from Hell ("the Kingdom of Death"), was purified in the salt water of the sea. Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 858.

\(^{22}\) Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 929.
as a master who guides souls through the world of Darkness. This idea is repeated when the widow calls him "ce chien" and then compares him to "un grand ver nu", the worm symbolizing death\textsuperscript{23} as well as a transition or passage to a superior state.\textsuperscript{24} Similarly, the worm is a "symbole de la vie renaissant de la pourriture et de la mort".\textsuperscript{25} Thus the word 'ver' reinforces the theme of initiation, of a ritual passage to a higher level which will ultimately lead to rebirth.

Encouraged by the widow, Marko's captors decide to "crucify" him "comme fut crucifié son dieu" (p. 1154), reminding us of the role of initiation in Christian mythology. However, this torture proves ineffective: We are told that "aucun frémissement n'agitait ce visage qui semblait insensible, et le sang même ne suintait de sa chair ouverte que par gouttes lentes et rares, car Marko commandait à ses artères comme il commandait son coeur" (p. 1155). Here the Serb clearly ressembles a future shaman who must suffer ritual tortures as part of his initiation. Mircea Eliade explains that among the most common of shamanic initiatory rites one finds "difficult ordeals: beatings, feet held close to fire, suspension in the air, amputation of fingers and various other cruelties".\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, when the Turks place hot coals on his chest and Marko shows no response, he is undergoing a ritual torture as part of his initiation into the realm of the shamans who, like the ancient smiths, were called "masters of fire".

\textsuperscript{23} Ciriò, Dictionary 359.

\textsuperscript{24} Chevalier, Dictionnaire 1001.

\textsuperscript{25} Chevalier, Dictionnaire 1001.

\textsuperscript{26} Eliade, Shamanism 64.
As we have already noted, the image of the "red roses" symbolizes regeneration and the circle, a recurrent image in the last pages of the tale, indicates the cyclical movement of Time and perpetual renewal. This idea of rebirth, so important in the first tale, is both an essential aspect of primitive initiation and a major theme in "Le Sourire de Marko". In the conclusion of the tale, at the moment when the sun is setting, Marko, after successfully completing his various initiatory ordeals, kills the widow and then disappears into "le ventre des vagues", an expression clearly indicating another regressus ad uterum. Swallowed by the monster of the sea and safe within its belly, Marko is protected from the Turks pursuing him, just as his mouth was previously protected from them by Haisché's scarf. This final descent into the Great Mother and subsequent emergence from the purifying sea represent the last stages in Marko's shamanic initiation, which involves his passage into a semi-divine state, one which will later enable him to conquer the Turks and win the woman who saved him. The idea of a rebirth, implicit throughout the story, is clearly suggested by the analogy made between "la dernière traversée d'Arthur" and Marko's final journey by sea to the "Sainte Montagne" where he will find his eternal refuge and through which his memory will be forever preserved.

Like "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé", "Le Sourire de Marko" is structured around the themes of initiation and alchemy. The symbol of twilight is fundamental in both the story of the Chinese artist and the tale of the Serbian hero in that it serves to reconcile the duality of the universe, clearly presented here as an opposition between East and West. Expressing what the narrator terms "an exquisite euphemism" is the image of the circle
which dominates in this second tale. Directly linked to the symbolism of
the circle is the concept of the mystic Center, and, in particular, the
movement from the circumference of the circle to its central point. Like
the melding of pale light with Darkness at dusk, this movement symbolically
refers to a movement towards timelessness, spacelessness and cosmic
unity and harmony. Within the circumference of most of the circular images
described in this text, we find Marko, the god-like hero whose movement
towards a central point, towards the interface between Heaven and Earth
and Light and Dark, will lead to a transcendence of Time and Death. Marko
ultimately reaches the Center through his death when he is laid to rest at
the *axis mundi* of the “Sainte Montagne”. Here Death is viewed positively
and euphemized as a slow descent into the Chthonian Mother, as one stage in
an endless cycle. Thus the “euphemisme exquis” referred to by the narrator
seems to describe Gilbert Durand’s concept of a “euphemization” of the threat
of Chronos, that is, a view of Death as a refuge and a place of repose which
is attained by a “penetration” towards “a Center”.27

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iii. The Red and the White

The imaginal fabric woven in the first two nouvelles orientales will also encompass "Le Lait de la Mort", a work treated by Linda Klieger Stillman, who severely criticizes Yourcenar’s portrayal of women in an article entitled "Marguerite Yourcenar and the Phallacy of Indifference". Concerned more with Yourcenar’s personal life — with the guilt involved in her relationship with her mother, who died during childbirth — than with the author’s literary achievements, Stillman nonetheless mentions several of Yourcenar’s works, including the third tale in the Nouvelles orientales. Stating that the author’s narratives “devalue female sexuality”, she compares Yourcenar’s real mother with the dead mother in “Le Lait de la Mort”, who, she says, “remains vitally present in the surviving child’s life, while remorse pursues the survivor as if he were a criminal”. In fact, the so-called “surviving child” appears only very briefly in the text — the last mention of him is at the moment he is weaned from his mother’s breast — and there is obviously no indication of any feeling of remorse on his part. Stillman concludes that “This type of short story narrates the identification between love and torture, thirst and mourning, heterosexual libido and a painful desire enclosed in a labyrinth of brick walls”. Like Jean Blot, Blot compares Marko to the mother in “Le Lait de la Mort”, stating: “Le corps du bien-aimé est supplicié comme pour illustrer, traduire ou incarner le supplice de

1 Stillman, “Phallacy” 261-77.

2 Stillman, “Phallacy” 266-7.

3 Stillman, “Phallacy” 262.

4 Stillman, “Phallacy” 267.

5 Blot compares Marko to the mother in “Le Lait de la Mort”, stating: “Le corps du bien-aimé est supplicié comme pour illustrer, traduire ou incarner le supplice de
Linda Stillman focuses on the link between love and torture in Yourcenar's tale and overlooks the vivid imagery which evokes the themes of illusion, immortality, sacrifice and the alchemical quest. Our examination of these themes, with special emphasis on the images of the mirror, the tower, milk, fire, water and certain colors, will attempt not only to disprove Stillman's "anti-feminist" reading of Yourcenar's work, but also to restore a more universal context in which the text should be read.

Immortality, Alchemy and Sacrifice

We find that here again in the third tale of the collection the themes of alchemy and the quest for eternal life play an extremely central role, although one which is not readily evident. The first paragraph of the tale, for instance, can be read as a 'hermetic' text describing spiritual ascension by means of an alchemical ordering of colors or, in other words, a progression from black to white to red. The first words of the story -- "La longue file beige et grise de touristes" -- suggest the indifferentiation of man in contrast to the chromatic world surrounding him, illustrated by the "baroiage de la Place du Marché". Next there are several references to fire, the most important alchemical tool used for the calcination of undifferentiated matter: "allumaient", "enfer" and "des feux de miroirs ardents". The alchemical 'work in black', aimed at the destruction of differences, is evoked by the "suffocating semi-obscurity" of a German

l'amour. Au même supplice sont condamnés Marko, Kostis, l'amant des Néréides et aussi l'infortunée héroïne du Lait de la Mort - créatures riches de lait et de larmes - emmurée vivante pour devenir le ciment d'une tour qui autrement s'écroulerait". Blot, Yourcenar 93.
alehouse, while the stage of "solution", corresponding to the color white, occurs in the following sentence: "Une puanteur montait d’un tas de détritus de poissons que nettoyait des mouettes presque insupportablement blanches" (p. 1158). The verb 'nettoyer' clearly indicates a purification, the essential characteristic of this stage in the alchemi al opus. Finally, the last image described in this introductory paragraph, "d’un parasol couleur feu qui ressemblait de loin à une grosse orange flottant sur la mer", brings to mind the "pierre au rouge", the goal of the alchemist's process of transmutation, as well as the notion of light ("orange") blending into darkness ("mer"). Here, the appearance of the large orange also places an emphasis on the image of the circle which, like the "œuf du monde" of alchemy, indicates perfection, harmony and a union of opposites.

The narrator begins to tell the story of a heroic mother, an Albanian woman whose devotion to her child supersedes all else. Bemoaning the artificiality of the modern world and a lack of genuine emotion, he describes the heroines of legend as "ces créatures riches de lait et de larmes dont on serait fier d'être enfant" (p. 1159).6 This mention of milk, a word which first appears in the story's title, introduces an important image in the text. Clearly related to the archetype of the 'Great Mother', milk is a symbol of fertility, of primordial nourishment, of a paradisiacal Center and even of immortality.8 It is interesting that milk, a lunar symbol, was

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6 Linda Stillman mistakenly attributes this statement to the Englishman, Philip Mild. It is actually made by the French narrator, Jules Bontrand. Stillman, "Phallacy" 270.

7 Durand, Structures 294.

8 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 556.
often used in sacrificial offerings aimed at ensuring the renewal of Spring in that the theme of sacrifice is fundamental in "Le Lait de la Mort": in order to provide a good foundation for the tower they are building, the three brothers decide to sacrifice one of their wives to this end by burying her alive within its walls. The young wife who is chosen for the sacrifice will passively accept her fate, but on the condition that an opening be left in the wall for her breasts so that her child might continue to benefit from his mother's milk. Milk also had a symbolic function in alchemy: the Philosopher's Stone, representing attainment of immortality, was sometimes called "le Lait de la Vierge".\(^9\) In addition, C.G. Jung cites several examples of alchemical texts and illustrations glorifying "virgin's milk" and linking it with renewal.\(^10\) We will attempt to show how, just as in the two preceding tales, the conclusion of this story with its emphasis on the image of milk represents the realization of the alchemical *opus magnum* and attainment of Eternal Life.

The "Tower of Scutari", built to serve as a watch tower, plays an interesting symbolic role in the text. Described in a mysterious way by the narrator, the structure is compared to the Tower of Babel: "...le vent de la nuit et les sorcières de la montagne renversaient leur tour comme Dieu fit crouler Babel" (p. 1160). Before the brothers decide to offer it a sacrificial victim, the tower cannot remain standing. Like the Tower of Babel, it is a

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\(^9\) Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 557.

\(^10\) C.G. Jung, "Psychology and Alchemy", *Collected Works*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), XII, 408-9. We find, for instance, a drawing entitled "The sea of renewal arising from virgin's milk" (p. 409), and an alchemical motto which reads: "The stone, like to an infant, is to be fed with virgin's milk" (p. 408).
symbol of ascension, a door to the heavens offering a means of attaining the level of the gods, and its destruction by the spirits of Nature -- or by the God of Christianity in the case of Babel -- signifies the impossibility of such attempts on man's part. Like the mountain or the ladder, the tower is also an *axis mundi*, placed at a mystical center uniting Heaven, Earth and Hell. Furthermore, the tower, "given that it is enclosed and walled-in, is emblematic of the Virgin Mary, as can be seen in many allegorical designs and litanies".\(^{11}\) In "Le Lait de la Mort" an analogy is clearly made between the young Albanian mother\(^{12}\) and the Virgin Mary: For instance, the sacrificial victim, "Toute droite au fond de sa niche, ... avait l'air d'une Marie debout derrière son aule!" (p. 1164). This analogy is particularly interesting when we consider that the Philosopher's Stone was often referred to as "the Milk of the Virgin" and that numerous alchemical texts describe a glorification or apotheosis of the Virgin Mary.\(^{13}\) Even more interesting is the link between the tower and the alchemical "athanor", that is, the furnace used for the transmutation of matter, which was shaped like a tower to signify that this metamorphosis implied a process of ascension: from lead to gold, or "au sens symbolique, de la lourdeur charnelle à la spiritualisation pure".\(^{14}\) According to our interpretation, the young mother, enclosed within the round walls of the tower/athanor, will undergo a

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12 Mathieu Galey erroneously calls her "Vania" in his commentary in the Gallimard edition (1963) of the *Nouvelles Orientales*. Vania is in fact the name of her infant son.

13 Jung, *Alchemy* 420-21. One example is the *assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*.

14 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 960.
transformation like that involved in the alchemical operation, one which will finally lead to a kind of rebirth.

The image of this Albanian woman entombed within the tower recalls that of Marko Kraljevitch buried in the "Sainete Montagne", both at a central point or interface between Heaven and Earth. The symbolism of the circle is evoked in the description of the victim's entrance "jusqu'à la niche creusée dans la muraille ronde de la tour" (p. 1164). The mystical centers where both Marko and the young mother find their final repose reflect Gilbert Durand's concept of nocturnal "intimité", which involves a positive view of Death and its euphemization as a place of refuge. Discussing the symbolism of burial rites and stressing the role of the "sépulcre maternel", Durand includes under the heading "demeure intime" not only tombs, crypts and catacombs, but also grottos, holes, the chrysalis, the egg, the shell and many other images, which are all linked to the Chthonian Mother, the circle or Mandala, and "the paradisiacal center".\textsuperscript{15} Thus the woman's burial within the tower in "Le Lait de la Mort", viewed positively as a "demeure intime", can be considered as a return to the state of innocence of the maternal womb, characteristic of the \textit{nigredo} stage of the alchemical process. Durand explains that the alchemist's goal was to penetrate into this "intimité utérine", and he states that "L'alchimie est un regressus ad uterum".\textsuperscript{16} The "œuf philosophale" was even sometimes referred to as a "sépulcre".\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Durand, \textit{Structures} 269-307.

\textsuperscript{16} Durand, \textit{Structures} 289.

\textsuperscript{17} Durand, \textit{Structures} 289.
Directly related to this theme of a return to the maternal womb is the image of milk, which Durand discusses at length in a chapter entitled "Les Symboles de l'intimité," calling it "l'archétype alimentaire", "boisson sacrée" and relating it to "les divines mamelles" of Great Godesses in primitive cultures. When the young Albanian mother is sacrificed to the "Grande Œuvre" which will take place in the enclosed space of the tower, she will produce a "sacred drink", a drink of immortality: "the Milk of the Virgin" or Philosopher's Stone. The narrator's reference to her "sandales rouges" and the red bricks of the tower evoke the alchemical *rubedo*, while shortly afterwards the "gold" of her "jupon doré" suggests the stage of "sublimation". In the next sentence, the mother, "standing erect within her niche", is compared to "Mary standing behind her altar", an image of purity and immortality recalling the Philosopher's Stone. "Le jaillissement miraculeux" created by the "flots de lait" from her breasts will be linked, like the "virgin's milk" described in alchemical texts and all other "sacred drinks", to cyclical renewal and rebirth.\(^{18}\) Although the young mother finally dies, her breasts continue to give milk until her child is weaned; "alors seulement, la gorge épuisée s'effrita et il n'y a eut plus sur le rebord de briques qu'une pincée de cendres blanches" (p. 1166). This "pinch" of white ashes strongly suggests an image of salt and the rich symbolism it entails. Gilbert Durand explains that for alchemists, salt was analogous to gold in that both are primary substances or essences which are inalterable: "Le 'sel' en effet n'est qu'un terme générique dont l'or est le cas le plus particulier et le plus précieux. L'or dont rêve l'alchimiste est une substance

\(^{18}\) Durand, *Structures* 297.
cachée, secrète, non pas le vulgaire métal, *aurum vulgi*, mais l'or philosophal, la pierre merveilleuse,..., 'teinture rouge', 'élixir de vie',..., etc.". 19 We are told that for centuries the story of the Tower of Scutari was repeated and the structure itself visited annually by women hoping to find the "traînée blanche" said still to flow. Although finally "the tower itself disappeared", the story -- retold in Yourcenar's tale by the French engineer -- remains as a testimony to the young mother's sacrifice and the image of her milk serves as an eternal symbol of the purity of her soul.

Images of Liquidity: Mirrors and Tears

The title of this short story -- "Le Lait de la Mort" -- presents us with the first in a series of varied images of liquidity which permeate the text. In general, liquids -- such as water, milk or blood -- are related to the Moon and to the archetype of the Eternal Feminine, which can be either positively valorized as a Virgin or a "Great Mother" or viewed negatively as a "Femme Fatale" or "Terrifying Mother". Discussing what he terms "symboles nyctomorphes" (related to darkness), Gilbert Durand includes in his "constellation de l'eau noire" not only aquatic symbols such as waves but also tears, hair, menstrual blood and mirrors. 20 In addition to the important symbol of milk, we find that such liquid images as tears and mirrors dominate in Yourcenar's tale.

19 Durand, *Structures* 300.

As we have already noted, milk, evoked in the narrator's description of "ces créatures de lait et de larmes", is clearly linked with the Chthonian Mother, with a return to innocence and a paradisal state, as well as with the alchemical quest for immortality. Reinforcing the association between the archetype of the Great Mother and the theme of liquidity is the following declaration made by the eldest of the three brothers: "Petits frères, frères par le sang, le lait et le baptême..." (p. 1160). Here blood, milk and water not only link the three brothers, but also represent their link with their mother. Throughout the story, these brothers are constantly referred to as "les trois frères", the number three being strongly emphasized in the following statement: "Mes petits frères, nous avons besoin les uns des autres, et il n'est pas question pour le trèfle de sacrifier une de ses trois feuilles" (p. 1161). This image of a three-leaf clover evokes the Trinity, a universal symbol, with each brother representing one aspect of the Christian Deity: power/Father (the eldest), intelligence/Son (the middle brother) and love/Holy Ghost (the youngest). Completing the Trinity embodied by the brothers is the Virgin Mary, symbolizing both the Divine Mother and the purity of Woman, and represented in this story by the youngest brother's wife, who is sacrificed. Thus the Christian Trinity is transformed into an "alchemical quaternity", a progression frequently described by Jung, who speaks, for instance, of "the Three and the One (Trinity and Mary)". Acting as an intermediary between the terrestrial and the celestial and at once representing and replacing the God to whom she gives birth, the Virgin plays an essential role in Christian thought, in

21 Jung, Alchemy 422. Other references to the movement from the Trinity to the alchemical quaternity can be found on pp. 26, 126, 169, etc.
Alchemy and in Yourcenar's tale.

Closely related to water, which Durand calls "le miroir originaire", is the image of the mirror. A recurrent symbol throughout much of Yourcenar's work, the mirror and its relationship to various themes in Denier du rêve have been studied, for example, by Frederick and Edith Farrell. In the introductory paragraph of "Le Lait de la Mort" we find the first mirror image in the text, which is related here to the water of the Adriatic Sea: "Les montagnes pelées de l'Herzégovine maintenaient Raguse sous des feux de miroirs ardents" (p. 1158). The sea, acting as a mirror, reflects the sun, represented by the metaphor of "fires". This image resembles the Chinese concept of the mirror which was said to "take the fire of the sun". A lunar and feminine symbol, the mirror/sea, however, only passively reflects the fire/sunlight without actually being penetrated by it. The interesting mingling of fire and water which is evoked here will be examined in greater detail in the next section of this study of the third nouvelle orientale.

Because of its primordial nature, water, when functioning as a mirror, generally reflects purity, sincerity and authenticity, whereas other mirror images in this text seem to have an opposite effect. For instance, when the narrator asks his friend Philip if he had a "good mother", the Englishman replies: "Ma mère est belle, mince, maquillée, dure comme la glace d'une vitrine" (p. 1159). This declaration introduces the theme of illusion and

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24 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 637.
provides the French engineer/narrator with an opportunity to discuss the modern world's lack of authenticity. Unlike water, the man-made glass of a shop window serves to mirror the superficiality and artificiality of the woman with whom it is associated. The complex symbolism of the mirror is therefore ambivalent: it reflects Truth, but at the same time carries with it an element of illusion and falsehood. This ambivalence is described in Chevalier in the following manner:

1 y a identité dans la différence, disent les textes hindous: La lumière se reflète dans l'eau, mais en fait ne la pénètre pas; ainsi fait Civa. Ainsi la spéculation n'est-elle qu'une connaissance indirecte, lunaire. Par ailleurs, le miroir donne de la réalité une image inversée: Ce qui est en haut est comme ce qui est en bas, dit la Table d'Emeraude hermétique, mais en sens inverse. La manifestation est le reflet inversé du Principe: c'est ce qu'expriment les deux triangles inversés de l'hexagone étoilé.25

The mirror is also generally considered a symbol of the soul, an idea first introduced by Plato; thus its ambivalent nature can be interpreted as a reflection of the multiplicity of the soul. Grégoire de Nysse, developing Plato's original concept, explains that the quality of the mirror is important: "comme un miroir, lorsqu'il est bien fait, reçoit sur sa surface polie les traits de celui qui lui est présenté, ainsi l'âme, purifiée de toutes les salissures terrestres, reçoit l'image de la beauté incorruptible".26 As our study will demonstrate, the water-mirror -- the purest of all reflecting surfaces -- symbolizes the soul of the young mother in "Le Lait de la Mort".

25 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 637.
26 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 638.
An image which is closely linked to the mirror and is recurrent throughout this tale is that of feminine tears. It is first evoked by the narrator when he states that only the women in the legends of "semi-barbaric countries" are "rich in milk and tears". Later, when the first bricks are laid before the young Albanian woman's "red sandals", we read that "Des larmes chaudes roulèrent le long de ses joues et vinrent se mélérer au ciment que la truelle égalisait sur la pierre" (p. 1164). These symbols of the Eternal Feminine are thus blended into the foundation of the tower which will serve as a "maternal sepulchre" and they also seem to be associated with Death. Durand explains that tears are related to various "infernal rivers" such as the Styx, stating that "le 'champs des pleurs' est contigu au fleuve du trépas".  

One of the most interesting passages in the text involves the interrelated images of water, mirrors and eyes. Describing the 'death' of the young heroine in the concluding pages of the story, the text reads:

*Ses yeux languissants s'éteignirent comme le reflet des étoiles dans une citerne sans eau, et l'on ne vit plus à travers la fente que deux prunelles vitreuses qui ne regardaient plus ciel. Ces prunelles à leur tour se liquéfièrent et laissèrent place à deux orbites creuses au fond desquelles on apercevait la Mort, mais la jeune poitrine demeura intacte et, pendant deux ans, à l'aurore, à midi et au crépuscule, le jaillissement miraculeux continua, jusqu'à ce que l'enfant sevré se détournât de lui-même du sein. (p. 1166)*

The light of her soul/spirit, reflected in the mirrors of her eyes, goes out like the images of stars in a circular cistern devoid of rainwater. Here the

'death' of the heroine's soul is linked with the absence of a water-mirror. The Centers of her eyes, once containing Celestial light, now become "two glassy pupils", mirror/lunar symbols which previously, however, represented the sun surrounded by the sky's darkness (the irises). Finally, the theme of liquidity completely dominates, her pupils passing into a liquid state and being replaced by "deux orbites creuses". The French 'orbite' indicates not only the socket of the eye but also the circular movement of the planets around the sun, as in the design of a Mandala with a mystical Center. The entire passage suggests a movement towards the realm of the nocturnal and the chthonian with its abundance of feminine images: water, circles, centers, holes (evoked by the words "creuses" and "fond"), darkness and Death. It presents a "nocturnal" perception of Death, that is, a return to the obscurity of the maternal womb which is but one stage in a perpetual cycle of renewal. In fact, as we have seen, after her spiritual death, the mother's physical body continues to produce milk for her child. Thus, the young woman's 'death' describes a separation of her body and soul, which, in alchemical terms, refers to the division of matter and spirit in preparation for their subsequent reunion, a stage which will finally lead to immortality. Once again, we are reminded of the analogy between the Albanian mother and the Virgin Mary, whom alchemists generally associated with the terrestrial, with the body and matter. Describing an Hermetic drawing called "Figura speculi Sanctae Trinitatis" (Figure of the Mirror of the Holy Trinity), Jung explains that after Mary's death, "by a divine miracle her body was again

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28 Here the heroine resembles Marko when, playing dead, his eyes no longer reflect "l'immensité du ciel et du soir".
united with her soul and both were taken up to heaven" where she is crowned Queen. Yourcenar's heroine will be immortalized by the "miracle" of her milk and by her story which -- "digne d'inspirer aux poètes autant de larmes que celle d'Andromaque" -- is still being endlessly repeated, or 'rabâchée', by the narrator. In the last pages of the tale, which serve as a contrast to the story we have just read, the image of eyes/mirrors continues to dominate. In opposition to the Albanian heroine whose eyes are sacrificed for her son's life, the gypsy mother destroys her child's eyesight in order to ensure her own financial security. The text also contrasts the gypsy's "jupons jaunes" with the Albanian woman's "jupon doré", the colors yellow and gold forming the two opposing poles of the alchemical spectrum.

Fire and Light

The element of fire is considered the antithesis of water in Alchemy (called respectively ignis noster and aqua permanens) as well as in most other symbolic systems. Associated with purification, illumination and, above all, regeneration, fire was called by alchemists "an Element which operates at the centre of all things", as a unifying and stabilizing factor. We shall point out how fire -- particularly when placed in contrast to water -- plays an interesting role in "Le Lait de la Mort".

29 Jung, Alchemy 420.

30 Cirlot explains that the alchemical ordering of colors runs as follows: "yellow, blue, green, black, white, red, gold". Cirlot, Dictionary 57.

31 Cirlot, Dictionary 101.
As we have noted earlier, the first paragraph of the tale provides us with several images evoking fire. The emphasis is placed on the extreme heat of the day, which is compared with that of the flames of Héli: "Il faisait chaud comme il ne fait chaud qu'en enfer" (p. 1158). An interesting image which we have already discussed briefly is that of the "feux de miroirs ardents", describing the sun reflected on the sea. Here the opposing elements of fire and water mysteriously comingle, just as the sexes were intermingled by the artist Wang-Fô as one step in the alchemical transmutation. In this paragraph, which we consider a kind of hermetic text, a progression occurs, from a mingling of the two opposing principles towards a union or sacred marriage of fire and water. The last words in the paragraph -- "à l'ombre d'un parasol couleur feu qui ressemblait de loin à une grosse orange flottant sur la mer" -- describe a *conjunctio solis et lunae*, or union of opposites: the parasol resembling a large orange evokes fire/the sun which joins with the water/moon of the sea.

The text seems to establish a parallel between eyes and fire, a parallel also found in Buddhist and Egyptian mythology, and one which is directly related to the more universal link between the eyes and the light of the sun (as in Masonic symbolism, for example). In the first sentence of "Le Lait de la Mort" we read: "les bonnets soutachés, les opulentes vestes brodées se balançant au vent sur le seuil des boutiques allumaient l'œil des voyageurs en quête de cadeaux à bon marché ou de travestis pour les bals costumés du bord" (p. 1158). The verb 'allumer' evokes both fire and light which are associated here with the "eye" of the travelers. Similarly, when the

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32 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 687.
heroine's 'dies', we are told that her eyes "s'éteignirent", indicating not only the death of her spirit, but also an extinguishing of fire and light. Thus, the story of the Albanian mother's sacrifice both begins and ends with images of fire, and because, in Yourcenar's words, fire signifies Life, they seem to refer respectively to Birth and Death. This is interesting when we consider the alchemist's belief that all things derive from and return to fire, the agent of transmutation and regeneration.

We have previously mentioned the connection between the red bricks of the Tower and the alchemical rubedo, the stage generally preceding the completion of the opus. The reddish-orange color of the tower, which is clearly emphasized in the text, carries on the symbolism of fire introduced in the story's first paragraph. Thus the image of the mother's "warm tears" blending into the red stones placed around her can be considered as another 'mingling' of the antithetical elements of water and fire (or of Darkness and Light). Jung even explains that in a certain alchemical text "fire and water are interpreted morally as 'flames and tears'". At the end of the tale we are told that centuries after the Albanian mother's 'death', "les mères attendries vinrent suivre du doigt le long de la brique roussie les rigoles tracées par le lait merveilleux" (p. 1166). The adjective "roussie" not only suggests the reddish-orange color of fire, but also denotes something being burned or singed. Here we find a union of red (brick) and white (milk), two essential colors in alchemy which, when joined, symbolize the conjunction

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33 Yourcenar, *Eyes* 173. She explains that "life's true face is a brazier", and points out the comforting and devouring aspects of both fire and life.

34 Jung, *Alchemy* 239. When he mentions "flames and tears", he is quoting Béaude Verville's "Recueil stéganographique".
of fire and water, the sun and moon, the "King" and "Queen", and indicate the perfection of the hermaphrodite, often represented as "the red-and-white rose".35 The same red/white symbolism is evoked by the following image: "Il n’y eut plus sur le rebord de briques qu’une pincée de cendres blanches" (p. 1166). We can therefore conclude that in the image of the young mother enclosed within the brick tower we find a series of opposites being united: red/white, Sun/Moon, King/Queen of Heaven, and Fire/Water.

As we have already seen, the symbols of fire which abound in this tale are generally associated with those of sunlight. Whereas the sun is depicted as the light of the Spirit, the absence of light -- represented by the Shadow -- appears as the negative double of the body, as the alter ego or the soul. This traditional concept is explicit in the text: the three brothers deliberately avoid the light of the fire out of fear of projecting their shadows onto the tower because "on peut ... enfermer dans une batisse en construction ce noir prolongement de l’homme qui est peut-être son âme" (p.1160). It is interesting that the brothers fear the shadow, an image which Gilbert Durand associates with mirrors and tears (all included under the heading "symboles nyctomorphes") because all can be viewed negatively, from a diurnal perspective, as symbols of Death or as the terrifying aspect of the feminine principle.36 However, in "Le Lait de la Mort" these feminine images of darkness and liquidity, linked with the young Albanian mother, are ultimately positive symbols signifying the soul and cyclical renewal.

35 Jung, Alchemy 80. For additional examples of Jung’s interpretation of red and white symbolism in Alchemy, see pp. 232, 359, etc.

36 Durand, Structures 106-7.
As in the two preceding tales, the half light of dusk plays an important role in this tale; it is described as "cette heure... où le fantôme de la lumière morte hante encore les champs" (p. 1161), that sacred instant when the pale light of Day seems to meld with the darkness of Night. It is at this symbolic moment between Light and Dark, between Life and Death, that the brothers decide to choose a sacrificial victim and then return home to their wives, one of whom will be placed, at dawn on the following day, within the brick walls of the tower. It is also at the hour of twilight that the young mother will nurse her child for the first time from her prison inside the tower, only a few days before her spirit 'dies' in order to be reborn. We are told twice that the child has regularly been breastfed three times a day -- at dawn, at noon and at dusk -- a schedule which will be continued until he is weaned. This tripartite division of the day according to the three phases of the sun brings to mind the symbolism of the Trinity, previously evoked by the masculine triad formed by the brothers. Thus, the triple nature of the Sun, replacing the traditional Christian Trinity, is transformed into a feminine quaternity when completed by the Albanian woman who represents the Virgin, the Earth Mother and the Moon, and the tale will conclude with their symbolic union, an alchemical conjunctio of Sol and Luna.

In addition to linking this text to the other tales previously presented in this chapter through the mediating image of twilight, the symbolic fabric of "Le Lait de la Mort" not only highlights the important role played by the Albanian mother, who, like the Virgin Mary, completes and perfects the masculine symbol of the Trinity, but also reveals the dominance in the text of feminine images which evoke a "nocturnal" perception of Death as one
step in a continuous process of renewal. Such a reading strongly brings into question Linda Klieger Stillman's emphasis on anti-feminist elements and her statement that the author's narratives "devalue female sexuality, depicted as dependent on ruse, fancy and artifice, and always infelicitous". Stillman also asserts that in Yourcenar's writings the author replaces her own experiences and desires "by the controlling male who speaks with the unalterable authority of history and in whose hands women fare at best...poorly". Such a story as "Le Lait de la Mort" in fact contradicts Ms. Stillman's generalization: Here the heroine's fate is controlled not by her brothers-in-law but by their wives, and it is her own decision to continue nursing her child that will ultimately immortalize her memory. Both Stillman and Jean Blot criticize the connection between torture and love in Yourcenar's tales. What they both neglect to take into account is the symbolic significance of torture in the alchemical process. Eliade describes its importance to the Greeks and explains that with Arab alchemists its role became clear:

In the Testament of Ga'far Sadiq, we read that dead bodies must be tortured by fire and by all the Arts of Suffering in order that they may revive; for without suffering or death one cannot achieve eternal life. 'Torture' always brought 'death' with it - mortificatio, putrefactio, nigredo. There was no hope of 'resuscitating' to a transcendent mode of being (that is, no hope of attaining to transmutation) without prior 'death'. The alchemical symbolism of torture and death is sometimes equivocal; the operation can be taken to refer either to man or to a mineral substance.

37 Stillman, "Phallacy" 262.

38 Stillman, "Phallacy" 262.

39 Eliade, Forge 152.
From the larger perspective of symbolic and alchemical traditions within which Marguerite Yourcenar has so often fashioned her narratives, the torture which leads to the 'death' of the heroine in this third nouvelle orientale assumes clearer significance. It becomes indeed a *sine qua non* to attainment of the Philosopher's Stone and Eternal Life.
Chapter 2 - A Solar Rhythm

1. Love and Death

"Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi", the first of four tales to be discussed in this chapter, shares with the preceding three stories a prevalence of images of twilight, images evoking not only Death, but also the promise of Rebirth. Here, however, the Dusk will serve as the first phase in a solar cycle to be continued and completed throughout the course of the next three nouvelles orientales. In "Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi", the sun's descent metaphorically announces the hero's passage from Life to Death, but interestingly, this imminent Death is presented in conjunction with an emergent love. This theme of love, appearing frequently in Yourcenar's *Nouvelles Orientales*, has been considered in a variety of ways by the critics who have shown an interest in this work. We have already discussed, for instance, Jean Blot's and Linda Stillman's emphasis on the role of torture and suffering in Yourcenar's portrayals of her characters' emotional relationships. Speaking of what he calls Yourcenar's "érotique", which he generally links with sadistic elements, Jean Blot mentions the fourth tale, and discusses its lack of emotion:

L'érotique de Yourcenar... a pour caractéristique, de se garder de toute affectivité. De l'abstraction intellectuelle à la brutalité sensuelle, il n'est passage ni transition. L'objet du désir, si même il demeure confus, préserve en tout cas sa nature d'objet. L'amé ne prétend ni ne parvient à une existence rivale à celle de l'amant. De ce fait, l'amour reste gratuit, arbitraire, rien qu'un désir qui surprend et désarme l'intelligence, qu'elle ne peut expliquer et auquel elle ne parvient ni à s'intéresser elle-même ni à intéresser le cœur.1

1 Blot, *Yourcenar* 97.
Whereas Blot finds an absence of emotion in this tale, Pierre Horn describes it as lacking eroticism. Comparing it with "Le Sourire de Marko", Horn states that "This joyful eroticism is missing from "Le Dernier Amour du Prince Genghi" (The last love of Prince Genghi) and replaced by the acrid bitterness of tears". As we turn to "Le Dernier Amour du Prince Genghi", a story which, the author tells us, fills a "lacune" in the celebrated eleventh century Japanese novel by Lady Murasaki Shikibu, we shall examine three elements whose symbolic functions will severely challenge both Blot's and Horn's readings: the theme of ritual love, symbols of fire and light, and the concept of a mysterious union.

Love as Initiation:

C. Frederick and Edith Farrell state that the central element in all of the *Nouvelles Orientales* is love:

Although they begin and end with stories about artists and how their art shapes their lives, these oriental tales are primarily about love. As in *Feux*, the theme of love is treated from many different points of view: love that turns to hate, maternal and married love, love as shown by service, love that rises above the routines of daily lives and provides a link with the eternal.

Although we do not agree that love is the principal theme in all of the stories, we do consider it an important element, particularly in this fourth

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2 Horn, *Yvonne* 21.

tale. Furthermore, the sort of love which, according to the Farreils, "provides a link with the eternal" is extremely significant to our study of Yourcenar’s work and it is precisely the sacred dimension of love which concerns us here. Yourcenar herself, describing what she calls "sympathetic love" in an interview with Mathieu Galey, stresses that "Sensual relations are sacred because they are universal" and speaks sadly of "the absence of the sacred" in European conceptions of love.4

The love which develops between Prince Genghí and la Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombebent resembles a mystical ritual, and thus involves a participation in the sacred. The hermit’s abode where their union will take place and which the aging Prince "avait pris soin de faire construire au flanc de la montagne" to serve as a retreat until his death is characteristic of what Eliade refers to as an "espace sacré".5 It is located "en pleine sauvagerie champêtre" in the middle of the forest, an archetypal image of the Chthonian Mother which suggests a return to a primordial state. A similar symbolic role is played by the Prince’s secluded "cabane".6 Further, we read that the "maisonnette s’élevait au pied d’un érable centenaire": here the "century old maple tree", like the mountain on which the house is built, evokes the symbolism of a cosmic axis or Center of the World.

4 Yourcenar, *Eyes* 52.

5 Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) 21-59. In this chapter on "sacred space", Eliade cites numerous examples of abodes which are all related to the symbolism of the *Axis mundi* and the *Terre-Mère*.

6 Eliade explains the symbolism of "la cabane sacrée" among Algonquin and Sioux Indian tribes. Eliade, *Sacré* 42.
The Prince's experience while sequestered at his mountain retreat is characteristic of the initial stages of tribal initiation rites: separation from society, a symbolic *regressus ad uterum*, isolation, an affliction resembling illness, and suffering. He suffers not only from the "illness" of his blindness, but also from his inability to accept the aging process and his loss of physical beauty. We are told in the beginning of the story, for instance, that he chose to become a hermit because "il savait cette fois que ne lui serait plus réservé que le rôle de vieillard, et à ce personnage il préférait celui de fantôme" (p. 1168). Within the sacred space of his "ermitage" Prince Genghi will undergo a sort of initiation into death and it is his relationship with the Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent that will ultimately help him through this difficult ordeal.

The development of their relationship is ritual in nature. It begins eighteen years before the prince goes into seclusion when the Dame, then serving as a lady-in-waiting to Genghi's other wives, would occasionally be honored with the prince's "nocturnal visits". During those eighteen years "elle avait aimé le prince sans jamais se lasser de souffrir" (p. 1170). We have already noted the importance of suffering in the author's work. Yourcenar tells us in an interview that "Love is a disorder" and that the link between love and disease was established by the ancients long before her. After sending numerous letters to him at his mountain retreat which are never answered, the Dame goes to him, begging him to let her stay with him, but she is harshly rejected. She then waits for him to become blind: "elle surveillait de loin les progrès de la cécité de Genghi, comme une femme

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7 Yourcenar, *Eyes* 73-4.
impatiente de rejoindre son amant attend la complète tombée du soir” (p.1170). Her subsequent use of disguises to trick the Prince into allowing her to remain with him brings to mind the symbolic function of masks and disguises in ritual ceremonies such as tribal initiations, funerals and fertility rites. In initiation rites, for example, masks are generally worn by the initiator and are said to have magical powers or to be instruments of possession.8 Chevalier tells us that there is also a danger involved for the person wearing the mask who, “ayant voulu capter les forces de l’autre en l’attirant dans les pièges de son masque, peut être à son tour possédé par l’autre” or he may be identified with his mask to such an extent that he finally becomes “l’image représentée”.9 Thus, at the end of the story, when the Prince remembers her in her disguise as “Chujo” but has forgotten the real “Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent”, she has fallen into the trap of her own mask.

Several months before first donning the mask of “Chujo”, she had tried another disguise -- that of Ukifune, a farmer's daughter -- which was ultimately unsuccessful. It is clearly indicated that their relationship developed very gradually over a long period of time, taking on a number of different forms or disguises. It therefore recalls the Hindu ritual of maithuna, described by Yourcenar as “the most highly developed expression of the sacred in love”, a “union with the divine through the agency of a

8 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 615-16.

9 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 616-17. Interestingly, we also read here that “Le masque vise à maîtriser et à contrôler le monde invisible”.
human individual". Eliade explains the practice of *maithuna* in the following way:

*Maithuna* makes its appearance as the consummation of a long and difficult apprenticeship. The neophyte must acquire perfect control of his senses, and, to this end, he must approach the 'devout woman' (*nayika*) by stages and transform her into a goddess through an interiorized iconographic dramaturgy.  

After their sacred 'union', the Dame acts as Genghi's eyes and delights him with her charms, her skill as a cook and her musical talent. When he falls ill and she cares for him on his deathbed, we read that the prince "ne pouvait que goûter ce que cette intimité nouvelle et misérable ajoutait entre deux êtres aux étroites douceurs de l'amour" (p. 1175). Earlier he describes her as a "harp", an image which is revealing in terms of this woman's role in Genghi's initiation into the mysteries of death. A universal symbol which links Heaven and Earth, the harp was thought to guide men to the Heavens, not only after but before death: we read in Chevalier that "durant la vie terrestre, elle symbolise les tensions entre les instincts matériels ... et les aspirations spirituelles ...". Thus la Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent, like the "devout woman" of the *maithuna*, is transformed into a kind of goddess. In fact, after their first mysterious union, Genghi associates the Dame with a divinity when he tells her: "Je te devine à travers un brouillard qui n'est peut-être que le halo de ta propre beauté" (p.

10 Yourcenar, *Eyes* 53.

11 Eliade, *Yoga* 266.

12 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 495.
Furthermore, she serves as the Prince’s initiator, not only helping him accept his loss of physical beauty, but also acting as an intermediary between the phenomenal and the noumenal, that is, between Genghi’s terrestrial existence and his ascension into Heaven. The story thus demonstrates Yourcenar’s theory that “pleasure is a gateway to knowledge or to God.” Finally, at the moment of Genghi’s death, we learn that the Dame has been successful in her appointed role: his face acquires the serenity of the dead and “La fin de toute douleur avait effacé de son visage toute trace de satiété ou d’amertume et semblait lui avoir persuadé à lui-même qu’il avait encore dix-huit ans” (p. 1177).

A Prince of Fire and Light:

The first words in the story, describing the great Japanese seducer as “Genghi le Resplendissant”, signal the important role played by light, and in particular its link with the aging prince. Furthermore we are told that, years before, his rare nocturnal visits “avaient suffi à éclairer la pauvre vie de la Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent” (p. 1170). It is natural that the gradual onset of the prince’s blindness and approaching death be linked with an increasing loss of light for, as Yourcenar tells us, “les ténèbres pour lui commençaient avant la mort”. Thus, when he first moves into his hut in the forest, winter begins to fall and “le brouillard étouffa le soleil”. Here the fog suggests a phase of evolution, a period of indistinction between two states of being which, for Genghi, are Life and Death.

\footnote{Yourcenar, _Eyes_ 54.}
The prince's blindness, related to the symbolism of light, is another important theme in the tale. In mythology, blindness is generally linked with clairvoyance: Gilbert Durand mentions the examples of Odin and Varuna, the latter a sun god who is at once "celui qui 'voit tout' et celui qui est 'aveugle'." Similarly, seers and soothsayers are often blind men, a fact indicating that one must have "les yeux fermés à la lumière physique pour percevoir la lumière divine". Durand further establishes a parallel between blind individuals and the unconscious, stating that in legend and literature these individuals often personify what he calls the "archétype du roi aveugle" who is "constamment prêt à composer avec le jeune héros de lumière, prince charmant . . .". In Yourcenar's tale, Prince Genghi embodies the two opposing archetypes: the Blind King he has now become and the Prince of Light, that image of his former self which he calls "le souvenir de mon pire ennemi, le beau prince aux yeux vifs dont l'image me tient éveillé toutes les nuits" (p. 1172). In this way, he represents both the Conscious and the Unconscious: like the half light of twilight, he is suspended at a place between Darkness and Light, between Life and Death. This idea is conveyed in the text by the number of references made to the "crépuscule" and the season of autumn. The story in fact begins in autumn, when Genghi goes into seclusion and ends with his death one year -- or one complete cycle -- later "à la fin de l'automne". The fact that each of the seasons is mentioned in the text evokes Nature's Eternal Return and

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14 Durand, Structures 171.

15 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 88.

16 Durand, Structures 102.
emphasizes the importance of the cycle in this chapter.

The prince's self-imposed sequestration -- his chosen role of hermit -- also has an interesting symbolic function in relation to themes of light and blindness. We are reminded above all of the ninth enigma of the Tarot, "The Hermit", who was called "the Master of the Invisible". He is pictured carrying a lantern which symbolizes "comme la lampe d'Hermès Trismégiste, la lumière voilée de la sagesse, celle que l'Hermite couvre de son bleu manteau d'initié". In his examination of the symbolism of the Tarot, P. D. Ouspensky explains that "the Hermit" uses his lantern to search for "buried treasure", for "without a lantern you will always be finding treasures, but your gold will turn to dust". Also said to work "dans l'invisible pour conditionner le devenir en gestion", the Hermit is the archetypal hermetic philosopher, and is symbolically linked with Hermes, intermediary between Heaven and Earth. There are thus obvious similarities between Prince Genghi and both the Hermit and the god Hermes, the latter described by Durand as "le vieillard symbole de l'inconscient aveugle". Although unable to see the light of day, the prince possesses "la lumière voilée de la sagesse", revealing in his somewhat hermetic final speech several important philosophical truths about the human condition.

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17 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 501.

18 Ouspensky, *Universe* 212. It is interesting to note that Ouspensky compares the Tarot with Alchemy, stating that they are "parallel symbolical systems of psychology and metaphysics" (190).

19 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 501.

20 Durand, *Structures* 259.

21 For instance, he states: "Dans un univers où tout se passe comme un songe, on s'en voudrait de durer toujours. Je ne me plains pas que les choses, les êtres, les coeurs soient
There are many references in the text to Genghi's voluntary religious asceticism. We read, for instance, that after "sa jeunesse orageuse", he learns in his old age to "goûter tout son saoul au luxe suprême qui consiste à se passer de tout" (p. 1169). Alone at his mountain retreat, the prince, dressed in his "strict monk's robe", spends his days reading the Scriptures, finding in "ces versets austères une saveur qui manquait désormais pour lui aux plus pathétiques vers d'amour" (p. 1159). His hermitage and asceticism reflect something more fundamental in the story: the theme of purification, which is directly related to the elements of fire and water. Genghi, who is clearly associated with fire, reads the Scriptures, we are told, "à la lueur d'un brasero avare", an almost oxymoronic image. Here the brazier's fire is linked with asceticism and purity, whereas later the symbolism of fire is clearly sexual. For example, when he invites the Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent, disguised as Ukifune, to enter his hut, the aging seducer suggests: "Tu pourras te réchauffer à mon feu bien qu'il contienne moins de charbons que de cendres" (p. 1171). In the next paragraph the fire is described as "presque mort", and again Genghi asks the woman to remove her clothes before "his" fire. Like his fire, the prince, now close to death, has lost his youthly ardor and the abundance of ashes further indicates that the fire of life has almost been extinguished. It is thus interesting to recall that ashes may be the result of a purification by fire, as well as a sign of mystical rebirth, as in the case of the mythical Phœnix.

périssables, puisqu'une part de leur beauté est faite de ce malheur. Ce qui m'afflige, c'est qu'ils soient uniques. Jadis, la certitude d'obtenir à chaque instant de ma vie une révélation qui ne se renouvelerait plus composait le plus clair de mes secrets plaisirs : maintenant, je meurs honteux comme un privilégié qui aurait assisté seul à une fête sublime qu'on ne donnera qu'une fois" (pp. 1175-76).
A Mysterious Union:

Purification, it now remains to be seen, not only becomes associated with both fire and light, but also leads, through a mysterious union, to spiritual regeneration. Whereas Prince Genghi is associated with light and the element of fire, the Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent is related to liquids, particularly water and tears. For example, when she dons her first disguise in an attempt to seduce the prince, it is the sounds of her crying -- her "sanglots féminins" -- which attract his attention. Here, there are four references to the woman's tears in six consecutive sentences: "pleurer", "sanglots", "larmes", and "je pleure" (p. 1171). Furthermore, as an introduction to this scene, we find a description of the natural environment in which water obviously dominates light: "Les pluies tendres du printemps tombaient du ciel sur la terre molle, noyant les dernières lueurs du crépuscule..." (p. 1171). The Dame is also linked with the "tender" water of rain, and she too will play a dominant role when she succeeds in tricking and seducing the prince. Described as "toute trempée" and "mouillée jusqu'aux os", she proceeds to dry her wet body at 'Genghi's fire'. Later it is evident that the prince relates the elements of water and earth to the feminine principle: "...le bruit d'un ruisseau est plus monotone que la voix d'une femme, et les courbes des collines ou les mèches des nuages sont faites pour ceux qui voient, et planent trop loin de nous pour se laisser caresser" (p. 1173). The following observation made by the Farrells about the role of the natural elements in Yourcenar's work is extremely accurate: "In terms of elemental images, which play a large role in Yourcenar's work, women are
primarily earth and water, while men are primarily fire and air".\textsuperscript{22} This attribution of elemental images to the sexes, an important part of the \textit{Nouvelles orientales}, once again reveals a parallel with alchemical thought. Thus the nocturnal unions of the Prince and the Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent eighteen years prior to his exile in the forest are like "des étoiles dans une nuit pluvieuse". This same imagery is continued in the description of their second union: the aging prince is compared to a dying fire and the woman, disguised as Ukifune, linked with both rainwater and tears. This symbolic union of antithetical elements obviously evokes the goal of the alchemical \textit{opus} : the \textit{mysterium conjunctionis}.

We find in the images of the text an alchemical progression both leading to and resulting from this mysterious union. First, the approaching darkness of Genghi's blindness, called "les ténèbres", suggests the unconscious condition of the stage described as the work in black". Later we read that the prince's face, "vacant, désaffecté, terni par la cécité et les approches de l'âge, ressemblait à un miroir plombé où s'était jadis reflété de la beauté" (p. 1171). It is significant that this mirror, lacking the brilliance of reflected light, is leaden because lead signals the first stage of an alchemical transmutation: called "the water of all metals" by Paracelsus, lead was often considered the \textit{prima materia} -- described as "the lead of the philosophers"\textsuperscript{23} -- and many alchemists spoke of the transformation of lead into gold as the goal of their work. This immersion into the \textit{prima materia}, which is the obscurity of Genghi's blindness, leads to a stage of

\textsuperscript{22} Farrells, \textit{Counterpoint} 101. Bachelard's study of the elements is noteworthy here.

\textsuperscript{23} Jung, \textit{Alchemy} 340.
purification, evoked by the prince's hermitage and religious asceticism. The "feuille blanche" sent by messenger to family and friends from the Japanese prince, who was formerly a renowned poet and calligrapher, reflects "the work in white", as this stage of purification is commonly known. Also clearly associated with purification is the element of fire, which, as we have noted, plays a central role both in this tale and in Alchemy.

The alchemical "conjunction" appears in the text as a union of fire and water, symbolized respectively, by the aging prince and the Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent. We have already described the place of their union -- Genghi's hut in the forest -- as an evocation of the Terra Mater, a maternal matrix in which the Philosopher's Stone will be engendered. The idea of an interface of opposing principles is implied in the following description of the prince's hermitage: "... l'endroit où l'exilé volontaire habitait en compagnie des chevreuils et des paons de la forêt" (pp. 1170-71). The roe deer, as we observed earlier in our discussion of "Le Sourire de Marko", is a nocturnal creature often playing the role of psychopomp, while the peacock, on the other hand, is an archetypal solar symbol which is also linked with fire.²⁴

The mystical union of fire/Prince and water/Dame will result in a number of images of the Philosopher's Stone. For example, when the dame removes her clothing before the fire, we read that "Le feu rosissait son corps mince qui semblait taillé dans l'ambre le plus pâle" (pp. 1171-72). The fire makes her body like a rose, a symbol of purity and perfection -- like the "rosiers des philosophes" -- and she also seems to be carved in the

²⁴ Chevalier, Dictionnaire 725.
pale, yellowish gold color of amber. Amber, representing solar attraction, is often attributed to celestial essences because, "réunissant en lui les formes de l'or et de l'argent", it reflects both the incorruptible purity of gold and the luminous, celestial glow of silver.  

Similarly, when Prince Genghi speaks of "the halo" of her beauty and describes her as "a harp", he is revealing the relationship between his mistress and the celestial world. This image of the harp, a link between Heaven and Earth, further reinforces the theme of a union of opposites. Just as the Dame is said to be carved in amber, the prince is later described as being "sculpté dans du jade blanc". The connection between the Philosopher's Stone and jade -- especially white jade -- is well documented, and has already been discussed in our examination of "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé". Finally, in the concluding pages of the story, the ultimate stage of "sublimation" is signaled by the colors of the leaves at the beginning of autumn: "L'automne arriva, changeant les arbres de la montagne en autant de fées vêtues de pourpre et d'or, mais destinées à mourir aux premiers froids" (p. 1174). Here the colors of purple and gold, suggesting immortality, are linked with the prince, who, like them, will die before the arrival of winter, and thus become a part of Nature's endless cycle.

In one of her conversations with Mathieu Galey, Marguerite Yourcenar discusses "Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi", stating that it was republished in a feminist journal:

I wrote to the editor, Mme Servan-Schreiber: 'I'm somewhat surprised that you have introduced your readers to so devoted, so tender, and so humble a woman. They must have been shocked'. The response I received, logical in its own way, asserted that, on the contrary, the story offered an excellent object lesson: 'Don't be so devoted to a man.' For my part, I find the Woman of the the Village of the Falling Flowers who figures in the story to be an exemplary figure. True, she suffers when she learns that the prince, on his deathbed, has forgotten the first moments of their love. Obviously this discovery is painful. But she comes back to the prince, who has gone blind, and takes care of him, nurses him, helps him to die. Thus she fulfills to perfection the lover's role for which she was destined, and everything is as it should be. Whether he remembers their early love or not is of no importance.26

The author's explanation of her story singularly contradicts Jean Blot's view that it lacks emotion. A symbolic reading of the tale indeed reveals how deep emotion, such as the love and pain experienced by the Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent, can establish a link with the celestial, and ultimately lead to attainment of Absolute Knowledge. When Yourcenar states that the Dame fulfills the lover's role she was destined for, she seems to be referring to what we call the woman's role as initiator, her function as her lover's guide into the mysteries of Death and Rebirth. The imaginal fabric discerned here also disproves Pierre Horn's observation regarding the tale's lack of eroticism. Although his comments about Yourcenar's work are generally insightful, Horn, like Blot and Stillman, fails to apprehend the ritualistic, sacred import of this narrative, approaching it merely through its diegetic, external structure. For instance, he does not recognize that, in "Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi", the erotic elements are presented symbolically: the 'fire' of the prince's passion is not only

26 Yourcenar, *Eyes* 54-5.
aroused by the sight of the Dame's wet body on which it leaves its rose-like mark and coloring, but it is also one of the two opposing elements which will ultimately join in a sacred marriage, a *mysterium conjunctio*.

Finally, the emphasis in this text on twilight and cyclical time introduces a symbolic pattern describing the sun's daily journey which will encompass the next three stories. The movement towards Nightfall in "Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi" will result in images of the "Black Sun" in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides", the brilliance of solar light then returning with the Dawn in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", until finally the passage from dusk to dusk is completed and the circle closed with a metaphor for the setting sun in the conclusion of "La Veuve Aphrodissia".
II. The Black Sun

The author tells us that the fifth tale, "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides", is based upon "des faits divers ou des superstitions de la Grèce d'aujourd'hui, ou plutôt d'hier" (p. 1215), that is, of the Greece of the 1930's. Yourcenar's fascination with Hellenic thought manifests itself not only in this short story, but also in many of her better known works. Walter Kaiser, a literary critic and the English translator of *Comme l'Eau qui coule*, describes the author's relationship with Greece in the following manner:

Her Eleatic sense of time; her almost sensory perception of the flow of history; her celebration of the body and faith in austere clarity of mind; her acknowledgement of the anguish and humiliation as well as of the transcendent rapture of love; her unfailling recognition of the transience of beauty and the beauty of transience; her respect for the unorthodox, the paradoxical; her pantheistic worship of all created things; her dark but compassionate vision of man's tragic existence; her ceaseless quest to comprehend the nature of man - all these have either their origins or their confirmation in the eternal spirit of Greece, 'because almost everything that men have said best has been said in Greek' *(parce que tout ce que les hommes ont dit de mieux a été dit en grec).*

In his examination of the *Nouvelles orientales*, Jaccques de Ricaumont states that "c'est dans les deux nouvelles grecques que l'art de Marguerite Yourcenar est le plus personnel!". The two Greek tales are in fact among the most interesting of the collection and consequently have been the object

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2 Ricaumont, "Inventaire" 300.
of a relatively large number of critical studies. For instance, the fifth tale is discussed from the point of view of narration in an article entitled "Le narrateur et l'imaginaire dans L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" by Anne Marie De Gendt. Although this article's emphasis on the role of illusion and the Imaginary is noteworthy, it is irrelevant to our reading of the tale. Linda Kieger Stillman presents a somewhat superficial examination of the image of the sun in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides", and also states that the tale "recounts another version of the personalized alchemical metaphor" which, for Stillman, refers to Yourcenar's "differenciation", that is, her lack of sexual indifference resulting from her "repressed feminine discourse". Stillman's comments are largely unjustified, yet this allusion to alchemy -- albeit erroneously applied to the author's intentions and private life -- is interesting in terms of our study. Jean Blot once again stresses Yourcenar's "intensité sensuelle" and the "thème de l'érotisme grec" in terms of this fifth nouvelle orientale. Finally, the theme of love is treated by both Pierre Horn and the Farrells, the latter emphasizing that "love is divine". Their interpretation of the Néréides' love as a link with the celestial introduces a central element in the story, one, however, which merits further examination. We shall demonstrate how the symbolism of this tale, although thematically similar to that of the others, sets its apart as the

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3 Anne Marie De Gendt, "Le narrateur et l'imaginaire dans L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides", Les Lettres Romanes 34 (1980), 193-205. Stating that the narrator avoids creating the usual atmosphere of a "conte merveilleux", De Gendt finds in the tale, as well as in the entire collection, "une incertitude devant l'imaginaire" (193).

4 Stillman, "Phallacy" 273-75.

5 Blot. Yourcenar 89-90.

6 Farrells, Counterpoint 99.
central point of the entire collection, as well as establishing its relationship to the other nouvelles orientales analyzed in this chapter through its evocation of a precise phase in the sun’s cycle. In addition to a discussion of the text’s solar imagery, our treatment of “L’Homme qui a aimé les Néréides” will focus on Panégyotis’ initiation into the Feminine and the role of Spirit and Matter.

Initiation into the Feminine

As we have already seen in “Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé” and “Le Sourire de Marko”, the theme of initiation is a central element in the Nouvelles orientales. Panégyotis’ ritual initiation, however, is of quite a different nature from those of Marko or of Ling. After the initial introduction to Panégyotis, the story’s narrator, Jean Démériadis, begins to describe the young Greek’s transformation by recounting his prior life. We are told, for instance, that in his youth Panégyotis never wanted for anything; his house was equipped with “un réveille-matin dans la cuisine, une lampe allumée devant le mur des icônes, enfin tout ce qu’il faut” (p. 1179). Signaling Panégyotis’ complete immersion in Profane Time and in the physical world is the alarm clock, and its mention in conjunction with illuminated icons (the latter generally reflecting the spiritual realm) seems to be an ironic commentary on the inadequacy of Christian rituals as a means of participation in the Sacred. Similarly, we read that the path which has been laid out for him is “une route grecque, poussiéreuse, caillouteuse et monotone, mais avec ça et là des grillons qui chantent...”. His world is
thus dull and colorless, but with a promise of change indicated by the crickets. The narrator characterizes the young Greek as handsome and virile, and cites among his numerous mistresses the veterinarian's daughter and the priest's wife, these two women symbolically representing the complete range of Panégyotis' experience with profane love.

Démétriadis goes on to describe the events leading up to Panégyotis' initiation and subsequent transformation, explaining that upon his return he has become "un Panégyotis nouveau, aussi transformé que s'il avait passé par la mort" (p. 1181). Therefore, as in any ritual initiation, the Greek's experience involves the essential symbolic death to the world of the Profane leading to a participation in the Sacred. The author's descriptions of the place where the initiation occurs indicate a Center, similar to those evoked in the other tales involving initiations such as the Emperor's palace in the kingdom of Han, "les bouches de Kattaro" and "la Sainte Montagne". When Panégyotis goes back to the area where he first encountered the Néréides, the images described evoke a return to innocence, to a mystical Center: "Il’y a là une source où les pêcheurs viennent quelquefois se fournir d’eau douce, un vallon creux, un champ de figuiers d’où un sentier descend vers la mer" (p. 1182). The fresh-water spring, the "hollow valley", the fig trees and a descent into the sea, all of these images are clearly feminine, indicating an entry into the archetype of the Great Mother and an introduction to the mysteries of fecundity. The fig tree is a particularly rich and interesting symbol in terms of our study: An axis mundi associated with immortality and fertility, the fig tree was the central element in a Greek initiatory rite into the mysteries of fecundity in which
"les sycophantes étaient chargés de révéler la figure".7

As a result of his encounter with the Néréides under the fig trees, Panégyotis becomes mute, "car il ne faut pas que soient révélés au vulgaire les secrets de leur amour" (p. 1181). Here the young Greek's role as initiate is clearly indicated: He is no longer among the Profane -- the "vulgaires" --, because certain secrets have been revealed to him. The idea of a revelation is evoked by the image of the nymphs' hair. We read that when he devours their hair Panégyotis has "l'impression de mâchonner du miel". A universal symbol, honey is a primordial, sacred form of nourishment which, like milk, is linked with fecundity and immortality as well as with eroticism. Furthermore, honey, playing an essential role in many initiation rituals such as those involved in the Eleusinian Mysteries, serves as "la révélation à l'initié"8 which marks the neophyte's rebirth. For Gilbert Durand, honey symbolizes the "délices de l'intimité retrouvée" for, as he explains, "le miel au creux de l'arbre, au sein de l'abeille ou de la fleur est aussi, comme le dit l'Upanishad, le symbole du cœur des choses".9 Eroticism, fecundity, rebirth, intimacy, a mystical Center -- all of these symbolic interpretations of honey are related to the archetype of the Eternal Feminine which, ambivalent by nature, can be viewed either as a Great Mother or as a Femme Fatale. Thus the nymphs' honey-like hair is the revelation of Panégyotis'

7 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 440. Similarly, we read here that in North Africa the fig symbolizes "la fécondité venue des morts".

8 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 633. Referring to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Dictionnaire tells us that "du miel était donné aux initiés d'un degré supérieur, comme signe d'une vie nouvelle" (p. 634).

9 Durand, Structures 297.
initiation into the secrets of the Eternal Feminine which will cause him to undergo a drastic change in personality. It is also, and more importantly, a participation in the sacred, a return to a Center or *recessus ad uterum* similar to that experienced by Marko in his movements through the waves and under the mountains. Finally, the yellow-gold color of both honey and the Néréides' hair further suggests immortality and rebirth.

Yourcenar describes the revelation of Panégyotis' initiation when she writes: "Les Néréides ont ouvert au jeune insensé l'accès au monde féminin aussi différent des filles de l'île que celles-ci le sont des femelles du bétail" (p. 1182). Here, there is a progression from the bestial ("femelles du bétail") to the human ("filles de l'île") to the celestial ("Néréides"). This type of tripartite division of the universe which represents man's relationship to the noumenal and the phenomenal is, as Ouspensky tells us, the basis of all the hermetic or occult sciences, such as Alchemy, the Tarot, the Cabala, Black magic, Astrology, etc.\(^\text{10}\) The text continues: "...elles lui ont apporté l'envirement de l'inconnu, l'épuisement du miracle, les malignités étincelantes du bonheur" (p. 1182). The unknown and the miraculous, characteristic of the noumenal world, are revealed to the young Greek as part of his discovery of the spiritual realm as it is reflected by the Néréides.

After his initiation, Panégyotis is transformed by the Nymphs who "l'ont abêtì pour mieux le mêler à leurs jeux, comme une espèce de faune innocent". Unlike the initiates in most tribal rituals, he remains entirely within the realm of the sacred, never returning to Profane Time: "Il ne

\(^{10}\) Ouspensky, *Universe* 189-190.
travaille plus; il ne s’inquiète plus ni des mois ni des jours" (p. 1183). The preceding sentence stands in opposition to the earlier descriptions of his home with its alarm clock in the kitchen, and his daily activities which consisted of working in his father's fields with "le pilaf à midi et l'ouzo glauque et parfumé avant le repas du soir". The new Panégyotis avoids human civilization, choosing instead to immerse himself in the natural world: "Il s'enfonce dans les champs et les bois de pins au creux des collines désertes". The presentation of the landscape clearly assumes a feminine valorization and suggests a return to the intimacy of the maternal womb. In its evocation of a sinking movement, the verb 's'enfoncer' denotes the kind of slow, pleasurable descent so aptly identified by cultural anthropology as "l'intimité" of the Nocturnal Mode.\footnote{Durand, \textit{Structures} 274-93.} The "champs" recall the Elysian Fields of Greco-roman mythology, a Paradise involving a return to innocence, while the forest is clearly a maternal symbol, evoking the mysteries of fertility and regeneration as well as the idea of a Center of Life, represented, for instance, by the 'bois sacrés' where the gods were said to dwell. The pine trees filling the woods not only symbolize immortality and the Eternal return, but also bring to mind the cult of Dionysus (and Cybele, the great chthonian goddess) which associated this particular tree with fecundity. The use of the word 'creux' further reinforces Durand's concept of "intimité" which he links with passivity and the archetypal Mother. Finally, we find in the "collines désertes" the recurrence of an anatomical analogon from the previous tale ("les courbes des collines"), establishing a clear relationship between the element of Earth and the feminine principle.
There are several indications that as a result of his initiatory experience, Panégyotis himself is associated with immortality. We read, for instance, that "les paysans prétendent qu'il ne vieillira pas". The images described in the following passages are also quite revealing: "... on dit qu'une fleur de jasmin posée sur un mur de pierres sèches, un caillou blanc au pied d'un cyprès sont autant de messages où il déchiffre l'heure et le lieu du prochain rendez-vous des fées" (p. 1183). First, the jasmin with its white or yellow blossoms evokes the tantrico-taoist symbolism of the "Golden Flower", also mentioned frequently by medieval alchemists. The jasmin flower is equivalent to the Elixir of life and its "floraison est le retour au centre, à l'unité, à l'état primordial". It is significant that the jasmin appears on a wall of stones, this image recalling the Chinese alchemist Yu-the-Great who, like his son, was born out of stone as well as certain Christian legends which depict Christ as originating from stone. The same symbolism, only reversed, is evoked by the image which follows: a white pebble at the foot of a cypress tree. Here the vegetable is replaced by the mineral: It is a no longer a white flower, but a white stone which acts as a sign for Panégyotis, both stones and flowers being alchemical symbols for totality. In this passage the emphasis placed on stones brings to mind the archetypal Earth Mother, Cybele, who was originally worshipped in the form of a stone. Cybele's role in Roman mythology is explained thus:

A l'époque de la décadence romaine, Cybèle sera associée au culte d'Attis, le dieu mort et ressuscité périodiquement, dans un culte

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12 Jung, Alchemy 76, 80, etc.

13 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 447.
It is not surprising to find mineral imagery in this short story, as Yourcenar's interest in stones has been expressed in other works. For example, in *L'Œuvre au Noir*, Zenon speaks of the "sourdès cogitations des pierres", and at the end of her eulogy to Roger Caillois, the writer told the Académie française that she had, "from time to time, endeavored to listen to stones". Of course, the "caillou blanc" which serves as Panégyotis' guide reminds us of the important symbolic role played by minerals, and particularly by the Philosopher's Stone, in Alchemy.

As he concludes his story of the young Greek's transformation, the narrator reveals his own envy of Panégyotis' condition: "Il est sorti du monde des faits pour entrer dans celui des illusions, et il m'arrive de penser que l'illusion est peut-être la forme que prennent aux yeux du vulgaire les plus secrètes réalités" (p. 1183). Here the idea of an initiation into the mysteries of life and death is again clearly indicated by the word 'vulgaire'. Furthermore, this sentence reveals a theme which is recurrent not only in the *Nouvelles orientales*, but also throughout all of Yourcenar's work: that truth is hidden behind what is generally considered illusion, and that only those who allow themselves to enter the world of illusion will be privy to life's "plus secrètes réalités".

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Spirit and Matter

The first paragraph presents a description of the title character as he appears subsequent to his transformation. His feet, accustomed to "tous les contacts de l'air et du sol", not only signal Panégyotis' link with the natural elements, but also set him apart from his Northern counterparts. In addition, the suggestion of an interface between these two antithetical elements -- air and earth -- introduces the notion of opposition which is continued throughout the rest of the paragraph. The Greek's shoulders and collar bone are compared to rocks jutting out of his clothing whereas his ears are said to protrude "à la façon des anses d'une amphore": His body is thus assimilated to Nature ("rochers") on the one hand, and to civilization ("amphore") on the other. The word 'amphore' further evokes the alchemical vase, a receptacle of secrets and a place of metamorphoses. Traces of beauty can be observed on his pale, vacant face "comme l'affleurement sous un terrain ingrât d'une statue antique brisée" (p. 1178). In other words, traces of civilization/consciousness ("statue antique") are manifested from the depths of chaos/the unconscious ("terrain ingrât"). The land is called "ingrât" and thus recalls the "stubbornness" of Prime Matter described by alchemists in their attempts to release the Spirit enclosed within it. His eyes, compared to a sick animal's, are fringed with eyelashes like those of a mule, an animal symbolizing man's terrestrial, instinctual nature, his libido. For alchemists, the mule represented the stubborn nature of the \textit{prima materia} and embodied a chthonian trinity -- called the "dæmon triumus" -- consisting of the three priciples of Matter (Mercury, Salt and Sulfur).\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Jung, Alchemy} 460.
Finally, at the end of this first paragraph, Panégyotis’ movements are compared to those of “idoles archaïques” while at the same time “des bêlements sortaient de sa bouche grande ouverte”. Here again, spirituality (“idoles”) and bestiality (“bêlements”) -- or, in alchemical terms, Spirit and Matter -- are placed in opposition.17

Panégyotis’s expression is often described as being vague or vacant and he is called “l’idiot”, an appellation which recalls the interesting role assigned to the idiot by other twentieth century authors, such as the Russian writers or the American novelist, William Faulkner. In Faulkner’s work, for instance, the “village idiot” generally possesses intuitive insight into Truths which are invisible to others. We are also reminded of one of the most mysterious figures of the Tarot, “The Fool”, who, while completely detached from Reason and reality, possesses transcendental knowledge; he is “celui qui sacrifie tout, pour acquérir la sagesse, l’initié exemplaire”.18 "The Fool" is pictured dragging himself “across a lifeless plain beneath the scorching rays of the sun”, gazing sideways “with fixed eyes, with a half smile, half grimace frozen upon his face”.19 Such descriptions of this Tarot enigma apply equally well to the young Greek in Yourcenar’s tale. It is also significant that Panégyotis becomes mute. As speech is generally associated with Reason and Intelligence, the Greek’s loss of speech must

17 In the English version of the *Nouvelles orientales* the French ‘bêlements’ is translated (in collaboration with the author) as “braying” which reinforces the symbolism of the mule mentioned above. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Oriental Tales* trans. Alberto Manguel (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1985) 74.

18 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 458. See also 619 (“le Mat”).

19 Ouspensky, *Universe* 203.
refer to his departure from the rational world and his entry into the realm of instinct and intuition. This idea is, in fact, explicitly stated in the text: "... son esprit s'en est allé pour ne plus revenir, et la parole ne renaitra plus jamais sur ses lèvres : Homère déjà savait qu'ils voient se consumer leur intelligence et leur force, ceux qui couchent avec les déesses d'or" (p. 1183).

Panégyotis' physical transformation and his loss of speech are manifestations of a more profound metamorphosis, one involving a victory of Spirit over Matter. We read, for instance, that after Panégyotis' encounter with the Néréides, "Ses yeux étincelaient, mais il semblait que le blanc de l'œil et la pupille eussent dévoré l'iris" (p. 1181). This description brings to mind that of the young mother in "Le Lait de la Mort" at the moment of the departure of her Spirit. Here, however, the movement is reversed: the white of the eye and the pupil, representing the sun, devour the darkness of the iris, an image of the sky. In addition, his eyes are entirely jaundiced ("jauni") like the color of the sun. Thus the Greek's transformation involves a dominance of light over darkness, or of Spirit over Matter. In the beginning of the tale, we are told that "le bleu délavé" of Panégyotis' shirt "s'harmonisait avec les tons du ciel déteint par la lumière d'été" (p. 1178). Like the sky which is faded by the sun, Panégyotis is washed out by the light until he is ultimately reduced to the colorless state of pure Matter.

Following his initiation by the Nymphs, Panégyotis becomes subservient not only to them, but also to the light. Thus when he reaches greedily for the "métal blanc" of a drachma, he does so because of his attraction to its silver or white color, which corresponds to the Moon, to passivity and to the feminine principle. The color white is naturally applied
to the Néréides as well: Not only are they associated with the jasmine flower and the white pebble previously mentioned, but the narrator also speaks of "leurs bras blancs". The silver drachma further suggests the alchemical symbol of mercury which is said to be a servant to sulfur, and corresponds to the state of solution, to non-differentiation and to the unconscious. Just as Mercury is subservient to Sulfur, as the Moon is to the Sun, Panégyotis becomes a servant to the Néréides, who appear as reflections of the Sun. After he picks up the drachma, Panégyotis is compared to a white seagull (he returns to his place "comme une mouette au bord d'un quai"). It is interesting to note that, according to an Indian myth, the seagull was said to be the "propriétaire de la lumière du jour, qu'elle conservait jalousement dans une boîte". This interpretation suggests the image of Spirit contained within Matter, recalling earlier descriptions of Panégyotis' physical transformation.

The young Greek is also frequently compared with a sheep; for instance, he is called "un mouton malade", like those of his father's flock which send Panégyotis in search of the veterinarian on the day of his encounter with the Nymphs. Whiteness is clearly associated with the sheep, an animal which further evokes the theme of a sacrifice such as was involved in numerous primitive rituals aimed at bringing about the return of Spring. Once again there is an emphasis on the young Greek's passive role: He appears not only as a puppet to be used in the Néréides' "jeux", but also as a sacrificial

20 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 652.

21 When his son fails to return, Panégyotis' father begins to worry and his concern "se déplaça de ses moutons sur son fils" (p. 84).
victim offered as a means of placating these "golden goddesses". As the Nymphs are obviously linked with fecundity, Nature and Rebirth, the aim of the "jeux" in which Panégyotis serves as their pawn must be related to the renewal of Nature. Like the metals dissolved into Prime Matter in alchemical operations aimed at obtaining the Philosopher's Stone, Panégyotis, in the hands of the Nymphs, is reduced to a state of complete passivity similar to unconsciousness in the goddesses' attempts to bring about the rebirth of the natural world.

The Role of the Sun

Linda Klieger Stillman, referring to the entire corpus of Yourcenar's work, states that "the sun, if it is not bleeding, is either already burnt out or horrifiedly devouring". Many of the other critics who discuss "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" mention the sun, an image which clearly plays a dominant role in the tale. Our study of the various phases of this fundamental image, however, diverge significantly from Ms. Stillman's interpretations, which tend to minimize its symbolic function.

The story's narrator often alludes to the Néréides' relationship with the sun, stating, for example, that, in contrast to Northern ghosts, these Mediterranean goddesses come out "à l'heure tragique de midi", at the moment of the day when the sun has reached its zenith. Furthermore, he

22 We read that the Néréides "sont innocentes et mauvaises comme la Nature qui tantôt protège et tantôt détruit l'homme" (p. 83). Thus they embody the ambivalent nature of both Nature and Eros.

explains that “elles sont comme immergées dans le mystère du plein jour” (pp. 1180-81). Despite their obvious affinity with "le dangereux soleil", the Nymphs are not equivalent to the sun: they are, on the contrary, "néfastes comme l'eau où l'on boit les germes de la fièvre" (p. 1181). This description recalls Durand's concept of "l'eau noire" which, both hostile and deadly, represents the negative aspects of the ambivalent archetype of the Feminine.24 Like water, these "déesses d'or" merely absorb or deflect the sun's powerful rays: On their arms, "des poils blonds interceptent le soleil" (p. 1182), the word "intercept" having negative connotations. They are like the shadows of the fig trees in the valley where they seduce Panégyotis: "On imagine la scène : les trouées de soleil dans l'ombre des figuiers, qui n'est pas une ombre, mais une forme plus verte et plus douce de la lumière" (p. 1182). It is significant that in Greece, the Nereids, who were the sisters of Thetis and figured in the Argonauts expedition, were traditionally said to people fountains and rivers. According to Cirlot, "by virtue of their association with the Element of water, their significance is ambivalent and they may preside equally over birth and fertility or dissolution and death".25 They also resemble Nature Spirits or "elementals", as Paracelsus called them, who inhabit the invisible, spiritual counterpart of visible Nature.26 It is interesting, therefore, that the Néréides are associated with the spring at the place where they rendez-vous with the young Greek, and that the


same imagery recurs when Panégyotis becomes mute: "Des syllabes saccadées s’échappaient de sa bouche comme les derniers gargouillements d’une source qui meurt" (p. 1181). Here, the liquid aspect of the Greek’s speech reflects his bond with the Néréides, and the fact that his utterances resemble those of a dying spring signals their victory over him.

The role of the “devouring” sun, as Linda Stillman aptly describes it, is of fundamental importance in this tale. We have already mentioned the relationship between the sun and “ces beaux démons de midi”, the Néréides. A universal image, the zenith of the sun represents a sacred instant, a moment of equilibrium in the cyclical movement of time which is ruptured once the light begins its declines. This notion of sacrality and timelessness is important when we consider that Panégyotis’ initiation occurs at this moment of the day. According to Chevalier, the ascension towards the Zenith symbolizes a penetration of the Infinite, the Spiritual, whereas the movement towards the Nadir indicates an immersion in the densest Matter.27 Although they are linked with the midday light, the Néréides, by virtue of their destructive nature, are more closely related to the antithesis of the zenith, that is, to the devouring sun metaphorically known as the “black sun”. For the alchemist, this image of the sol niger corresponds to Prime Matter, while for the psychoanalyst, it is a symbol of the unconscious. Gilbert Durand explains that this “black sun”, this “aveur de soleil”, is often represented by devouring animals such as tigers, jaguars, and dragons, or by the devil (as in Persia), while in China the black sun, Ho, “se rattache au principe Yin, à l’élément nocturne, féminin, humide et

27 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 1035.
paradoxalement lunaire". Among the various cultural representations of the black sun described by Durand is the figure of Saint Elie in Christian Croatia. It is significant that Saint Elie played this role because the place where Panégyotis first meets the Néréides is, we are told, "sur l'autre versant du Mont Saint Elie".

The Nymphs embody this negative, destructive aspect of "le dangereux soleil", while at the same time reflecting the light of the sun they devour. Called "déesses d'or", they project the ambivalent nature of the sun, which can be seen alternately as a symbol of fertility and immortality, or as one of domination or destruction. The blondness of their hair, frequently emphasized in the narrator's descriptions, further reinforces their association with the sun and the celestial world, as "cette couleur blonde symbolise les forces psychiques émanées de la divinité". It is this blond hair -- "le fil soyeux, le mince fil, le fil égaré d'un cheveux blond" -- seen on the Greek's jacket which serves as the only concrete evidence supporting the narrator's conviction that Panégyotis was seduced not by the three Americans who appear at the end of the story, but by the Nymphs.

The narrator's description of these American tourists is nonetheless quite revealing in terms of the indications that they might, in fact, be the "Néréides habillées en femmes". First, they are wearing white, a color linked with the Nymphs, when they appear on the "quai inondé de soleil".

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28 Durand, Structures 94. He continues: ". . . ce soleil dévorant et ténébreux nous semble être proche parent du kronos grec, symbole de l'instabilité du temps destructeur, prototype de tous les ogres du folklore européen", these ogres representing "le sens actif d'engloutir, de manger, le père de toutes les Gorgones des occidentales Gorgades" (p. 94-5).

29 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 132.
Secondly, they live "loin des grandes routes", virtually the same expression previously used to describe Panégyotis' isolation following his transformation. The fact that two of them are carefully protected from the strong rays of the sun by hats, scarves or sunglasses removes them from suspicion; however, "l'une d'entre elles allait nu-tête". This girl, the first to be described by Démétriadis, is also wearing sprigs of myrtle in her hair. Myrtle, its white flowers and evergreen leaves suggesting immortality, was sacred to Venus, the goddess of love and pleasure, and the text seems to link the Néréïdes with Venus when the narrator mentions the conception Northerners have of the Mediterranean Nymphs "d'après Praxitèle", Praxiteles being a Greek sculptor known for his statues of Venus. It is also very significant that, according to the narrator, these American women "pêchaient la nuit au trident" and "chassaient la caille en automne". The trident, the emblem of Poseidon and a symbol of the teeth of the sea's monsters (like waves), signals a divine domination over the sea. In addition, it is both a solar image and a representation of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, the Americans' use of a trident implies an association with water and the divine, as well as with the Nereids of Greek mythology, who personified the violent waves, or the monsters of the deep. The fact that the trident, a solar symbol, is used at night further suggests the "black sun", an image which describes the nocturnal course of the sun. The quail symbolizes heat and "ardeur amoureuse", and in China is called "l'Oiseau rouge", representing summer and fire.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, the Americans' hunt for quail can be assimilated

\textsuperscript{30} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 970.

\textsuperscript{31} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 155.
to the Nérèides' search for "ardeur amoureuse". But, more importantly, we are reminded of the Vedic myth which describes a quail freed by Ashvin, signifying the liberation of the morning light from the hands of the night. In Yourcenar's tale, the quail, symbolizing the light of dawn, is sought and trapped in autumn, a time suggesting semi-obscurity and the sun's decline. Here again, the devouring black sun is symbolically evoked by the Americans' actions.

In spite of such links between these women and the Nymphs, Panégyotis reveals no signs of recognition when they appear: "ses yeux distants restaient vagues et sans lueur". The piece of blond hair spotted on his jacket confirms Démétriadis' conviction about the young Greek's experience with the "déeses d'or" because the one American woman previously suspected is a redhead: "... des brins de myrte piqués dans sa chevelure rousse". It is interesting to examine the symbolism of this reddish-ochre hair. The *Dictionnaire des symboles* explains that in opposition to the redness of celestial fire, "roux", a chthonian and terrestrial color, implies an impure fire: "En somme, le roux évoque le feu infernal dévorant, les désirs de la luxure, la passion du désir, la chaleur d'en bas, qui consument l'être physique et spirituel".32 The Nérèides' blond hair, on the other hand, reveals their divine nature, and serves as a contrast with the earthly aspect of love characterized by the Americans. In the story's introductory paragraph, Panégyotis' pants are described as "roux" like the hair of the American tourists, these rust-colored pants being perhaps another

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32 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 833-34.
indication of the Greek's earthly nature, as well as of his link with Prime Matter. Jung explains the significance of rust in terms of alchemy:

The unconscious is always the fly in the ointment, the skeleton in the cupboard of perfection, the painful lie given to all idealistic pronouncements, the earthiness that clings to our human nature and sadly clouds the crystal clarity we long for. In the alchemical view rust, like verdigris, is the metal's sickness. But at the same time this leprosy is the *vera prima materia*, the basis for the preparation of the philosophical gold.33

Whereas Panégyotis' rust-colored pants and the Americans' reddish hair reflect their link with the Earth and the material world, the Nymphs' blond hair signals their immersion in the domaine of the spiritual and their affinity with the sun.

Unlike the preceding *nouvelle orientale* examined in this chapter, which is largely dominated by solar images describing the half-light of dusk, "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" presents us with the two extreme positions of the sun on the temporal vertical: the zenith and its antithesis, the "black sun". Whereas the twilight is positively valorized in the preceding story, the sun in this fifth tale in a collection of ten is an ambivalent symbol: at its zenith, it represents a sacred moment, a union with the divinity, while at its opposite position as the "black sun" it evokes images of domination and destruction. Of course, the black sun is not necessarily a negative image: We find it used by Baudelaire, for instance, in his *Petits Poèmes en prose* in an assimilative and nocturnal fashion. The

33 Jung, *Alchemy* 159.
ambivalence of the sun (and of the Néréides) is manifested by its effects upon Panégyotis. On the one hand, the black sun devours his Reason, reducing him to the unconscious state of the densest Matter, while, on the other hand, it reveals to him the mysteries of fecundity, allowing him to enter the realm of the Sacred. Thus "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" is appropriately placed at the central point of the work in that it signals a break from the solar imagery previously described by introducing the vertical (North/South) axis which divides the circle of the sun's daily movement. In addition, through its evocation of the *sol niger* which describes the nocturnal course of the sun, this tale continues the cycle begun at dusk in "Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi". Although Linda Stillman's mention of the various solar images apparent in Yourcenar's work is significant, she ignores the implications of such symbols. In fact, her only conclusion about "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" lies in the analogy she draws between the veterinarian Panégyotis goes to find and "the 'butcher' who delivered Marguerite".34 Above all, she entirely disregards the symbolic function of each of the sun's phases she mentions, and, in particular, the fundamental role played by the "black sun" in this tale, which marks a second phase of the solar cycle in the continuous circle of Time.

34 Stillman, "Phallacy" 273.
III. The Flight of Dawn

There are a number of similarities between "l'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" and the sixth tale, "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", "une fantaisie personnelle de l'auteur, née du désir d'expliquer le nom charmant d'une petite chapelle dans la campagne attique" (p. 1216). For Jean Blot, this story, which he considers the best in the collection, involves a conflict between Christianity and paganism, as well as what he calls the theme "de la réconciliation et de l'érotisme".1 Furthermore, he finds the common element between the loves of the Néréides and those of the Nymphs in "Notre-Dame des Hirondelles" to be "l'hérésie du désir" (p. 90). Clearly, the theme of conflict is central to this tale; however, we believe it is not restricted to the historical combat described by Blot. The text in fact reveals an opposition between the forces of the universe, as well as the reconciliation of these antithetical principles by a third figure. In addition, Blot neglects the symbolic importance of this sixth tale in terms of its position in a cycle of solar images and in a pattern structuring the entire collection. We will examine this imagery as it is revealed through the conflict involving Thérapion, the Nymphs and the Virgin Mary.

Thérapion's View

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1 Blot, Fourcenar 88. Similarly, Pierre Horn states that this story "is concerned with the conflict between an unyielding Christianity and a tolerant paganism" (Horn, Fourcenar 22), and for Jacques de Ricaumont it suggests "une réconciliation du paganisme et du christianisme" (Ricaumont, "Inventaire" 300).
Thérapion the monk -- the story's protagonist -- is described in the first paragraph as a Christian whose life has been devoted to a combat against Evil which involves the destruction of "démon" and "les sortilèges de Pan". He is called "saint homme" by the Greek peasants of his congregation, who seem to associate the monk with God, "le Père". His asceticism, indicated by the words "austère" and "anachorète", suggests the notion of purification, and it is with the aim of purifying the world that Thérapion undertakes the destruction of the Nymphs.

The monk's attitude towards these "jeunes bêtes divines" reflects what Gilbert Durand would call a "diurnal" conception of Eros, that is, a negative, aggressive reaction to images seen as destructive, devouring, dark and deadly. Reflecting Thérapion's attitude towards the Nymphs are the various animals with which he compares them. We read, for instance, that "malgré leur beauté elles n'éveillaient en lui aucun désir, car leur nudité lui répugnait comme la chair pâle de la chenille ou le derme lisse des couleuvres" (p. 1186). The impurity of the "Maudites" is likened to that of caterpillars, an insect evoking "l'image de la tendance à un mal avilissant et de la laideur". Like the caterpillar, the grass snake is a slithering or crawling creature associated with the Earth. Serpents are also traditionally linked with demonic spirits, with the evil forces of Nature, or with the libido. However, the figure of Eros is always ambivalent in nature. Thus, the complex archetype of the serpent can represent the vital

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3 Cirlot, Dictionary 274.
principle of the universe, the fertilizing powers of Nature. In addition, because of its ability to shed its skin, the snake, like other reptiles and insects, is often a symbol of metamorphosis and resurrection. Similarly, the caterpillar, by virtue of the fact that it passes from its larval state into a chrysalis to be ultimately transformed into a butterfly, can be viewed positively as a lunar symbol.4 The notion of a resurrection or passage into a superior state is further evoked by the image of a worm ("un ver foulé aux pieds"), which Thérapiion uses in reference to the Nymphs. According to Chevalier, "le ver apparaît comme le symbole de la transition, de la terre à la lumière, de la mort à la vie, de l'état larvaire à l'envol spirituel".5 On the other hand, Jung emphasizes the destructive nature of the worm, defining it as a "libidinal figure which kills instead of giving life".6 It is clearly this second interpretation of the worm's symbolism which describes the monk's view of the Nymphs, as well as of Eros.

Not only is Thérapiion repulsed by the impurity of the Nymphs' flesh, but he is also terrified by their devouring nature: "Le moine les craignait comme une bande de louves, et elles l'inquiétaient comme un troupeau de prostituées" (p. 1186). Like a prostitute, the she-wolf, with its "aspect chthonien ou infernal", is considered in certain cultures to be the "incarnation of sexual desire".7 More importantly, we find the interesting

4 Durand, Structures 362.

5 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 1001.


7 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 582-3. Durand, discussing the symbol of the wolf, states that "le loup est assimilé aux dieux du trépas et aux génies infernaux. Tel le Mormolyke
image of a wolf’s mouth devouring the sun, which Durand links with “le soleil noir” as well as with the figure of Kronos, “du monstre dévorant le temps humain ou s’attaquant même aux astres mesureurs du Temps”. Thus, Thérapion’s fear of Eros can also be seen as a manifestation of his anguish in the face of the threat of Time.

The monk reacts to his feelings of fear and disgust with aggression and negation. When he decides to undertake the systematic destruction of the Nymphs, he is fulfilling his supreme goal, that of cleansing the world of evil forces. This act of purification is characterized above all by the “anchorite’s” use of fire in his combat against “les Malignes”. We are told, for example, that he carries two flints (“deux silex”) with him whenever he goes out, the quartz of these flints making them resemble celestial or sacred weapons. The purifying fire used by Thérapion to burn down the olive and pine trees which conceal the Nymphs stands in contrast to the terrestrial, sexual fire represented by these seemingly bestial creatures. The monk also fights them armed with a cross, an image which, according to Cirlot, is often linked with fire. Besides the “grand Christ peint sur une croix à quatre bras égaux” which he plants at the opening of the grotto serving as a refuge to the “fairy women”, the monk also creates the image of a cross with his own body: “debout au seuil de la vallée, les bras levés,

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des Grecs...”, a feminine demon said to have nursed Acheron and to eat bad children. Durand, Structures 91.

8 Durand, Structures 93.

9 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 794.

10 Cirlot, Dictionary 66. Cirlot is quoting Jung and Bayley.
immobile durant des heures entières, il priaît le ciel de l'aider à détruire ces dangereux restes de la race des dieux" (p. 1188). The white chapel he builds around the grotto (a grotto which for Thérapion is "comme un cancer enfoncé dans son propre sein") is clearly another manifestation of his conception of celestial purity. The lime water ("lait de chaux") used to whitewash the church gives it the appearance "d'une blanche colombe blottie sur le sein du rocher", the placement of the adjective in this phrase stressing the idea of whiteness and purity, and the dove recalling Christian images of Mary's visitation by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. It is the "rocher", however, which seems to dominate here, and the word "sein" signals the primordial relationship between the rock/grotto and the Terra Mater. This white dove nestling against the rock parallels an image used in the preceding paragraph to describe the Nymphs: "on vit des pleurs tomber de la pierre" (p. 97). Appearing frequently in Yourcenar's work as a symbol of femininity and purification, tears function here as a link between the Nymphs and the white dove/chapel. This link is reinforced by another description of the Nymphs earlier in the tale which evokes the same imagery: "la blancheur de leur corps se confondait de loin avec le miroitement des rochers" (p. 1186). These images, assimilating two feminine symbols, the white chapel, a manifestation of Heaven on Earth, and the Nymphs, terrestrial creatures who possess divine powers, essentially present us with a single conception of purity, one which directly opposes Thérapion's view.  

11 In the Dictionnaire treatment of the dove, the difference between Christian and pagan notions of purity is mentioned: "Dans une acceptation païenne, qui valorise différemment la notion de pureté, non en l'opposant à l'amour charnel mais en l'associant à lui, la colombe, oiseau d'Aphrodite, représente l'accomplissement amoureux que l'amant offre à l'objet de son désir". Chevalier, Dictionnaire 269.
pattern of symbolic convergence: Like the jasmine flower on a stone wall described in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides", they suggest not only the generative powers of stones, but also the idea of Spirit contained within Matter. It is thus very significant that the rock/grotto, representing the Great Earth Mother, signals the *prima materia*, and that "the radiant white dove" is a very common alchemical symbol of the Spirit freed from Matter.\(^{12}\) However, the fact that the dove in Yourcenar's text still appears "bottled sur le sein du rocher" indicates that the ultimate transformation of the *magnus opus* remains to be realized, that the Spirit (dove) has not yet been released from Prime Matter (Earth).

The Role of the Nymphs

As we have previously noted, most of the animals associated with the Nymphs symbolize an eventual transformation, and virtually all the images describing them indicate an intimate relationship with Nature. By virtue of their link with the natural world, the Nymphs of "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" resemble the Néréides in the preceding tale. Like the Néréides, they are "démons" performing sinful acts who are nonetheless accepted by the Greek peasants who "leur pardonnaient leurs méfaits comme on pardonne au soleil qui désagrège la cervelle des fous, à la lune qui sucre le lait des mères endormies, et à l'amour qui fait tant souffrir" (p. 1186).

\(^{12}\) *Jung, Alchemy* 340. Jung explains that "the lead of the philosophers" contains "the radiant white dove, called the salt of metals". Also known as *pneuma* (p. 265) or *columba spiritus sancti* (p. 329), the dove "is the 'chaste, wise and rich queen of Sheba, veiled in white, who was willing to give herself to none but King Solomon'" (p. 340-42, quoting Grasseus, "Arca arcani", *Theatr. chem.*, VI, p. 314).
Indeed, we find many of the same images used to describe the Néréides being applied in this tale to the Nymphs. For instance, both are linked with water and springs. The Nymphs are said to emerge "du bouillonnement des eaux", and there are cold water springs near the grotto where they hide from Thérapion. In addition, the following statement clearly evokes the Durandian concept of "l'eau noire" previously mentioned in relation to the Néréides: "Ou bien, un jeune garçon lancé sur leur piste redescendait hors d'âme, grelottant de fièvre, ayant bu la mort avec l'eau d'une source" (p. 1186). Both the Nymphs and the Néréides are associated with certain sacred trees, notably the olive tree, the pine and the plane tree. The latter, an image of longevity and immortality because of the fact that it may live as long as 2000 years, is called "le platane des Nymphes". In their attempts to escape Thérapion's wrath and his purifying fire, the Nymphs hide in the trunk of "un vieil olivier", a common symbol of fecundity, as well as in "un jeune pin dont la résine versait des pleurs d'or". The pine tree, symbolizing immortality and its resin, the Elixir of Life, served as a representation of the dead and resurrected body of the god Attis as well as of the Eternal Return of Nature in festivals celebrated at the spring equinox. More revealing, however, in terms of this tale, is the following information regarding the symbolism of the pine in the cult of Cybele: "Le pin était aussi consacré à Cybèle, déesse de la fécondité. Il serait la métamorphose d'une nymphe, que le dieu Pan aurait aimé".


14 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 761.
of the transformation the Nymphs will undergo in the story’s conclusion. Similarly, pine trees appear in the description of the valley where the Nymphs finally take refuge from the monk:

Enfin, encerclées par la prière et par le feu, amaigries par l’absence d’offrandes, privées d’amour depuis que les jeunes gens du village commençaient à se détourner d’elles, les Nymphes cherchèrent refuge dans un vallon désert, où quelques pins noirs plantés dans le sol argileux faisaient penser à de grands oiseaux ramassant dans leurs fortes serres la terre rouge et remuant dans le ciel les milles pointes fines de leur plumes d’aigle (p. 1187).

This valley, reminiscent of the place where Panégyotis was seduced by the "démons de midi", is a symbol of the fertility of Mother Earth. It also stands in contrast to the desert, a symbol of purification which is associated with the monk: "le moine Thérapion continua de monter sa garde de prière au seuil de la chapelle, comme un anachorète dans le désert" (p. 1190). It is interesting that the pine trees in this passage are compared with eagles lifting the earth’s red soil. The eagle, a solar image linked with Christ and other ouranian divinities, is an alchemical figure which, like the phoenix, signals the liberation of the Spirit and the attainment of immortality. The emphasis placed here on the red color of the soil further suggests the ‘œuvre au rouge’ of the opus, characterized by the hermaphroditic figure of Rebis. Thus, the Nymphs’ place of refuge, where the eagle-like pine trees join with the soil of the valley, appears as a meeting of Heaven and Earth, an axis mundi.

The cave or grotto in which the “femmes fées” are finally enclosed plays an important symbolic role in the tale. Darkness and humidity characterize this grotto, where the Nymphs are “à demi visibles dans les fraîches
ténèbres" (p. 1188). When, shortly after Easter, Thérapion leads a group of his followers to the Nymphs' hideout, the area has the appearance of a labyrinth: "il les guida à travers le dédale des collines, dans les molles ténèbres pleines de sève" (p. 1188). Here the darkness, positively qualified as "molles", is heavy with sap, an image suggesting the regeneration of vegetation and the return of Spring. The text continues thus:

Dans l'ombre opaque, on entendait glousser les sources. Un faible bruit palpitait, doux comme la brise dans les pinèdes : c'était la respiration des Nymphes endormies, qui rêvaient de la jeunesse du monde, du temps où l'homme n'existait pas encore, et où la terre n'enfantait que les arbres, les bêtes et les dieux (p. 1188)

This allusion to a primordial moment in the Earth's history is significant in terms of the symbolic function of the grotto. Associated with darkness, humidity, birth, and a return to origins, the cavern clearly symbolizes the maternal womb, the unconscious, the chaos, and the prima materia of the alchemical œuvre au noir. Furthermore, the maze-like appearance of the region and the grotto's narrow opening ("on n'y accédait que par une embouchure juste assez large pour livrer passage à un corps") signal an initiatory passage involving a symbolic death to a prior existence. It is the Nymphs who will undergo an initiatory experience: a regressus ad uterum, isolation, and suffering, followed by rebirth into a superior mode of being. Similarly, the grotto will take on the role of the alchemical vessel, or "philosopher's egg", a place of transformations from which will emerge and ascend a symbol of resurrection resulting from the extraction of Spirit from Matter.
We have already mentioned the notion of transformation in respect to the ambivalence of the animal images applied to the Nymphs (i.e., caterpillars, snakes, and worms). The progression of this imagery occurs later in the story when their divine bodies begin to weaken and decompose: "Le corps défaut des Nymphs se décomposait en buée, ou s'apprérait à tomber en poussière comme les ailes d'un papillon mort" (p. 1189). Another revealing animal image used to describe the Nymphs is that of the goat: we read of "leur trot capricieux et saccadé de jeunes chèvres" (p. 1186) and their resemblance to "herds of goats" (p. 1190-91). We read in Chevalier that "Zeus enfant suçait le lait de la chèvre Amalthee, qui fut transformée en nympe, puis en déesse nourricière, puis en fille du soleil".15 Again, we are presented with an image of ascending movement, a passage from the terrestrial into the celestial. This ultimate stage in the transformation of the Nymphs will be realized by means of the intervention of another figure in the tale: the Virgin Mary.

The Intermediary

It is clear that Thérapion and the Nymphs represent two opposing visions of the universe which may be qualified in historical terms as Christian and pagan. The first sentence of "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" informs us that in his youth the monk was "le disciple le plus fidèle du grand Athanase". A

15 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 238. It is interesting to note that, according to the *Dictionnaire*, clothes made from goats' wool, such as the *cilicium* in ancient Rome and Syria, traditionally symbolized a union with the divinity. This primitive custom was adopted by Christians through their use of a hair coat (*cible*) and the coarse wool robes worn by monks, such as Thérapion's "épais vêtements de bure brune". Thus the "holy monk" is closer to pagan thought than he would care to realize.
young Alexandrian deacon, Athanasius composed the Athanasian Creed, a document maintaining the divine nature of Christ and anathematizing the followers of Arius, for whom Christ was neither True God nor True Man. This creed was accepted under the reign of Constantine at the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) which called for religious unity, fixed a date for Easter, and indirectly led to the eventual triumph of Christianity over the pagan religions of the Empire.\textsuperscript{16}

In her interviews with Patrick de Rosbo, Marguerite Yourcenar describes a similar conflict, one which opposes a bipolar division of the universe with a philosophy aimed at the union of antithetical principles, when she discusses the role of alchemy: Here she contrasts the Scholastic Rationalism of the West with Alchemical thought (which had its origins in Eastern mysticism), the former establishing a distinct opposition between Good and Evil, Body and Soul, Life and Death, and the latter expressing, on the contrary, "un monde fluide, en état de perpétuel devenir".\textsuperscript{17} Like the Western rationalist, the Christian monk Thérapion divides the universe into two distinct, opposing camps (good vs. evil, soul vs. body, Spirit vs. Matter), whereas the alchemical view, maintaining that Spirit is contained in Matter (as exemplified by the Nymphs, these "jeunes bêtes divines"), separates the antithetical forces only in order ultimately to reunite them, in the hope of imitating the perfection of Nature's cycles. The opposition between


\textsuperscript{17} Rosbo, \textit{Entretiens} 124-5. In an interview with Mathieu Galey, the writer also discusses the Christian attitude towards love and sensuality: "Christianity has always been divided on the subject of love, it has always been hostile, doubtful, disapproving of the flesh". Yourcenar, \textit{ Éyes} 53.
Thérapion and the Nymphs further reflects the Durandian contrast between a "diurnal vision" based on antithesis, opposition and aggression, and a "nocturnal view" characterized by synthesis, reconciliation and passivity. A number of other conflicts are suggested: the Superego vs. the Id, Reason vs. Instinct, Civilization vs. Nature, Masculine vs. Feminine principles, Fire vs. Water. In "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", all of these contradictory forces will ultimately be reconciled by a third figure who acts as an intermediary in the conflict: the character named "Marie" who is introduced at the end of the story.

The text's description of this woman is very revealing. When she arrives in the evening, "son manteau et son écharpe étaient noirs, mais une lueur mystérieuse se faisait jour à travers cette étoffe obscure, comme si elle avait jeté la nuit sur le matin". The imagery is clear: she is like the night concealing the morning light. The mysterious radiance which dawns ("se faisait jour") must be a reference to Christ, who is described earlier in the tale as "le fils de Marie, vêtu d'or comme un soleil levant". The Virgin Mary, carrying within her a divine light and coming from the East, "comme le matin", seems at once to represent and replace the son of God to whom she gave birth. Her allusions to Christ become explicit when she speaks of the grotto where the Nymphs are held captive: "C'est dans une grotte que j'ai mis au monde mon enfant, et c'est dans une grotte que je l'ai confié sans crainte à la mort, afin qu'il subisse la seconde naissance de la Résurrection" (p.

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18 Durand explains that the sun rising in the East is the hypostasis *par excellence* of euranian divinities in a large number of world religions, including Christianity: "C'est en Orient que se situe le Paradis terrestre, et c'est là que le Psalmiste place l'Ascension du Christ, et saint Matthieu le retour du Christ". He also mentions that until the fifth century Christians worshiped the sunrise, an image often associated with the Phoenix or the eagle. See Durand, *Structures* 167-9.
1191). We have already discussed the important symbolism of the grotto in this tale; however, this reference to Christ's birth and resurrection recalls other sacred caverns, such as the one on Mount Dicte, well known as the birthplace of Zeus.19

Mary's role as mediator is introduced by a question she asks of the monk: "Mais n'aperçois-tu pas un moyen de concilier la vie des Nymphes et le salut de tes ouailles?". In addition, the fact that her voice is assimilated to the sound of a harp confirms her role as an intermediary between Heaven and Earth. For the Farrells, the character of Marie represents the highest form of love found in Yourcenar's work; she is "capable of a more perfect charity and understanding than are ordinary persons", and her "vision rises above pettiness and fanaticism".20 Jean Blot's comments about her role are far more pertinent in terms of this story's implications: "La Mère-Vierge va intervenir pour concilier Byzance et l'Antiquité, les Anges et les Nymphes, mais sans modifier la nature du conflit qui demeure érotique".21 The conflict does in fact involve two opposing conceptions of Eros, and Marie, embodying a "nocturnal" vision, will effect a synthesis. In alchemical terms, she resolves the universal conflict depicted in this story by separating and reuniting the antithetical principles of Matter and Spirit embodied by the Nymphs. Entering the Maternal Matrix/"Philosopher's Egg" of the grotto, she performs the final stage of the opus when she releases

19 For a more thorough discussion of the role of sacred caves in mythology, see Eliade, Religious Ideas I, 129-33.

20 Farrells, Counterpoint 100.

21 Blot, Yourcenar 89.
Spirit from Matter and effects a *mysterium conjunctionis* through her creation of the swallows/Nymphs.

An examination of the image of the swallow is essential to a thorough understanding of the text. It is significant that a link between the Nymphs and swallows is suggested in the beginning of "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" where we learn that, like the swallow, a symbol of purity "du fait qu'elle ne se pose jamais sur la terre",\(^{22}\) the Nymphs do not touch the ground ("leurs pieds légers ne touchaient pas terre"). Universally recognized as a harbinger of Spring, the swallow is said to return to China at the exact moment of the vernal equinox. By virtue of its relationship with the change of season, the swallow is also associated with a metamorphosis: "le rythme saisonnier (yin-yang) des migrations de l'hirondelle s'accompagne d'une métamorphose : elle se réfugie dans l'eau (yin, hiver) où, rapporte Lie-tseu, elle devient coquillage, puis redevient hirondelle, en accompagnant le mouvement ascendant du soleil (yang, été)").\(^{23}\) This type of cyclical transformation can equally be applied to the Nymphs, who, according to Marie, were originally angels that fell to the Earth, where they are associated with water (yin) and finally transformed into swallows, ascending like the rising sun (yang). Marie reveals that this cycle of death and rebirth will continue eternally when she tells the monk that the swallows/Nymphs "reviendront chaque année".

The image of dawn dominates in this sixth "nouvelle orientale". For instance, it is "aux premières lueurs de l'aube" that the construction of the

\(^{22}\) Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 507.

\(^{23}\) Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 506.
white chapel is begun. Another parallel between the church and the Nymphs is established in the text when we are informed three sentences later that the "fairy women" habitually come out at dawn: "Les premiers rayons du soleil s'allongeaient timidement jusqu'au seuil de la caverne; c'était l'heure où les malheureuses avaient coutume de sortir, pour prendre sur les feuilles des arbres voisins leur premier repas de rosée" (p. 1189). Furthermore, it is significant that Isis changed into a swallow at night, flying in circles around Osiris' coffin until sunrise, a myth interpreted in Chevalier as a "Symbole de l'éternel retour et annonce de la résurrection". When the Virgin Mary emerges from the grotto, she conceals the young swallows within the folds of her coat, the same coat which previously sheltered "une lueur mystérieuse". Here the birds/Nymphs are compared not only with the dawn, but also with Christ, who corresponds in alchemical terms to the androgynous figure of Rebis. Calling them "mes enfants", Marie then opens her arms widely -- forming the image of a cross, which here implies a union of opposites -- to release the swallows into the sky: we read that she "donna ainsi la volée aux oiseaux". Thus, the Virgin Mother, herself a link between Heaven and Earth, liberates the sun from the night (Spirit from Matter) and gives flight to the dawn (the resurrection of the divinity).

The fundamental role assigned to the character of Marie in this tale, as an intermediary between opposing forces and the "artist" who performs the alchemical *opus magnun*, is another example which disproves comments by such critics as Linda Stillman concerning the absence of influential women.

24 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 506. This symbolic function of the swallow is interesting when we consider that Thérapion emprisons the Nymphs shortly after Easter.
In Yourcenar's work. In addition, the story's abundance of images of sunrise symbolizing the glory of rebirth serves to contradict Ms. Stillman's statement that in all of Yourcenar's fiction, "the sun, if it is not bleeding, is either already burnt out or horrifyingly devouring". But, more importantly, the image of the sun arising from the darkness of night (like that of the Spring returning from Winter), so essential to "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", indicates a progression in the solar imagery whose cyclical pattern is highlighted in this chapter. In the fourth tale, images of twilight and autumn dominate, reflecting the sun's decline and a promise of rebirth. The fifth story then introduces the "black sun" which swallows and devours the light of day, and finally, in the sixth tale, the sun returns with images of dawn evoking the mysterious radiance of gold, the result of a divine resurrection.

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25 Stillman, "Phallacy" 272.
IV. The Triumph of the Sacred

Like the preceding tale, "La Veuve Aphrodissia" presents us with a conflict, one involving, on the one hand, Kostis, Aphrodissia's lover, and on the other hand, the village and its inhabitants. On a symbolic level, this commonplace opposition between an individual and his society reflects a more universal contrast which will be highlighted in our study. Set in Greece, the seventh tale has been the object of a greater amount of scholarship than the other stories, the most noteworthy study being the Farrells' in-depth examination of the text's rich imagery.  

1 Speaking of her narrative, Mme Yourcenar herself mentions the importance of its hidden symbolism: "Il y a en effet dans cette nouvelle, comme dans tout rêve et probablement tout mythe, plusieurs images superposées en couches successives de poésie et de réalité, certaines venant sans doute d'un lointain passé".  

2 Although the Farrells' presentation of the story's solar and elemental imagery is both fascinating and extremely accurate, no mention is made of its alchemical symbolism, nor of its similarities with the other "nouvelles orientales" in terms of recurrent themes and images. Our symbolic reading of "La Veuve Aphrodissia" will focus on the theme of alchemy and the solar cycle in an attempt to reveal the important position of this tale in relationship to the others treated in this chapter, as well as

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1 Farrells, "Title," 233-44. The Farrells also present a comparison between the characters of Aphrodissia and Antigone (Feux) in their Yourcenar in Counterpoint ("Antigone Twice Retold", pp. 65-73). It is noteworthy that in the pages of his book devoted to the Nouvelles orientales Pierre Horn's commentary on "La Veuve Aphrodissia" is longer than for any of the other tales. Horn, Yourcenar 21-22.

2 Rosbo, Entretiens 153.
in the collection as a whole. With this objective in mind, we shall discuss Kostis' role as Sun God and Smith, the conflict between the Sacred and the Profane, and finally, the symbolic union of Kostis and Aphrodissia.

A Sun God and A Smith

Although already murdered before the narrative begins, Kostis, the outlaw, is the story's central figure, not only due to Aphrodissia's recollections of their affair and his capture by the villagers, but also because of the omnipresent symbols of his head and decapitated body. The Farrells skillfully mention the relevance of the story's original title ("Le Chef Rouge"), stressing the etymological origin of the word 'chef' (head) and the importance of the color red, which they place in opposition to the blackness embodied by the widow.\(^3\) As they and others have pointed out, Kostis represents the sun, a symbolic role which becomes obvious in the story's concluding pages.\(^4\) For the Farrells, his red hair and red vest symbolize his link with passion, the sun's heat, fire and blood. The color red, fire, the sun, all of these are essential elements for the Alchemist, whose philosophy appears to be an underlying force in all the *Nouvelles orientales*. We are reminded, for example, of the red scarves in "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé" and "Le Sourire de Marko", of the red coals placed on

\(^3\) Farrells, "Title" 233.

\(^4\) This fact is mentioned not only by the Farrells and Pierre Horn, but also by Yourcenar herself: "À cette femme vêtue de ses traditionnels vêtements noirs de paysanne grecque, et roulant au fond d'un précipice avec cette tête qui saigne encore, se superpose bientôt l'image de la nuit emportant le soleil". Rosbo, *Entretiens* 153.
Marko's chest, of the red bricks in "Le Lait de la Mort", of Prince Genghi's relationship with fire, of the burning sun in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides", and of the red soil and the eagle in "Notre Dame des Hirondelles", not to mention the imagery in the last three stories of the collection. Based upon the alchemical themes and symbolic patterns revealed in the previous stories, Kostis' red hair and clothes, and his link with fire and sunlight must signal the androgynous figure of Rebis, indicating that before his capture this outlaw, like the sun, embodied the dual nature of a composite of opposing forces.

It is significant that the townspeople have Kostis beheaded. As the head is generally associated with the Spirit and astral light, the image of the Greek's head removed from his body suggests a separation of the spiritual and material principles, an alchemical theme we have observed in other stories, and one which is presented more explicitly in the following tale: "Kāli décapitée". Furthermore, the symbolic placement of Kostis' head on a pitchfork high in the air above the village reinforces its link with the sun which reigns far above the earth.

The fact that the outlaw is captured and killed on Saint George's Night suggests a link between Kostis and the dragon which, according to legend, is slain by the Christian saint.⁵ According to Durand, in this myth -- representing the Christian triumph of Good over Evil -- George succeeds in becoming a hero because he conquers the dragon who is the terrifying guardian of "the ultimate mystery of Time: Death".⁶ Thus, the village

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⁵ The Farrels mention that like Kostis, Saint George was beheaded. We find, however, that Kostis is compared here not with St. George, but with the conquered dragon.

⁶ Durand, *Structures* 368.
people act as heroes when they rejoice in their victory over their enemy, who, as we shall see, possesses knowledge of immortality, and like the dragon, is an ambivalent figure intimately linked with fire. We are further reminded of the alchemical image of the mercurial dragon, representing the dual nature of the *filius philosophorum* (Hermes/Mercurius), as well as of Ouroboros, illustrating the ultimate union of opposites.7

The theme of Alchemy assumes greater significance in this tale when we read that Kostis could have avoided capture had he returned "dans sa forge". Mircea Eliade's description of the ancient smith, the alchemist's predecessor, in *The Forge and the Crucible* corresponds perfectly with the portrait given of Kostis in "La Veuve Aphrodissia". The most obvious similarity between the two is their relationship with the element of fire. Furthermore, the ancient smiths were said to forge lightning as weapons for the gods of thunder (such as Zeus, Thor and Odin), and Kostis, too, is associated with a lightning bolt in the description of his first encounter with the priest's widow (pp. 1194-95).

Like the Greek outlaw, the blacksmith is often a pariah; both are "mysterious beings who must be isolated from the rest of the community".8 In the beginning of the tale, we learn that Kostis "avait vécu terré dans la montagne", an image which not only evokes a marriage of opposites ("terré"/Earth/withdrawal with "montagne"/Sky/ascension), but also recalls a name sometimes given to the isolated metalworkers: "men of the

7 *Jung, Alchemy* See pp. 66, 161, 166, etc.

8 *Eliade, Forge* 89.
mountain". It is interesting that the Dactyli, who were mythical smiths, "were the priests of Cybele, goddess of the mountains as well as of mines and caves and having her dwelling inside the mountains". Likewise, Kostis is said to hide in certain mountain caves where no others would dare enter (p. 1199). Another parallel may be drawn between the fact that the smiths of ancient times were often chiefs or priests of their community and the role accorded to Kostis by Yourcenar's original title for her tale: "Le Chef Rouge".

Eliade emphasizes the ambivalence involved in the community's reaction to the smith, stating that he "is both feared and respected" because, like fire itself, he "may be divine or demonic". Thus, although smithwork is often seen as the work of the Devil because of the latter's mastery over fire, in numerous European folktales, Jesus Christ, the 'master of fire' par excellence, "plays the role of a blacksmith who heals the sick and rejuvenates the old by putting them in a heated oven or forging them with an anvil". The same type of ambivalence is attributed to the Greek outlaw. Clearly feared and despised by the village people, he appears as the Incarnation of Evil when compared to the terrifying dragon slain by St. George. Yet, at the same time, the peasants seem strangely drawn to him, as is evidenced by their relentless pursuit of their enemy: "ces paysans acharnés sur le corps de Kostis comme des frelons sur un fruit gluant de miel" (p. 1195). Here Kostis' link with golden honey, an Elixir of Life

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9 Eliade, Forge 102-3.

10 Eliade, Forge 90-108.

11 Eliade, Forge 106-7.
associated with resurrection and immortality, implies a divine or sacred nature. In addition, the outlaw, whose severed head reflects the celestial light of the sun, is assimilated to Christ in the beginning of the story when his body is brought back to the village "à l'aube du troisième jour", an allusion to the divinity's resurrection recalling the conclusion of "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" and indicating a continuation of the solar cycle.

The Sacred and the Profane

Through his symbolic role as sun god and smith, Kostis manifests a celestial nature and a participation in the Sacred. When the townspeople hunt down their adversary and place his head above the square, they are motivated by their attraction to his divine strength and the desire to possess it. Through the use of animal imagery, the text's description of the outlaw's capture further reveals the outlaw's sacred role. We read that "ils l'avaient traqué comme un loup et forcé comme un sanglier" (p. 1193). Like many other animals, the wolf can be valorized either negatively or positively. Although often considered an image of evil, the wolf, because it sees at night, is also a "symbole de lumière, solaire, héros guerrier, ancêtre mythique", attributed by the Greeks to the sun god, Apollo. Similarly, the wild boar is a primordial, sacred creature as evidenced by its role as spiritual authority in the polar land of the mythical Hyperboreans, associated with the cult of Apollo. We read in Chevalier that this role "peut

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12 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 382. The Dictionnaire also mentions that the wolf is often associated with the polar North, as in the case of the "cestial wolf" in China which guards the "Palais céleste".
être en rapport avec la retraite solitaire en forêt du druide ou du brahmane, ou avec la propriété du sanglier de déterrer la truffe, mystérieux produit de la foudre, selon d'anciennes légendes, et de se nourrir des fruits du chêne, arbre sacré.\textsuperscript{13} It is also significant that the practice of hunting and killing a boar in Greece and ancient Gaul represents "l'image du spirituel traqué par le temporel".\textsuperscript{14} This image therefore indicates that the conflict between Kostis and the village reflects a more universal dichotomy, that which separates the Sacred from the Profane. The peasants, representing the Profane or uninitiated, must be "barricadés dans leur maisons" in order to shelter themselves from the hot sun at noon, just as they previously protected themselves from their enemy. Here, we find a theme which recalls Panégyotis' role in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides" as a neophyte whose initiation into the realm of the sacred allows him to look directly at the sun, this idea being perhaps derived from an ancient belief that to stare at the midday sun was to see God.\textsuperscript{15}

The townspeople's inferiority to their enemy is illustrated by Aphrodisia's attitude towards them. She frequently associates them with insects, such as the flies in her kitchen which she calls "lourdes mouches nourries d'immondices" and "une vermine un peu importune". Thus her gesture of dusting the flies off her white wall ("Elle... épousseta d'un grand geste le mur blanc où bourdonnaient deux ou trois mouches") must be

\textsuperscript{13} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 844.

\textsuperscript{14} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 844.

\textsuperscript{15} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 632. According to \textit{Dictionnaire}, this idea is expressed in the Scriptures.
an act of purification, an attempt to cleanse the white wall representing
Kostis (the spiritual, sacred element) of the dusty, insect-like villagers
(the temporal, profane principle). This notion of purification becomes
clearer as the text continues:

Ah, si l'on avait pu, d'un simple coup de torchon, balayer tout ce
village, ces vieilles femmes aux langues empoisonnées comme des
dards de guêpes; et le jeune prêtre, ivre du vin de la Messe, qui
tonnait dans l'église contre l'assassin de son prédécesseur; et ces
paysans archarnés sur le corps de Kostis comme des frelons sur un
fruit gluant de miel (p. 1195).

Again insect imagery is used, the women being associated with wasps
which, as the antithesis of bees (the latter representing the soul, Christ,
the spiritual realm), suggest malevolent forces. The hornets with which
the men are compared share in the same symbolism as the wasp, but are
additionally said to steal honey from the beneficent bee, just as the
peasants jealously seek possession of Kostis' secret knowledge of
immortality, and of the Sacred.

Like the peasants who reflect the most profane form of base Matter,
Aphrodissia's husband is inferior to Kostis, yet at the same time manifests
a higher degree of differentiation than the town's other inhabitants. On the
one hand, Aphrodissia, stating that she "se souciait de la vie de ce pompeux
ivrogne comme du banc de bois des lieux au fond du jardin" (p. 1195),
compares her husband with a piece of wood, the symbol par excellence of
Matter. On the other hand, however, the description of the priest Etienne's

grave symbolically reveals his superiority: "ce monticule bossué lui rappela brusquement le ventre adipeux du vieillard". Emphasizing the priest's repulsive appearance and lack of virility is the expression "adipose belly", but it is the word 'monticule' which is significant here: it recalls a sign in the Egyptian system of hieroglyphs representing the intermediate stages of matter, or more precisely, the first manifestations of creation differentiated from the primordial chaos. Standing in direct opposition to this small mound of earth (the word 'monticule' being a diminutive of 'montagne') is the mountain with which Kostis is linked, and from which "il descendait insolemment" to the village. Furthermore, we find an emphasis placed on the "couronnes de fer-blanc" covering the priest's tomb. These tinplated iron wreaths placed on the small hillock of earth present us with a silver-white circular and feminine image suggesting the Moon, and thus signal the 'œuvre au blanc'. Up to this point in the tale, an alchemical progression can be discerned: After Kostis, introduced as a divinely dualistic figure, is killed and divided in two, we are presented with descriptions of the densest, most undifferentiated matter (the village and its inhabitants), followed by images of purification (dusting the white wall) that lead to the first signs of differentiation and creation (the priest and his grave covered with "tinplate garlands"). Finally, when Aphrodissia places Kostis' body (the Sun) into the priest's garland-covered grave (the

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17 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 269.

18 We read in Chevalier that tin is associated with the Moon and water (p. 19), and that iron "s'oppose au cuivre ou au bronze, comme le métal vulgaire au métal noble, comme l'eau au feu, le nord au sud, le noir au rouge, le yin au yang" (p. 433). Chevalier, Dictionnaire.
Moon), she is effecting an alchemical union of opposites.

Both the alchemical process and the conflict between the Sacred and the Profane are reflected in the image of Kostis' head, "là-haut... piquée sur une fourche à l'endroit où le village cède la place aux rochers et au ciel" (p. 1199). The pitchfork piercing the outlaw's head is a symbol of ambivalence, illustrating "par son écartèlement la tendance à la différenciation" characteristic of the alchemical putrefaction, or separation of opposing elements. The central point where the head is placed, separating the village on the one hand and the rocks and sky on the other, clearly illustrates the dichotomy of Matter and Spirit, as well as of the Profane and the Sacred. In a sense, the capture and execution of the sun godsmith Kostis by the "uninitiated" villagers can be interpreted as a domination of the Sacred by the Profane -- a victory, however, which will ultimately be reversed in the story's conclusion.

The Union of Kostis and Aphrodissia

Just as Kostis symbolizes the sun and fire, Aphrodissia, serving as his complement, represents the night and water. There are a number of indications in the text linking the widow with water and liquids, most of which have been mentioned by the Farreis: her frequent tears, her first appearance in the story where she cries, washes glasses, serves "eau-de-vie", and spits in the peasants' food, her screams which "avaient jailli",

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19 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 481.
etc.20 Although they have carefully discerned the elemental imagery describing the two central characters, the Farrells neglect the alchemical significance of their union, which emerges as a mysterious marriage of antithetical principles.

Alone in her kitchen, Aphrodissia remembers her first meeting with the outlaw ten years prior to his death: "leur première rencontre dans un chemin creux, sous un mûrier où elle s’était abritée d’une averse de grêle, et leur passion née avec la soudaineté d’un éclaire par cette nuit orageuse" (pp. 1194–5). A careful examination of the images presented here reveals the important alchemical function of the encounter. The adjective 'creux', used in many of the other tales, signals the intimate, hermetic nature of the maternal womb and the "philosopher’s egg". The mulberry tree, with its red leaves that shine at night, is said in China to be "l’arbre où s’élève le soleil levant", and is also related to the vernal equinox.21 The notion of a divine birth is reinforced by the "averse de grêle", implying heavenly intervention and creative action. Representing celestial semen, the "éclair" recalls Kostis' role as smith, and the blending of lightning and rain is a universal symbol of the union of fire and water, the goal of the alchemical opus. In Chevalier’s discussion of the ancient smiths, we read: "La forge, dit-on en Chine, entre en communication avec le Ciel; la maîtrise du feu appelle la pluie, donc l’union de l’eau et du feu qui est le Grand Œuvre alchimique".22

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20 See Farrells, "Title" 237-8. They see in her dress of "étamine noire" only its function as "a stock image of a widow". This black muslin dress reminds us not only of Marie’s robe (representing the Night) in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", but also of the use of ‘étamine’ as a sieve for filtering liquids.

21 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 654.

22 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 456.
Finally, this imagery brings to mind both Wang-Fô’s positive valorization of lightning and the union of Prince Genghi and the Dame which, described as “des étoiles dans une nuit pluvieuse”, is another marriage of Fire and Water.

We find a certain symbolic progression between the lovers’ first and second encounters. Reminiscing, the widow relates her impressions of their second experience together: “et le jupe jaune qu’elle portait en ce temps-là, et qu’ils avaient étendu sur eux en guise de couverture, et c’avait été comme s’ils avaient couché sous un lambeau de soleil” (p. 1195). Before she joins her lover, it is simply a yellow skirt (one which is reminiscent of imagery used in “Le Lait de la Mort”), but when placed over them during their mysterious union it takes on the golden color of the resplendent midday sun. The “châtaignier” she mentions next in her recollection of this second meeting parallels the “mûrier” previously evoked. In ancient China, the chestnut tree corresponds to the West and to Autumn,23 and it serves here as a contrast to the mulberry tree symbolizing the sunrise/East and Spring. Thus, the cycle of solar images spanning the two encounters reflects the progression of the lovers’ relationship, and foreshadows the imagery of the tale’s conclusion.

Their subsequent meetings take place near the widow’s “cahute” by the cemetery, where Kostis would arrive “à la nuit tombée”. Both this isolated hut (reminiscent of Genghi’s mountain retreat) and the “enclos consacré” of the cemetery represent sacred space, as well as implying another return to the intimacy of the maternal womb. It is here that they are discovered by the priest, awakened by their “babil d’amour sous le platane”. The recurring

23 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 216.
image of the plane tree -- a tree sacred to the Nymphs in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" -- evokes longevity and immortality.

In the story's conclusion, describing Aphrodisia's theft of her lover's head, the successive stages of the alchemical opus are revealed. The scene begins with an ascent from the depths of the village (Matter): "Contournant le village, elle prit pour monter au sommet le raidillon le moins fréquenté". Three references are made to upward movement ("monter", "sommet", "raidillon"), with the verb 'contourner' suggesting a spiral motion towards infinity. As she climbs, "l'air brûlait comme un fer porté au blanc". The iron turned white, another allusion to smithwork, signals the "œuvre au blanc", a theme which is continued in the next sentence: "Le sentier débouchait enfin sur une esplanade blanche et ronde". Here we move from a vertical ascent up a narrow path (yang) to a horizontal opening up ('déboucher') into a mystical Center (yin). The "work in white" is indicated by this "esplanade blanche et ronde", an image of the Moon and the feminine principle.

Looking up, she sees the rocks, and even farther up, "il n'y avait que les aigles et le ciel, dont les aigles seuls savent les pistes" (p. 1199). The notion of height is now restored, which, in conjunction with the images of eagles and sky, implies the masculine, spiritual principle. It is amid the eagles (recalling the eagle-like pines in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles") in the air that Kostis' head soars, dominating the village below.

When Aphrodisia decides to hid her lover's head either under her kitchen floor or in "une caverne dont elle seule avait le secret", she is planning the realization of a union of Heaven and Earth, of Light and Darkness, the ultimate goal of the opus. Unconsciously expressing her knowledge of the
results of such a union, she assures Kostis "qu'ils étaient sauvés", that immortality is imminent. Sitting beneath "le platane qui poussait en contrebas de la place", a tree evoking the sacred nature of their earlier unions at the cemetery, the widow looks down at the forests, and finally "Tout au fond" where she perceives "la mer entre deux lèvres de la montagne". This image, reminiscent of Wang Fo's sea and mountains, describes an opening into the darkness of the maternal matrix, and Aphrodissia wishes that her lover could have fled under the waves, thus entering -- as Marko did -- into the realm of the Eternal Feminine. The widow's movement in these concluding scenes parallels that suggested by the imagery in her first two encounters with Kostis, which symbolically represents the cycle from sunrise to sunset: rising to where the eagles soar in the sky and then descending towards the sea, she again follows the semi-circular pattern of the sun. As she begins to cry, "elle laissait couler ses larmes sur le visage du mort", thus causing Water and Fire to unite. As a result of this sacred marriage, Kostis' head is now compared to a "une pastèque rouge avec des grains noirs au fond", a mixture of sunlight (red) and nocturnal darkness (black), or of Spirit and Matter, indicating the initial restoration of the sun god's original duality. Called "une taupe noire", the widow appears here both as "the incarnation of Night"\textsuperscript{24} and, like the mole, as a psychopomp to guide souls (Kostis) through the labyrinth of Darkness.

As others have already remarked, the concluding paragraph of this tale evokes an image of the setting sun. It also has, however, an important alchemical function in the text which has yet to be revealed. For instance, immediately before she falls, "une pierre enfin se détacha sous son pied,

\textsuperscript{24} Haxo, Yoccoz 21.
tomba au fond du précipice comme pour lui montrer la route" (p. 1201). This "pierre" must be seen as an allusion to the Philosopher's Stone which indicates the completion of the magnum opus. The image of the widow plunging "into the abime and the evening" (Matter/ Darkness) and carrying Kostis' blood stained head (Spirit/Light) evokes the final union of opposing forces, a mysterium conjunctionis, and the ultimate victory of the Sacred over the Profane.

The movement we have discerned in "La Veuve Aphrodissia" from the symbol of sunrise (evoked by the widow's first meeting with Kostis and her ascent up the mountain) towards the final image of the bleeding red sun disappearing into the darkness of night has important implications in terms of the preceding stories. With the conclusion of this seventh tale, the solar cycle completes itself, the circle is closed: we return here to the image of twilight which dominates the fourth narrative -- "Le dernier Amour de Prince Genghi" -- as well as the first three stories in the collection. It is interesting to compare the endings of "La Veuve Aphrodissia" with that of L'Œuvre au Noir, the latter, according to Yourcenar, describing the final stage in the alchemical process. Speaking of Zenon's experience, she states: "le flot de visions, qui à ce moment déborde et l'entraîne, culmine en une image allégorique de l'œuvre au rouge".25 In the visions Zenon has immediately before his death we find imagery paralleling that evoked in the conclusion of "La Veuve Aphrodissia", although presented on a much grander scale:

25 Rosbo, Entretiens 129.
La nuit était tombée, sans qu'il sût savoir si c'était en lui ou dans la chambre : tout était nuit. La nuit aussi bougeait : les ténèbres s'écartaient pour faire place à d'autres, abîme sur abîme, épaisseur sombre sur épaisseur sombre. Mais ce noir différent de celui qu'on voit par les yeux frémissait de couleurs issues pour ainsi dire de ce qui était leur absence : le noir tournant au vert livide, puis au blanc pur ; le blanc pâle se transmutait en or rouge sans que cessât pourtant l'originelle noircœur, tout comme les feux des astres et l'aurore boréale tressaillent dans ce qui est quand même la nuit noire. Un instant qui lui sembla éternel, un globe écarlate palpita en lui ou en dehors de lui, saligna sur la mer. Comme le soleil d'été dans les régions polaires, la sphère éclatante parut hésiter, prête à descendre d'un degré vers le nadir, puis, d'un sursaut imperceptible, remonta vers le zénith, se résorba enfin dans un jour aveuglant qui était en même temps la nuit (pp. 832-33).

In Zenon's vision, the sun appears to descend before it rises imperceptibly to be finally absorbed into "un jour aveuglant qui était en même temps la nuit", whereas the final images in "La Veuve Aphrodissia" describe only the dramatic fall of the sun/Kostis' head into the darkness of Night. Both texts, however, evoke a sacred union of Light and Darkness/Day and Night which, like the alchemical transmutation, ultimately implies an ascension towards rebirth and the attainment of immortality.
Chapter 3 - A Broken Circle

1. The Void

Unlike the tales discussed in our first and second chapters, the three concluding *nouvelles orientales* leave the reader with a feeling of disappointment, this impression becoming particularly evident in the final story where the circular path of the sun, although initially continued, will ultimately be broken. In this third chapter, we shall attempt to determine the reasons for this rupture and for the progressive movement we find here towards disillusionment and despair, which serve as a sharp contrast to the sense of promise and hope evoked by the first story in the collection.

"Kâli décapitée", the eighth *nouvelle orientale* is one of the shortest in the entire work, as well as one of the least successful in terms of its presentation of an important theme. Mme Yourcenar herself mentions in an interview that "Kâli décapitée", based on the Hindu legend, is "the worst story in the lot".\(^1\) As a consequence, it is scarcely mentioned by the critics who discuss the *Nouvelles orientales*.\(^2\) The Farrells, for instance, simply state that "the Oriental legend of Kali, in which a goddess' head is attached to a prostitute's body, shows the highest and lowest forms of love and comments on how much can be learned from desire, and from regret".\(^3\) We believe, nonetheless, that the tale merits examination based upon the fact

\(^{1}\) Yourcenar, *Euros* 85.

\(^{2}\) The tale is not mentioned at all by Jean Blot (Blot, *Yourcenar*), and Pierre Horn devotes only one line to it in his examination of the collection (Horn, *Yourcenar* 21).

\(^{3}\) Farrells, *Counterpoint* 99-100. We find their conclusion to be somewhat simplistic: the tale, although imperfect, does present a more profound message.
that, like the other stories, it exemplifies the fundamental role of alchemical thought and the imagination in Yourcenar's work. We find in this short 'récit' many familiar images which will be discussed in our study of Kāli's original divine character, her subsequent transformation, her resemblance to the Black Sun, and finally, her important encounter with the Sage in the tale's conclusion.

A Perfect Diamond

The title of this story signals the notion of a rupture, a division of the head (Spirit) from the body (Matter) resembling Kostis' experience in the previous tale. Prior to her decapitation, Kāli, like Kostis, was a divine creature, the embodiment of perfection. Following the text's introduction of the new Kāli, she is described in her original state: "Jadis, Kāli, nénuphar de la perfection, trônait au ciel d'Indra comme à l'intérieur d'un saphir; les diamants du matin scintillaient dans son regard" (p. 1203). All of the images here clearly suggest perfection: the water lily resembles the lotus emerging from the primordial waters, the sapphire commonly represents the celestial kingdom, and the diamond, an important image throughout the tale, corresponds to the Philosopher's Stone in Indian Alchemy as a symbol of immortality.⁴ Similarly, Kāli is "parfaite comme une fleur" and "pure comme le jour".

The text goes on to explain how the goddess fell from this state of divine perfection: "Les dieux jaloux guettèrent Kāli un soir d'éclipse, dans un cône

⁴ Eliade, *Pogu* 274.
d'ombre", and by means of a bolt of lighting, they decapitate her. These gods recall the peasants in "La Veuve Aphrodissia" who cut off Kostis' head because they are jealous of his link with the Sacred. The eclipse mentioned here not only foreshadows disaster, but also announces the end of a cycle through the image of the sun being devoured by the Darkness.\textsuperscript{5} Furthermore, the "cône d'ombre" -- the cone being both a feminine symbol and an "Image ascensionnelle de l'évolution de la matière vers l'esprit"\textsuperscript{6} -- suggests the alchemical athanor, a place of transformations. When Kâlî's head is severed from her body, "un flot de lumière jaillit de sa nuque tranchée", signaling the release of Spirit from Matter. This light is then condensed into snow and the snow must be interpreted as a form of purification: "Un vent froid souffla, condensa la clarté qui se mit à tomber du ciel; une couche blanche s'amassa au sommet des montagnes, sous des espaces étoilés où il commençait à faire nuit" (p. 1203).

Regretting their crime, the gods descend to the abyss where Kâlî has fallen: "Au fond du charnier, dans un marécage, la tête de Kâlî ondoyait comme un lotus, et ses longs cheveux noirs nageaient autour d'elle comme des racines flottantes" (p. 1204). Here we find an image that is almost identical to one appearing in "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé", that is, the Emperor's head emerging like a lotus from the primordial waters (as the first manifestation of creation) and the hair of his "courtisans" floating around it like snakes. The same theme is presented in these two stories, as well as in "La Veuve Aphrodissia": The perfect unity of a divinity is

\textsuperscript{5} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 389.

\textsuperscript{6} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 275.
destroyed by a division of Spirit and Matter, followed by a purification which results in the emergence from the chaos of the first manifestation of creation. Finally, we read that "le chef de Kāli" (recalling the original title of the previous tale, p. 1215) is joined to the body of a prostitute, the incarnation of impurity and the Profane. The result of this soldering operation is a union of the sacred and the profane, that is, of antithetical principles. However, unlike the alchemical coincidentia oppositorum which leads to a state of perfect unity, the operation performed on Kāli creates a state of conflict and disharmony for the unhappy goddess whose contradictory elements remain incompatible.

Kāli Divided

In the story's first sentence, Kāli is described as "la déesse terrible", signaling her role in Hindu mythology as Durga Pratyangira, one of the many terrifying forms assumed by Shiva's wife. The paragraph following this introductory sentence lists the numerous antitheses which are responsible for the goddess' contradictory nature. She can be found, for instance, "simultanément au Nord et au Sud", both at the sun's Zenith (her head) and its Nadir (her body). Called "Kāli, la Noire", she resembles the devouring Black sun, the vedic 'Surya', described as "la phase du temps destructrice". Like many goddesses, Kāli embodies the ambivalence of Eros: she is at once "horrible et belle".

7 Durand, Structures 37. Durand also mentions that the masters of Kali Durga are the lion and the bull, both very common symbols of the Black Sun.
Physically, she is compared to a banana tree, a plant which for the Buddhist is a symbol of instability and impermanence. This symbolic function of the 'bananier' is revealing when examined in conjunction with the next sentence, which, through a series of varied but interrelated images, evokes the notion of an imminent change, and indicates that Kāli's state of conflict will not be permanent, that it is but a phase in her evolution. We read that "Elle a des épaules rondes comme le lever de la lune d'automne; des seins gonflés comme des bourgeois près d'éclorer; ses cuisses ondulent comme la trompe de l'éléphanteau nouveau-né, et ses pieds dansants sont comme de jeunes pousses" (p. 1202). All the imagery here suggests something about to emerge, to be differentiated or manifested in a symbolic awakening. Within the goddess' body, the purity of the pale moon is about to appear on the horizon, and the perfect harmony of a flower is on the verge of unfolding, the latter image recalling descriptions of the Néréides and the Nymphs whose breasts are as pure as "pale roses" (pp. 1182 & 1189). The next image to appear -- the trunk of a new-born elephant -- is more complex. We are reminded of the important role played by the elephant in Indian mythology, as exemplified by the elephant of Indra and the name (elephant) given to Shiva. Furthermore, we read in Chevalier: "c'est d'un éléphanteau que la reine Māya conçut Bouddha... il évoque ailleurs l'Éveil, ce qui nous ramène au symbolisme de la Connaissance figuré par Ganesha".

A venerated figure in India having a man's head and an elephant's body (his head was cut off as a punishment and replaced by that of an elephant), the

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8 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 104.

9 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 397.
mythical Ganesha, like Kâli at this point in the tale, evokes the asymmetry and disharmony of an incongruous mixture of the grotesque and the sublime. In addition, Ganesha, the son of Shiva, expresses "le Principe de la manifestation", as well as denoting "toutes les possibilités de la vie et toutes ses expressions". Finally, Kâli's feet are like "de jeunes pousses", an image which, like the baby elephant, the flower buds and the early moon, depicts the first germs of life, an awakening that will lead to the manifestation of the Cosmos.

The goddess embodies the gamut of metals glorified by alchemists ranging from bronze and silver (ying) to copper and gold (yang), as well as the entire spectrum of the sun's phases: "Elle se mire tour à tour dans le bronze de la nuit, dans l'argent de l'aurore, dans le cuivre du crépuscule, et, dans l'or de midi, elle se contemple" (p. 1202). However, despite the apparent perfection characteristic of such a union of opposites, Kâli feels incomplete. Introduced by the word "Mais", the next sentence reveals her sadness, reflected not only in her "pure" eyes, but also in her pale face "éternellement mouillé de larmes" and "couvert de rosée comme la face inquiète du matin". Like the early morning, she is in the initial stages of creation, having not yet reached the perfection of the sun's zenith because of the unreconciled conflict within her. The image of dew, suggesting immortality, stands in opposition to the "chapelet d'ossements" encircling her neck in that the ancient Hebrews believed that celestial dew gave life to dry bones. In addition, bones are said to contain the germ (marrow) of a

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10 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 472.

11 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 325.
glorious resurrection. It is thus interesting that the "necklace of human skulls" traditionally worn by the Kâli of Hindu mythology becomes in Yourcenar's tale a "rosary of bones", the word 'chapelet' adding a sacred element to the image, and that this rosary appears around Kâli's neck, at the point where opposites meet.

Next we are offered more details about Kâli's life following her transformation and about the reasons for her sadness. Motivated by the desires of her prostitute's body, she sleeps with a variety of men including "chameliers", "mendiants aveugles", "bâteliers", and Blacks, all seemingly profane beings who nonetheless suggest the idea of a symbolic passage or transition. The "chamelier", for instance, is related to the camel, "un animal impur" associated with Death in Hindu iconography but at the same time representing "la monture qui aide à traverser le désert; grâce à laquelle on peut donc atteindre le centre caché, l'Essence divine". The notion of Darkness and Death is further evoked by the Blacks (who are like "bêtes de somme") and the "bâteliers", the latter clearly suggesting the archetypal Night Sea Journey, a guided passage to the other world across the sea of Death. The "blind beggars", recalling the theme of blindness presented in "Le Dernier Amour du Prince Genghi", symbolize both an absence of light and

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12 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 825. Also described here is the Greek custom of offering the gods the bones of sacrificed animals which they would burn in order to regenerate the animals.


14 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 204.
spiritual illumination or clairvoyance. Finally, the "lits de vermine" in which Kāli sleeps with these men further suggests the symbolism of the 'ver', evoking a passage from Death to Life. Thus, the goddess' sexual experiences -- her immersion in the basest Matter -- seem to signal a symbolic death which entails a transition ultimately leading to rebirth.

While her body participates in the world of the Profane, Kāli's head remains pure: "sa bouche amère ne donne pas de baisers, ses cils ne caressent pas les joues de ceux qui l'étreignent, et son visage reste éternellement pâle comme une lune immaculée" (p. 1203). She still exudes a strong sense of dichotomy and duality which opposes the purity and primordial unity she previously embodied. However, a ritual purification will follow, as indicated by the goddess' association with the fire of a funeral pyre: "Kāli étalée dans l'ombre pyramidale des bûchers s'abandonne sur les cendres tièdes". The pyramid, a symbol of ascension and a meeting of Heaven and Earth (for the alchemist, the pyramid resolved the problem of squaring the circle), resembles the "Philosopher's egg". The "cendres tièdes" mentioned here bring to mind a practice of yogis who, following the example of the ascetic Çiva, covered their bodies with ashes as a sign of their renunciation of terrestrial vanity. Next, her body is compared to the "flammes du bûcher"; whereas fire is often negatively valorized as

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15 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 89. We read: "Des ascètes hindous croient parvenir à l'illumination spirituelle en fixant des yeux un soleil éblouissant et ardent jusqu'à en perdre la vue. L'aveugle évoque l'image de celui qui voit autre chose, avec d'autres yeux, d'un autre monde".


17 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 187.
destructive and devouring, the word 'flame' tends to denote purification. The goddess thus seems to be undergoing an alchemical purification -- one ironically resembling an ascetic ritual -- which will eventually help her ascend to a superior level and obtain absolute knowledge.

Like her predecessor, the Hindu Durga Pratyagira who inspired her creation, the Kāli of our tale is intimately linked with destruction, devouring consumption, and theft. As we shall discover, however, this aspect of her character is not entirely negative. The fallen goddess is “immonde comme le rat des égouts et détestée comme la belette des champs”. The rat, although generally a nocturnal and chthonian image, is symbolically ambivalent; it can be either destructive or beneficent.18 Furthermore, the rat, like the weasel, is often seen as a thief, a role which brings to mind the Indian 'mûshaka', the rat serving as Ganesha's steed. As such, mûshaka is associated with theft and fraudulent appropriation of riches; however, according to the Dictionnaire des symboles: "ce voieur est l'Atmâ, à l'intérieur du cœur. Sous le voile de l'illusion, il tire seul bénéfice des jouissances apparentes de l'être, et même du profit de l'ascèse".19 This theme of theft is continued in the next sentence of the text: "Elle vola les cœurs comme un lambeau d'entailles aux étals des tripiers". The analogy drawn between hearts and entrails is significant when we recall that the latter were traditionally thought to possess magical powers. In ancient Egypt, for example, the intestines were removed from the bodies of the dead and placed in urns on magical boats representing the voyage to the Beyond.

18 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 801-2.

19 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 802.
the voyage to the Beyond. Monsters and demons often tried to steal these urns in order to possess the magical powers they contained within them.\footnote{Chevalier, Dictionnaire 523.} Thus Kāli's role as thief has important connotations in that it implies an attempt to recapture the link with the sacred she had before her fall from Indra's Heaven. Similarly, in an earlier description, the goddess is said to be "Triste comme une flévreuse qui ne parvendrait pas à procurer d'eau fraîche". As a result of her asymmetric nature, she is like one who is ill and unable to attain the purity ("eau fraîche") she once knew. Indicating that she is somewhat successful in these attempts to regain perfection is the fact that the "liquefied fortunes" of her victims "poissaient ses mains comme des rayons de miel". We are reminded here of the image of the Greek villagers (hornets) hovering over Kostis' honey-covered body (fruit) in "La Veuve Aphrodissia". Unlike the peasants in the preceding tale, however, Kāli succeeds in covering herself with the "rays of honey", an image suggesting the sun and gold, as well as describing an Elixir of Life.

Towards the end of the tale, shortly before Kāli's encounter with the Sage, we find a strong emphasis placed on the goddess' destructive and devouring nature, on her resemblance to the metaphoric Black Sun:

Une fureur l'avait prise contre tout ce qui vit, en même temps qu'un désir d'en augmenter sa substance, d'anéantir les créatures tout en s'assouvisant. On la rencontrait accroupie aux abords des cimetières; sa bouche craquait des ossements comme la gueule des lionnes. Elle tua comme l'insecte femelle qui dévore ses mâles; elle écrasa les êtres qu'elle enfantait comme une laie qui se retourne sur sa portée (p. 1205).
She kills and devours as a means of fulfilling her insatiable hunger for immortality. Her consumption of bones, which, as we have already noted, contain regenerative powers, implies an attempt to suck the essence of life from her victims. Her mouth, previously exempt from the impure activities of her body, is now like "la gueule des lionnes", an image clearly recalling the Black Sun and thus indicating a continuation of the solar cycle from the preceding tale. The mythical sol niger represents the female principle (Darkness/Death) swallowing the male principle (Light/Life), just as the "insecte femelle" evoked in this passage devours "ses mâles". The most interesting image described here, however, is the last one, which compares the goddess to a female boar, an animal which, like many sacred Mother Goddesses, both creates and destroys life. The boar plays an important symbolic role in Indian mythology: We are reminded, for example, of Vishnu's avatar as a wild boar who recovers the Earth from the abyss of the ocean, bringing it back to the surface to organize it. But it is the "laie adamantine" of Hindu mythology which seems to be evoked by the text's imagery. The Dictionnaire des symboles explains:

La laie adamantine joue un rôle important dans le Vajrayana. Elle est l'attribut de cette Vajra varahi (Dorje Phagmo), qui manifeste un aspect féminin de l'Eveil... Cette déité... doit être assimilée à la réalisation de la Vacuité, et du canal subtil central (sushumna) dans lequel les souffles sont recueillis pour que la Félicité soit libérée.

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21 Graves, Encyclopedia 362.

22 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 845.
This symbolic function of the female boar thus signals the beginnings of Kālī's awakening, and foreshadows the sort of revelation she will experience through her encounter with the Sage in the tale's conclusion.

The Role of the Sage

On the morning before Kālī meets the Wise Man, she leaves the prostitutes' quarter, encounters an idiot "sitting on a dung heap", and we read that "DÉjà, il n'était plus séparé de la déesse que par la longueur de son ombre". This statement reveals that the goddess is already nearing a reconciliation with the dark, irrational side of her self, or her 'id', represented by the idiot. After he leaves her, Kālī continues her journey towards "une ville inconnue", an expression emphasizing the role of the unknown and foreshadowing the mysterious nature of the experience she will soon undergo.

Finally, "A l'orée d'une forêt" -- at a point where Nature (feminine) meets Civilization (masculine) -- Kālī finds the Sage. The text's description of this figure reveals his important function as a spiritual advisor. He appears sitting cross-legged, the characteristic posture of the yogic 'asana' which describes the "absolute cessation of trouble from the pairs of opposites" necessary for transcendence of the human condition.²³ His body is "décharné", an adjective whose etymology suggests complete detachment from the flesh and the physical realm. Like a leitmotif, the image of a funeral pyre recurs in this description of the Sage's body: It is "sec comme

²³ Eliade, *Yoga* 54.
du bois préparé pour le bûcher". Again the theme of purification is evoked, and the notion of dryness signals the ascetic trials associated with the desert.24 The statement that "No one can discern if he is very young or very old" establishes a parallel between the Sage and the Virgin Mary of "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" ("Bien qu'elle fût très jeune, elle avait la gravité, la lenteur, la dignité d'une très vieille femme", p. 1190). Like Marie, this Wise man, who is beyond Life and Death, will act as an intermediary in the story, reconciling the antithetical forces of the universe. His eyes, though scarcely visible beneath his lowered lids, "see everything". Here the idea that Truth is perceived without the aid of eyesight recalls the important role of blindness in "Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi". Divine light emanates not only from the Wise Man's head, but also from his entire being ("La lumière autour de lui se disposait en auréole"), making him appear like a center of spiritual energy.

In the presence of this sacred man who will act as her guide, Kāli begins to experience an inner peace, foreseeing a "grand repos définitif, arrêt des mondes, délivrance des êtres, jour de bénédiction où la vie et la mort seront également inutiles, âge où Tout se résorbe en Rien, comme si ce pur néant qu'elle venait de concevoir tressaillait en elle à la façon d'un futur enfant" (p. 1205). The goddess is about to transcend the wheel of Time and Life by giving herself over to the 'void' ("sunya") embodied by the Sage, this "Maître de la grande compassion". The "pur néant" she feels emerging within her like

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24 We read in Chevalier: "La sécheresse désigne en effet en théologie mystique une phase d'épreuves, pendant laquelle l'âme ne sent plus son Dieu, n'éprouve plus aucun élan, ne conçoit aucune idée ... C'est à cette phase cependant qu'elle parvient à la plus haute intensité, que sa nature ignée se révèle et que son feu introduit dans l'immortalité de l'union bienheureuse, que la vraie voie débouche enfin sur l'union". Chevalier, Dictionnaire 836.
a child in her womb resembles the tantric "vajra" -- often represented by a diamond or the Philosopher's Stone -- which is the point where the void is materialized: "point sans point dont tout découle et où tout retoune". 25 This void -- the revelation of the long and rigorous tantric path, the latter suggesting, according to Eliade, "the difficulties of the alchemical opus" -- "is of an adamantine essence, for which reason it is called vajra (= diamond)". 26 Eliade's description of the foundations of tantric metaphysics is revealing in terms of our story:

The creation, and the becoming that arose from it, represent the shattering of the primordial Unity, and the separation of the two principles (Siva-Sakti, etc.); in consequence, man experiences a state of duality (object-subject, etc.) -- and this is suffering, illusion, 'bondage'. The purpose of tantric sadhana is the reunion of the two polar principles within the disciple's own body. 'Revealed' for the use of the kāli-yuga, tantrism is above all a practice, an act, a realization (= sadhana ). But although the revelation is addressed to all, the tantric path includes an initiation that can be performed only by a guru; hence the importance of the master, who alone can communicate the secret, esoteric doctrine, transmitting it 'from mouth to ear'. 27

Throughout the course of Yourcenar's tale we find the same tantric progression described here by Eliade, and Kāli's experience closely resembles the initiation of the disciple who is "required to contemplate the dissolution and creation of the universe and finally to experience in himself the 'death' (= dissolution) and 'resurrection' (= re-creation) both of the

25 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 990.

26 Eliade, Yogs 206.

27 Eliade, Yogs 206-7.
cosmos and of his own subtle body".28

The Sage who appears at the end of the story obviously plays the part of the 'guru' in the initiation, acting as Kâli's spiritual advisor and introducing her to the metaphysical concept of the 'void'. Explaining to her that she was never free from "l'enchaînement des choses", he ultimately reveals that only now in her new condition as a fallen goddess is she "plus près d'accéder à ce qui est sans forme". In other words, as a result of her initiatory experience -- involving her fall from primordial unity, her division, subsequent transformation, and purification -- she appears to be on the verge of attaining this sense of void, the absence of duality which leads to a revelation of the perfection of transcendentental knowledge.

"Kâli Décapitée" is important to our study of the "Imaginaire" in that it offers us another variation on an alchemical theme, presented here from the point of view of Hindu mythology and tantric metaphysics. Mircea Eliade discusses the relationship between Indian alchemy, Hatha-Yoga and Tantrism, emphasizing the role played by asceticism in all these domains:

"...the alchemist hopes to achieve the same results as the yogi by projecting his asceticism on to matter. Instead of submitting his body and his psycho-mental life to the rigours of yoga, in order to separate the Spirit (purusha) from all experience belonging to the sphere of the substance (prakrti), the alchemist subjects metals to chemical operations which correspond to 'purifications' and ascetic 'tortures'."29

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28 Eliade, Yoga 274. Eliade continues: "This process of dissolution and re-creation suggests the solvitur et coagulatur of Western alchemy".

29 Eliade, Forge 128.
Corresponding to the alchemical *prima materia*, which may be modified in its various stages of manifestation, the concept of primordial matter or 'prakṛti' is a fundamental tantric principle. Eliade explains that "in the ideological universe in which the alchemist works and which is that of tantrism, *prakṛti* is not only the cosmological principle of classical Sankhya and yoga; *prakṛti* is the primordial mode of the Goddess, of the Shakti". This statement clarifies Kāli's role in the text: She originally embodied the concept of 'prakṛti' which was subsequently transmuted, purified and perfected through the goddess' initiation.

It may seem unusual or ironic that we relate Kāli's erotic experiences to the ascetic rituals of the yogi. However, supporting our interpretation is Eliade's description of certain erotic rituals performed by alchemico-tantric disciples in India. Mme Yourcenar herself mentions how the Oriental conception of asceticism and eroticism differs markedly from the Christian or Western view:

Le détachement du sage hindou n'implique ni dégoût, ni réprobation puritaine, ni hantise de l'abjection charnelle. Dans certaines sectes même, comme d'ailleurs dans tel groupe hérétique au sein du christianisme, l'acte sexuel deviendra pour le mystique ce qu'il n'a jamais cessé d'être pour la religion populaire, l'un des symboles et l'une des formes de l'union avec Dieu. L'Étre absolu, l'Athman suprême comprend en lui le jeu amoureux des milliers d'êtres qui composent les mondes; les étreintes frénétiques des déités du bouddhisme tantrique sont une part acceptée du Cycle des Choses.

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30 Eliade, *Forge* 140.

31 Eliade, *Forge* 132.

As we have already noted, Kâli’s erotic experience depicts a symbolic passage; it is but one stage in an evolution (the “Cycle des Choses”) which should ultimately lead her to a heightened awareness and a spiritual awakening, to an understanding and acceptance of the cosmic void.

Although this tale’s central theme is interesting and its imagery skillfully presented, “Kâli Décapitée” has a number of flaws which make it inferior to most of the other ‘nouvelles’ in the collection. It lacks the colorful atmosphere evoked by illusion and fantasy in such stories as “Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé”, “L’Homme qui a aimé les Néréides”, and “Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles”, and the powerful drama of a heroic quest (“Le Sourire de Marko”), or of a tragedy like “Le Lait de la Mort”, or of a love linked with the sacred (“Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi” or “La Veuve Aphrodisia”). The imperfection of this eighth tale is particularly evident in its final paragraph:

‘Le désir t’a appris l’innocence du désir, dit-il; le regret t’enseigne l’inutilité de regretter. Prends patience, ô Erreur dont nous sommes tous une part, ô Imparfaite grâce à qui la perfection prend conscience d’elle-même, ô Fureur qui n’es pas nécessairement immortelle...’ (p. 1206).

The title character having apparently just experienced a spiritual revelation, these concluding lines leave the reader with a strong sense of anti-climax. Thus, the question arises as to whether this anti-climactic ending is not perhaps a deliberate device, a means of inviting the reader to

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13-14. On the first page of this short work, Mme Yourcenar calls the legend of Kâli one of India’s “great erotic myths”: “la tête coupée de Kâli posée sur le corps d’une courtisane de bas étage, et le divin soudé à ce qui passe pour l’immonde” (p. 7).
reevaluate the nature of Kâli's revelation, to ask himself if she is truly on
the path towards spiritual rebirth. This disappointing conclusion also
seems to serve as a foreshadowing of Cornélius experience in the final
nouvelle orientale, one which is clearly characterized by extreme
pessimism and a strong feeling of sadness. Thus, although Kâli's role as an
incarnation of the Black Sun seems to imply that the solar cycle discerned
in the previous chapter is continuing, the fact that we are left here with a
question about the goddess' future indicates a movement towards
uncertainty and disillusionment, two elements marking the conclusion of
this collection of oriental tales.
II. The Last Banquet

Like the previous tale, "La Fin de Marko Krallévitch" has certain shortcomings which make it inferior to most of the others in the collection. It is mentioned only very briefly by Pierre Horn, who stresses the role of the character he calls the "Mysterious Stranger", the Old Man without a name who is a central figure in the narrative. This ninth story is unique in that it was not written until 1978 and thus did not appear with the other 'nouvelles' in the original collection. The author explains the story's origins:

Le conte a pour point de départ un fragment de ballade serbe évoquant la mort du héros aux mains d'un mystérieux, banal, et allégorique passant. Mais où ai-je lu ou entendu cette histoire à laquelle, ensuite, j'ai souvent repensé? Je ne le sais plus, et ne la retrouve pas dans les quelques textes du même genre que j'ai sous la main, et qui donnent de la mort de Marko Krallévitch plusieurs versions, mais pas celle-là (p. 1216).

The narrative is thus in some respects the continuation of a tale appearing in the beginning in the collection, "Le Sourire de Marko", where this semi-divine Serbian hero is first introduced to the reader. However, the account of this memorable character's death in "La Fin de Marko Krallévitch" pales in comparison with the earlier story's narration of a heroic quest, its triumphant conclusion, and its description of Marko's passing as akin to "la dernière traversée d'Arthur". Nonetheless, this ninth tale presents an important theme, namely the contrast between Western/Christian thought and various forms of mysticism, most of which originated in the East. In

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1 Horn, *Youcenar* 22.
addition to a treatment of this central theme, our symbolic reading of "La Fin de Marko Kraliévitch" will highlight the theme of smithwork, the symbolism of the Banquet, and the function of the mysterious Old Man.

Bells and Bronzemakers

Very early in the text, we find evidence of an opposition between Christianity and various other forms of mystical thought. In the introductory paragraph, for instance, there is a strong emphasis on the Christian sounds emanating from the church bells, which are "plus fortes et plus stridentes qu'ailleurs comme si... elles eussent voulu affirmer très haut que leurs sonneurs étaient chrétiens, et chrétien le mort qu'on s'apprêtait à mettre en terre" (p. 1207). The theme of death is clearly introduced by "le glas" resounding above the city "dans le ciel presque insupportablement bleu". However, it is the bells themselves which are important here: Suspended at a point between Heaven and Earth, they are connected with the blueness of the sky, which denotes infinity and seems to resolve all contradictions.²

The notion of conflict is first revealed by the expression "Mais en bas..." which is followed by a description of "la ville blanche aux couretones étroites, à des hommes accroupis du côté de l'ombre". That the city is white yet filled with shadows indicates an antithetical atmosphere which contrasts with the sense of synthesis evoked by the blue sky and the bells. Likewise, the smallness and narrowness of the courtyards opposes the

² Chevalier, Dictionnaire 129.
vastness of the infinite expanse of blue above them. This contrast reflects a more universal opposition between Heaven and Earth, the spiritual and the material, the infinite and the finite.

Here below in the "white city", the sounds of the bells are not as pure as in the sky: They are "mélangées aux cris, aux appels, aux bêlements d'agneaux, aux hénissements des chevaux et aux braiments d'ânes". Lambs, horses, and asses, all of these creatures are linked with death; all are also commonly considered sacred animals which were often used as sacrificial offerings to the gods in pagan rituals. Thus, not only do these animals introduce the theme of sacrifice which is central to this tale, but the blending of their cries with the ringing of the bells also signals some basic similarities between two opposing modes of thought: the Christian and the pagan. Furthermore, the bells' peals blend in with women's "hulûlements", the verb 'hululer' evoking the darkness and chthonian symbolism associated with nocturnal birds, or with the "rire d'un idiot que ce deuil public n'intéressait pas". The latter image recalls one of the most important and most mysterious figures in the Tarot: "the Fool" ("le Fou") who is totally detached from reality, yet possesses secret transcendental knowledge. Once again we find a contrast between mysticism -- the hermetic science of the Tarot -- and the accepted religious practices of Christianity.

Finally, we read that "Dans le quartier des étameurs, le tapage des marteaux couvrail leur bruit" (p. 1207). Not only does the tinsmiths'

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3 See Chevalier, Dictionnaire 11, 42, 227.

4 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 619. We are also reminded of Panégyotis' resemblance to "the Fool" of the Tarot in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides".
hammering "cover", or block out, the bells, but the ringing is now described as "noise". Introducing the important symbolic role played by the smith, one we have observed in several of the other 'nouvelles', this sentence establishes a contrast between Alchemy and Christianity. A strong emphasis is placed on the work of the old tinsmith, "le vieux Stévan", who is in the process of completing "délicatement, par petits coups secs, le col d'une aiguière". It is interesting that as he speaks and even though he is interrupted by the arrival of his friend Andrèv, "le vieux Stévan" never puts down his hammer, an instrument thought to have sacred power for the smith. Through the loving efforts of the smith (he "caresses" the pitcher's copper lip), this ewer -- a feminine symbol which is etymologically linked with water ('aiguière') -- will ultimately have its copper body coated with molten tin. The resulting bronze is an alloy, symbolically a marriage of opposites attained through the union of the silver-white tin (water, Moon) and red copper (fire, Sun). The *Dictionnaire des symboles* explains that the making of alloys has a very important place in the metalurgical symbolism of ancient China: "Le grand œuvre du fondeur n'est achevé que si les cinq couleurs s'équilibrent, que si le cuivre et l'étain ne se peuvent séparer. L'aliage est l'image d'une union sexuelle parfaite". The union of opposites old Stévan is attempting to achieve is reflected in the text by the image of the light "du soleil bas d'une aprèsmidi finissante" invading "la boutique sombre".

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6 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 24. The work of the tinsmith in this story recalls the "tinplate garlands" described in "La Veuve Aphrodissia".
The contrast between Alchemy and Christianity is further evoked by the fact that, in general, church bells are made of bronze, or an alloy of copper, tin and silver. Thus, the tinsmith who makes bronze (Alchemy) creates a point of interface between opposites (Heaven/Earth, Light/Darkness) such as that symbolized by the bells (Christianity). In addition, he succeeds in imitating the perfection of nature, for, according to Egyptian thought, the sky ("la voûte celeste") is made of bronze in that both are impenetrable and linked with transcendence:

Ce métal dur était symbole d'incorruptibilité et d'immortalité, ainsi que d'inflexible justice ; si la voûte du ciel est d'airain, c'est qu'elle est impénétrable comme ce métal, et c'est aussi que ce métal est lié aux puissances ouraniennes les plus transcendantes, celles dont la voix résonne comme le tonnerre, inspirant aux hommes un sentiment fait de respect et d'épouvante.7

The Banquet

While Stévan continues his work, his friend Andrev recounts the events leading up to Marko's death at a banquet held to celebrate a yearly expedition to the "régions infidèles". The various people invited to attend the affair mysteriously suggest a secret society of metalworkers. For example, the first to be described by Andrev are "les vieux éclipsés": In almost every mythology, lameness is associated with the smith, this physical defect supposedly being the price he paid for his power and secret

7 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 20.
knowledge of fire and metals.\textsuperscript{8} The cripples in Yourcenar's story speak incessantly of the "bons coups qu’ils ont donnés à Kossovo", the word 'coup' describing their exploits in a famous battle between Christians and Turks, as well as suggesting the use of a hammer. According to Andrev, there are fewer and fewer of these lame old men at the feast every year "et même chaque saison", a fact which may be seen as the result of the domination of Christianity over more ancient mythical practices during this period in history.

Many other important men are in attendance at Marko's banquet that day, including powerful merchants and village leaders, "de ceux qui vivent dans la montagne". Both the image of "men living in the mountain" and the word "chefs" bring to mind Kostis, "Le Chef rouge", and his role as smith 'par excellence'. The text's description of the scene of battle between Serbs and Turks in which these mountain men took part has an important symbolic function: "... si près des Turcs qu’on peut tirer des flèches d’un bord à l’autre du torrent qui coule entre les rochers, et quand l’eau manque en été, il y coule du sang" (p. 1208). Here the river divides the two opposing forces, while the arrows, an image often linked with the thunderbolt, symbolize a synthesis, a rupture of ambivalence.\textsuperscript{9} As a result of the conciliatory action of the arrows, the water in the river joins with red blood (fire) at a central point between the two mountainous rocks.

\textsuperscript{8} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 136-7.

\textsuperscript{9} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 445-6. Jung presents an alchemical drawing which illustrates a scene similar to the one described by Yourcenar: The opposites of Sulphur (Sun) and Mercurius (Moon) form a bridge across the "river of eternal water". See Jung, \textit{Alchemy} 360.
Other guests are mentioned later, such as the man who speaks to Marko of the time they fought the "bey Constantin" together; he is a "béquillard" whose lameness again evokes the theme of smithwork. Finally, Andrej describes the blind sitar player who sings a tune he composed long ago in Marko's honor. The musician's blindness implies spiritual clairvoyance, and the music of his sitar symbolizes a mythical, Pythagorean "chant de l'univers". In addition, there is a direct relationship between musicians and smiths: Eliade, for instance, mentions that "Odin and his priests were called 'forgers of songs'".

Andrej, who serves as a valet at this reception, describes the preparation of food, mentioning that one always eats well at Marko's gatherings, even on Christian days of abstinence ("les jours maigres"). This statement reveals that the Serbian hero, although a Christian, disregards the Church's orthodox religious restrictions. On the day of the banquet, the valets serve "de grands plats dans lesquels on n'avait pas épargné les condiments". The word 'condiment' implies the use of salt, an essential element in alchemical symbolism. Durand explains that "Le sel étant d'ailleurs à la fois du domaine culinaire, alimentaire et chimique, peut passer en une chimie de première instance, aux côtés de l'eau, du vin et du sang pour le père des objets sensibles". Salt is thus linked with physical transmutation, as well as with fraternal and spiritual communion.

10 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 261.

11 Eliade, Forgie 98. For a more complete discussion of the close connection between smiths and musicians see Eliade, Forgie 98-9.

12 Durand, Structures 301. See also pp. 300-306.

13 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 858.
themes which play an important part in this tale. The dishes served at the banquet are heavy with "graisse", a word used by some mediaeval alchemists to refer to the primary nature of both gold and salt ("graisse du monde"). Considered a precious substance, animal fat is sometimes used in ritual sacrifices and its consumption by shamans and sorcerers is said to result in their acquisition of supernatural powers.

At the festival where these sacred substances are consumed, Andrej and the other servants perform a ceremonial purification: "... nous, les valets, avons versé de l'eau sur toutes les mains et essuyé tous les doigts" (p. 1208). Such an act of purification reflects the ritual nature of this annual gathering, recalling the traditional conception of the banquet in symbolic thought. The food at Marko's reception will be shared among the guests, and the leftovers distributed to anyone in the village who wants them. Gathered in "la grande cour" is a large crowd of people, each of whom has brought "un pot, petit ou grand, ou une écuelle, ou tout au moins une corbeille". This distribution of food resembles a religious ceremony, such as the Christian sacrament of taking communion, or any other ritual receiving of consecrated offerings. Jung mentions the "Fructus arboris immortalis" which is the alchemical equivalent of the offertory in the Christian mass; however, he explains that there are important differences: whereas the Christian receives the communal offering for himself personally, the alchemist, "since he is the redeemer of God and not the one being redeemed, ... is more

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14 Durand, Structures 300.
15 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 483-4.
concerned to perfect the substance than himself".16

Finally, we read that occasionally Marko "prenait lui-même un quartier de mouton dans un plat, et il disait à quelqu'un : 'Mangel'" (p. 1208). Here, we are immediately reminded of Christ -- 'l'agneau de Dieu' -- and the theme of sacrifice, associated with renewal and divine resurrection. Similarly, in the ritual banquets of the ancient Taoists, the concept of "eating the sacrifice" corresponded to the consumption of previously consecrated offerings.17 The reference to lamb, evoking the sacrificed body of the son of God, clearly establishes a parallel between Marko's last meal with the members of a secret fraternity and Christ's Last Supper with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion, a Banquet during which he instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Role of the Old Man

Pierre Horn, discussing the importance of myth in the Nouvelles orientales, states that "the weak and pitiful old man with no name is the fatidic Mysterious Stranger who brings to the banquet host his appointed death in 'La Fin de Marko Krailévitch'.18 Yourcenar herself mentions the fundamental role played by this allegorical character whose physical appearance is seemingly unimpressive. Speaking in an interview on the

16 Jung, Alchemy 352. Yourcenar herself mentions in an interview that "le sacrifice de la messe passait chez certains alchimistes pour l'équivalent du Grand Œuvre". Rosbo, Entretiens 135.

17 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 105.

18 Horn, Yourcenar 22.
subject of God and destiny, the author compares the old man in this tale with a character from Qui n'a pas son Minautaure?: "But no one noticed that the handsome Bacchus (God) of the play and the little pot-bellied man of the story are the same person, or, if you prefer, the same thing, for which there is no name". Although this statement clarifies the Old Man's function in the narrative as the illustration of "a subject that surpasses language", the text's description of this character merits our attention in terms of its symbolism and imagery.

Marko immediately notices this man who is seated amid the crowd on "un banc" (a word recalling the theme of the banquet): "Et tout à coup, il est arrivé devant un petit vieux assis sur un banc, avec ses pieds qui pendaient devant lui" (pp. 1208–9). It is significant that the man's feet are dangling from the bench, and that this image is later repeated for emphasis: his feet do not touch the ground, a characteristic recalling the swallows and Nymphs of "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" and signaling the Old Man's purity and detachment from the terrestrial world. Later we read that "ses pieds en savates pendaillaient devant lui". It is noteworthy that the sandals of numerous Greek gods reflected a mystical elevation and that those of the Taoist 'Immortals' allowed them to travel through the air: "Instruments de l'immortalité, symboles mêmes de l'Elixir de vie, on comprend que de tels accessoires soient souvent confectionnés par des Immortels-savetiers".

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19 Yourcenar, *Éyes* 156.

20 Yourcenar, *Éyes* 156.

21 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 843.
The Serbian hero, obviously annoyed by the presence of this stranger, tells him that he does not like "les inconnus ni les mendiants qui ne mendient pas". The fact that the Old Man has no name has a symbolic significance which may explain Marko's anger and sense of powerlessness in his presence. In many cultures, knowing an individual's name and pronouncing it implies an ability to exert power over that person. In addition, the image of the stranger plays an important role in many myths and legends: he can represent the "possibility of unseen change" and "peut être aussi bien un messager de Dieu qu'une dangereuse incarnation diabolique". The "petit vieux" in our story is in fact a kind of Divinity, but one which differs markedly from the traditional Christian conception of a God who embodies only Goodness, and Light without Darkness.

The ambivalent nature of this mysterious stranger is revealed when Marko tries to trip him ("il lui appliqua un croc-en-jambe"), but the man does not fall. Andrev observes: "Mais on aurait dit un petit vieux de pierre. Ou plutôt, non; il n'avait pas l'air plus solide qu'un autre" (p. 1209). He thus appears to be both weak and strong at the same time. The analogy Andrev draws between the Old Man and a stone suggests the alchemical symbolism of the 'pierre philosophale', a union of opposites and an embodiment of totality. Marko, himself a semi-divine figure (as revealed in "Le Sourire de Marko"), displays a similarly ambivalent nature. For instance, when the Old Man tells him "C'est vrai que tu passais parfois de l'un à l'autre", he is not

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22 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 676.

23 Cirlot, Dictionary 301.

24 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 422.
only implying that the Serb fought both for and against the Turks, but is also alluding to the hero’s antithetical character. Marko, too, refers to his own contradictory actions, which range from good to evil: "Mais il n’y a pas que le mal, après tout. J’ai donné aux popes; j’ai donné aux pauvres..." (p. 1210).

Finally, after a struggle between these two central characters in which the little man remains unscathed by the Serbian giant’s blows, Marko falls to the ground for the last time. Placing his jacket beneath the hero’s head so that he will be "moins mal à terre", the man heads for the doors "qui étaient grandes ouvertes", and which appear to have opened mystically to allow his departure. Here, his movement through the open doors symbolizes a passage from the Earth towards the world beyond, from the world of the Profane into the realm of the Sacred. This idea is supported by the fact that the Old Man’s back is "un peu courbé" as he crosses the threshold, suggesting an initiatory passage. In Chevalier, we learn of the significance of such a gesture in the symbolism of Free Masonry: "Le profane en pénétrant dans le Temple doit se courber, non en humiliation, mais pour marquer la difficulté du passage du monde profane au plan initiatique... Ce geste peut lui rappeler que, mort à la vie profane, il renaît à une vie nouvelle à laquelle il accède d’une manière semblable à celle de l’enfant venant au monde".25 Two dogs are chained "sur le seuil", one of which is "Le Grand Noir, qui est très mauvais". These two canines must been seen as guardians, one of them protecting the realm of the Living, and the other, "Le Grand Noir", standing guard over the world of Darkness and Death. The latter is reminiscent of a creature in teutonic mythology named 'Garm', a "terrible" and "monstrous"

25 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 782.
dog guarding the entrance to Niflheim, the underworld, "who saw that no living person penetrated into the world of the dead". The Old Man's power and influence in the kingdom of the Dead is indicated by the fact that when he places his hand on this terrifying dog's head, the animal does not show its teeth, a sign of acceptance and submission. Here again, the mysterious stranger's ambivalence is implied: he is equally powerful and at home in the domain of the Dead as in the world of the Living.

Andrev describes the Old Man's departure through the "entrée" into the world outside where "la route . . . s'allonge tout droit entre deux collines, tantôt montant, puis descendant, puis montant encore". His movement along this road is therefore cyclical (ascent-descent-ascent), recalling the path of the sun, such as that evoked in Zenon's visions prior to his death in *L'Oeuvre au noir* (pp. 832-3). Perceived in the distance by the banquet guests, the little man is walking through the dust, "traînant un peu les pieds". Again he seems detached from the Earth (dust), while the dragging of his feet suggests the typical lameness of a divine smith. Andrev notices that the stranger walks very quickly for an old man, a remark which recalls both the Sage ("Kâli Décapitée") and the Virgin Mary ("Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles"), who appear at once young and old. Like both of these divine figures and the bells and bronzework introduced in the beginning of this tale, the Old Man in "La Fin de Marko Krilévitch" is a link between Heaven and Earth, between the Sacred and the Profane. This role as intermediary is reflected in the final image in the tale -- the "vol d'oies sauvages" appearing in the empty sky "sur sa tête" -- in that geese are frequently

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26 Graves, *Encyclopédie* 251, 275, 276.
"considérées comme des messagères entre le ciel et la terre" or as messengers from the "Other World". Clearly symbolizing ascension, the flight of these birds above the Old Man's head indicate his ultimate movement towards the Heavens. But more importantly, we are reminded of the symbolic function of the goose in Alchemy: like the phoenix, it is an avis Hermetis, representing the result of a marriage of the Sun and the Moon, of the opposing forces in the universe.

As we mentioned in our introduction, Mme Yourcenar states that her "culture is built on a foundation of religion", a fact which is clearly reflected in her Nouvelles orientales by virtue of the fact that in almost all of the tales, the theme of the Sacred plays a dominant role. The importance of the Old Man in "La Fin de Marko Krilievitch" and of the author's comments about the allegorical role she accords him lies in the insight they offer us into Yourcenar's personal conception of God and Death, one which must be distinguished from the traditional Christian view. In addition, the contrast we find in this text between Christianity and certain mystical cults or sciences (i.e., paganism, the Tarot, smithwork and Alchemy) points to both the opposition between the two and the domination of the latter by the former. Yourcenar explains: "Eventually, the world discovered that it had become Christian, because Christianity had in the meantime become official, all powerful, and the persecutor of cults outside its purview".

27 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 694.
28 Yourcenar, Éyes 19.
29 Yourcenar, Éyes 209.
Finally, the author explains that the major difference between western religion and ancient or oriental thought, one which clearly appears in "La Fin de Marko Kraliévitch", is the fact that Eastern civilizations "were more sensitive than we are to the cycles of things; to the succession of generations, both divine and human; and to change within stasis".\textsuperscript{30} As we have seen, the "cycle of things" is frequently represented in Yourcenar's work by the circular movement of the sun, and although solar imagery is relatively scarce in this ninth tale, it still has symbolic implications. The final image of "un vol d'oiseau sauvages" not only indicates an ascending movement, but, given that the wild goose sometimes represents "le soleil sorti de l'œuf primordial",\textsuperscript{31} it can also be interpreted as a symbol of the rising sun. Such an image is in keeping with the symbolism of the Banquet and the consumption of sacrificial offerings as they are all associated with divine resurrection. Thus, the solar cycle appears to subtly continue in the \textit{Nouvelles orientales}: the devouring Black Sun of "Kâli, la Noire" which dominates the eighth tale is replaced here by a metaphor for the sunrise, a flight of wild geese, which would seem to make "The End of Marko Kraliévitch" a new beginning. Yet, when we compare this final image with the glorious flight of the swallows in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", or this account of Marko's uneventful death with Wang-Fô's triumphant departure from the world of the living in the first tale, we are struck by the fundamental difference in tone presented in the concluding narratives. Rather than celebrating the promise of Nature's Eternal Return and the glory

\textsuperscript{30} Yourcenar, \textit{Eyes} 209.

\textsuperscript{31} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 694.
of Rebirth, these final *nouvelles orientales* create an atmosphere which is both disappointing and disturbing and one which will be fully explained in the last story, the only "nouvelle occidentale" in the collection.
III. Dreams and Disillusion

In her "Post-scriptum de 1978", Mme Yourcenar states that the tenth and last of the *Nouvelles orientales*, entitled "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg", was initially written to serve as a conclusion to an unfinished novel, and that this narrative, originally called "Les Tulipes de Cornélius Berg", does not properly belong in the collection:

Nullement oriental, sauf pour deux brèves allusions à un voyage de l'artiste en Asie Mineure (et l'une d'elles est elle-même un ajout récent), ce récit n'appartient guère, en somme, à la collection qui précède. Mais je n'ai pas résisté à l'envie de mettre en regard du grand peintre chinois, perdu et sauvé à l'intérieur de son œuvre, cet obscur contemporain de Rembrandt méditant mélancoliquement à propos de la sienne (p. 1216).

The parallel the author draws between the first and last stories in the work is very significant. In fact, in his discussion of the theme of art, Pierre Horn, the only critic to treat this tenth tale, contrasts the role of the painter in "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé" with that of Cornélius Berg:

Art, therefore, provides the artist with a metaphorical escape from the ugliness of reality and the transient quality of things. No such serene salvation exists in "The Sadness of Cornelius Berg", however. His portraits reveal to him the meanness of the human soul, his still lifes the ineluctable decay of matter, and his landscapes the fleeting nature of time.¹

In general, we agree with Horn's interpretation; however, we find certain of his comments unjustified, and these will be discussed in our study of

¹ Horn, *Yourcenar* 20.
Cornélius' apparent decline, the artist's potential genius and the role of the Syndic of Haarlem. In addition, we shall address the question of why Yourcenar felt compelled to include this story, which is "nullement oriental", in her collection of "oriental tales": was the writer's decision, as Horn seems to suggest, based merely upon a desire to create a contrast between two different ways of perceiving the function of art, or does it have further implications which have yet to be uncovered?

Cornélius, the Artist

In the introductory paragraphs of this short story, we are presented with the portrait of an artist whose talent is on the decline. Returning to Amsterdam after a series of travels and an extended stay in Italy, Cornelius Berg is a penniless vagabond who moves from inn to inn, "peignant encore, parfois, de petits portraits, des tableaux de genre sur commande, et, par-ci par-là, un morceau de nu pour un amateur, ou quêtant le long des rues l'aubaine d'une enseigne" (p. 1211). His hands shake, his eyesight is failing and his steadiness of hand is being destroyed by wine, "dond il a pris le goût en Italie". Although all these characteristics clearly signal the painter's physical decline and loss of talent, they have positive value on a symbolic level. For instance, the loss of sight, a theme appearing frequently in the tales, indicates the possibility of spiritual insight and clairvoyance. Similarly, his recently acquired taste for wine, commonly considered a drink of immortality, suggests a link with the sacred as well as a means of abolishing the terrestrial condition of human existence. In addition, we

2 Durand, Structures 297-9.
learn that "le bruyant Cornélius d'autrefois" has now become completely taciturn, silence, like blindness, symbolizing "un prélude d'ouverture à la révélation".³ It is only when drunk that the artist begins to speak: "l'ivresse seule lui rendait sa langue ; il tenait alors des discours incompréhensibles". His unintelligible speech reminds us of Panégyotis, for whom the "honey" of the Néréides hair has the same intoxicating effect as wine does upon Cornélius. We also recall the "Sages buveurs" who achieved through their drinking a kind of spiritual intoxication, a liberation from the physical world, from sensation and passion, and the cycle of life.⁴ It is interesting, therefore, that Cornélius is indifferent to physical reality and that his fingers are described as "gourds", suggesting freedom from sensation of heat or cold.

We read that Cornélius "passait des heures au fond des tavernes enfumées comme une conscience d'ivrogne, où d'anciens élèves de Rembrandt, ses condisciples d'autrefois, lui payaient à boire, espérant qu'il leur raconterait ses voyages" (p. 1211). The image of the tavern designates a meeting place of friends or confidantes -- or of "condisciples" -- that is, people who share certain spiritual secrets, or, it may symbolize "dans un sens encore plus mystique, un centre d'initiation".⁵ We are also reminded of a scene recorded in a memorable painting by Rembrandt (Cornélius' teacher) which is entitled Christ at Emmaus (1648), depicting the tavern where the

³ Chevalier, Dictionnaire 883.
⁴ Chevalier, Dictionnaire 523.
⁵ Chevalier, Dictionnaire 1017-18.
apostles recognize as their resurrected lord the vagabond who accompanied them and who broke bread with them. Smoke, which in the tale fills the tavern like a drunkard's consciousness, is commonly considered a link between the earth and the sky; for instance, in China and elsewhere, the smoke of burning incense, resin, tobacco, reeds or cedar symbolizes a ritual purification as well as a junction between man and the celestial world. Thus, it appears that Cornélius, whose talents as an artist are rapidly fading away, manifests a potential for spiritual revelation and purification, and his drunken reunions at the tavern with the former disciples of the Master Painter, Rembrandt (something of a mystic in his own right), may be interpreted as initiatory meetings of a secret society.

Many elements in the text's descriptions of Cornélius Berg remind us of Wang-Fō, the great Chinese painter of the first tale whose artistic talent and alchemical expertise help him attain immortality. Both characters are poor artists who are described as "vagabonds". Both men, no longer young, are in a state of physical decline. The two artists, normally taciturn, habitually frequent taverns where their consumption of alcohol serves to make them talkative. Certain similarities between them are immediately noticeable in the following passage describing Wang-Fō's and Ling's first meeting in a smoke-filled tavern, the place where the disciple's alchemical initiation begins: "l'alcool de riz déliait la langue de cet artisan taciturne, et Wang ce soir-là parlait comme si le silence était un mur, et les mots des couleurs destinés à le couvrir" (p. 1140). Although the tongues of the two painters are loosened either by rice wine or the wine of grapes, the results

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6 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 470-71.
of their 'ivresse' are markedly different. Whereas the Chinese artisan covers the walls of silence with the mysterious language of colors that he passes on to his disciple Ling, the Dutch master, speaking incomprehensibly, faces the wall as a means of rejecting both his 'condisciples' and humanity in general:

Il s'asseyait, la figure tournée vers la muraille, son chapeau sur les yeux, pour ne pas voir le public, qui, disait-il, le dégoûtait. Cornélius, vieux peintre de portraits, longtemps établi dans une soupeute de Rome, avait toute sa vie trop scruté les visages humains ; il s'en détournait maintenant avec une indifférence irritée ; il allait jusqu'à dire qu'il n'aimait pas à peindre les animaux, ceux-ci ressemblant trop aux hommes (1211-12).

Here, there is a contrast between Cornélius, who turns away from the faces of his public by covering the artist's most important tool, his eyes, and Wang-Fô, whose special vision opens up for Ling a secret new world of previously unseen colors and images.

When Cornélius' former fellow students buy him drinks, it is in the hopes of hearing him reveal secrets about his travels in the south. However, the painter recalls these trips with disappointment: "Mais les pays poudreux de soleil où Cornélius avait traîné ses pinceaux et ses vessies de couleurs s'avéraient moins précis dans sa mémoire qu'ils ne l'avaient été dans ses projets d'avenir" (p. 1211). That these countries are "dusty" with sun emphasizes the impurity of the Earth, rather than the brilliance of heavenly light. Similarly, the use of the word 'vessie', rather than 'pot', implies the baseness associated with animals and bodily organs. In addition, the image of Cornélius "dragging" his brushes and paints contrasts with that of Ling respectfully carrying his master's drawings "comme s'il portait la voûte
céleste" as well as his brushes and colors, which are the only objects Wang-Fô deems worthy of owning. However, it is the Dutch artist's impressions of his travels which are central here because they reveal the theme of illusion versus reality, one which plays an important role not only in "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé", but in many of the other 'nouvelles orientales' as well. Unlike Wang-Fô, the Dutch painter constantly makes a distinction between his dreams of perfection and the reality of life, preferring the former to the latter and lamenting the disparity between the two. The Chinese artist, on the other hand, is capable of creating illusions which equal or surpass the beauty of Nature, and of making them reality.

A Spark of Genius

We learn that Cornélius' loss of talent is not entirely negative: "A mesure que se perdait le peu de talent qu'il avait jamais possédé, du génie semblait lui venir" (p. 1212). This notion of genius, coming mysteriously to the painter and symbolizing his "être spirituel", must be seen as the result of the symbolic purification he has undergone, that is, his detachment from society and indifference towards humanity. It is also a product of his 'ivresse' which liberates him from earthly reality and deprives him of rational speech, making him resemble "The Fool" of the Tarot, who possesses special insight and knowledge. The theme of a spiritual purification is further indicated by the fact that Cornélius paints "dans sa mansarde", a place whose height implies celestial elevation and whose

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7 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 473. The Dictionnaire also compares a man's genius to his intuition.
sloping walls resemble those of an alchemical athanor. Even the artist's name implies ascension, the German 'Berg' signifying 'mountain'. Within the walls of his mansard, Cornélius, formerly an accomplished portraitist, will turn to painting still lifes, an endeavor which will lead to the emergence of his 'génie', to an act of creation, recalling the original Latin meaning of the word 'genius' as a deity of birth and generation.

Cornélius chooses as subjects for his still lifes a beautiful, rare fruit "qui coûtait cher", "un simple chaudron" and "des épluchures". An interpretation of the following passage, describing these objects Cornélius has chosen to reproduce on canvas and the transformation they undergo, is essential to our study of the tale:

Une lumière jaunâtre emplissait la chambre ; la pluie lavait humblement les vitres ; l'humidité était partout. L'élément humide enflait sous forme de sève la sphère grumeleuse de l'orange, boursouflait les boiseries qui criaient un peu, ternissait le cuivre du pot (p. 1212).

First, yellow light fills the room, suggesting a spiritual, generative force, and then, the rain, also a symbol of fertilization, cleanses the window panes in an act of purification. The orange sphere of the fruit, with its "peau brillante", resembles the sun and recalls the image of a "parasol couleur feu qui ressemblait de loin à une grosse orange" in "Le Lait de la Mort" (p. 1158). Here, the water ("l'humidité") joins with the orange sphere (Sun) as well as with the copper (Fire) of the pot in a mysterious union of opposites (fire and water). The image of the cauldron, a receptacle and place of transmutation and regeneration, suggests both Black Magic and Alchemy. Durand, for instance, equates a copper cauldron with the "alchemical egg" from which
will emerge the "germe philosophal". In the same discussion of sacred receptacles, he mentions the related symbolism of peels, such as the "épluchures" appearing in Cornélius' still life: "... nous voyons apparaître constamment le thème de l'intimité liliputiennne : microcosme ou homonculus, emboîtement des germes que le 'chymiste' ou le botaniste du XVIIIe siècle se plaît à rêver, doucement couvés par la chaleur, bien à l'abri derrière les parois de la coque, de la coquille ou de la pelure". For Taoist alchemists, the cauldron corresponded to the human body where the Elixir of Immortality was prepared. It is thus significant that in the mixture of fire and water described in our story, the "humid element" which bloats the orange takes the form of sap, a common image in the tales evoking Immortality and the Elixir of Life. The symbolism of this short passage, describing a *mysterium conjunctionis*, clearly contradicts Pierre Horn's statement that Cornélius' still lifes reveal "the ineluctable decay of matter"; on the contrary, the imagery here not only illustrates a symbolic union of Matter and Spirit, suggesting fecundity, birth and renewal, but it also reveals an act of creative genius.

Although the Dutch painter is on the verge of reproducing on canvas the perfection of Nature he sees before him, he ultimately puts down his brushes, his fingers refusing to copy "cette double coulée humide et lumineuse imprégnant les choses et embuant le ciel" (p. 1212). The idea of a marriage of water and fire/light is strongly reinforced here and the use of

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8 Durand, *Structures* 289.

9 Durand, *Structures* 290. See also 288-93.

10 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 217.
the word 'coulée' -- denoting the casting of molten metals -- further suggests the work of the smith or alchemist. Unlike the alchemist Wang-Fô, who imitates the mysterious *conjunctio* found in Nature (Mountain/Sea, etc.) and thus achieves the 'Great Work', Corrélius, ignoring his potential genius, abandons the *opus*, while nonetheless touching the objects of his study with "toutes les sollicitudes de la tendresse". He contents himself with the perfection he sees in his dreams: "il rêvait des campagnes tremblant de rosée", dew being a recurrent image in the stories and another symbol of the Elixir of Immortality. The fields perceived in his imagination, appearing more beautiful than reality, must be deserted, for they are "trop sacrées pour l'homme".

Although the painter's endeavor to recreate Nature is abandoned, it is not insignificant that he visualizes its perfection in his dreams, dreams which are said to equal those of Rembrandt, his master. Jung explains that the birth of the Philosopher's Stone, an act transcending Reason, was often revealed to the alchemist through "dreams and dream-visions".\(^\text{11}\) Unconsciously, in fact, Cornelius seems to internalize physically the process of transmutation that he previously witnessed but refused to capture on canvas: "Ce vieillard, que la misère semblait gonfler, paraissait atteint d'une hydropisie du cœur" (p. 1212). His heart, a mandala or Center and an image frequently associated with fire and sunlight,\(^\text{12}\) resembles the orange sphere of his still life and it, too, is bloated with liquid. Fundamental to our interpretation is the use of the word 'hydropisie', which

\(^{11}\) *Jung, Alchemy* 252-3.

\(^{12}\) *Chevalier, Dictionnaire* 264.
originally comes from the Greek 'hudor', meaning water. Thus, like the ancient Taoists who practiced internal alchemy, the Dutch master appears to experience within his own body the *opus magnum*, a marriage of fire and water.

The Syndic of Haarlem

Following Cornélius' internalization of Nature's *coincidentia oppositorum*, there is a mention of Spring in the text, announcing cyclical renewal and rebirth. We learn that during that particular spring the artist spends most of his time in the company of the only relative with whom he has not broken ties, a character referred to only as 'le vieux Syndic de Haarlem'. The word 'syndic', unfamiliar to most modern readers, merits examination. Derived from the Greek 'sundikos', meaning an assistant in a court of justice or public advocate, the term has also come to denote a business agent. But more importantly, the word recalls one of Rembrandt's better known works entitled *The Syndics* (*Staalmeesters*, 1661), and as we shall demonstrate, the atmosphere evoked in this painting is essential to our understanding of the fundamental role played by this character in Yourcenar's tale. An old man who lives alone, the Syndic in our story is "doucement abêti par les routines d'une existence sans hasards". It is noteworthy that the word 'abêti' was used previously to describe Panégyotis following his mystical encounter with the Néréides. In addition, this description, emphasizing the insignificance of the old man's profession, seems to imply that the word 'syndic' is used mainly as a means of evoking the title of one of the masterpieces of the Dutch School of painting.
The town of Haarlem, "cette petite ville claire et propre", is known as one of Holland's major tulip growing centers, and it is the Syndic's function as an "amateur de tulipes" -- and not his profession -- which concerns us here. Recalling the art collectors mentioned in the beginning of the tale, the word 'amateur' now assimilates flowers to paintings. The Syndic's appearance in the story is restricted to the small area of his garden, a sacred space surrounded by a "mince barrière de bois peint" which recalls the "fausses boiseries" Cornélius is being paid to paint on the walls of a church in town. A parallel is thus established between the church and the garden, both archetypal Mother symbols representing mystical centers, however the word "false" used in reference to the church signals the superiority of the garden and the Syndic's flowers. His "oignions inestimables" resemble rhizomes which contain the germs of life and, like the lotus, "expriment la manifestation du Cosmos".\textsuperscript{13} Although Cornélius knows nothing of flowers, his artistic eye, like that of Wang-Fō, is able to distinguish the slightest detail of shapes, "les moindres nuances" of whites, blues, pinks and mauves which cannot be described in words (p. 1213).

The description of the Syndic's tulips is very revealing: "Grêles et rigides, les calices patriciens sortaient du sol gras et noir : une odeur mouillée, qui montait de la terre, flottait seule sur ces floraisons sans parfum" (p. 1213). At once spindly and rigid, these "patrician calyces" are characterized by their ambivalence. Essential to our interpretation of this image is the French 'calice' which, unlike its English equivalent, has a dual significance. As the outer protective coating of a flower, the calyx contains

\textsuperscript{13} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 764.
the germs of Nature's perfection. But, derived from the Greek 'kal' signifying both seed vessel and cup, 'calice' also denotes the Eucharistic chalice containing the wine of Christ's transformed blood. Furthermore, it evokes the legendary Holy Grail, said to hold an Elixir of Life. Durand, among others, relates the Christian chalice to the cauldron, stating: "chaudrons hindous et chinois, chaudron d'argent des Celtes, 'chaudron de la régénération' du musée de Copenhague, ancêtre probable du Graal, ancêtre certain du calice chrétien, 'pot triomphal' auquel est assimilé le Mandala dans les cérémonies tantriques, chaudrons qui ... rendent inépuisable la liste des vases sacrés".14 Again, the theme of alchemy is evoked through the "healing cup" of Taoist sages, which Jung equates with the Eucharistic Chalice.15 Thus, like the "healing cup", the chalice, the Grail or the alchemical cauldron (recalling Cornélius' 'génial' still life), the Syndic's future flowers conceal within their outer coating the secrets of Immortality, an Elixir of Life. Rising nobly from the black ground, which clearly signals the Unconscious, Prime Matter and the Chaos, these flowers present us with a recurrent image in the tales, one depicting the first manifestations of creation emerging from the primordial depths. Reinforcing the theme of birth and fecundity is the "damp odor" arising from the dark earth which is reminiscent of the "humid element" permeating the objects of Cornélius' still life. Finally, like the rare flowers in the mystical center/axis mundi of the Imperial Palace in "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé" (p. 1143), the blossoms in the old man's garden are "perfumeless".

14 Durand, Structures 291.

The role of the Syndic of Haarlem and the symbolism of his title are revealed when the old man, taking "un pot sur ses genoux, et, tenant la tige entre ses doigts, comme par la taille, faisait, sans mot dire, admirer la délicate merveille". Cornélius acknowledges Nature's perfection without speaking; he simply nods his head. Thus, the Syndic, holding a receptacle which resembles a cup or chalice and silently sharing with his relative the "delicate marvel" of its contents, appears like a priest presenting the sacrificial offering to the members of his congregation and acting as a link between God and Man. Here, we are reminded of Rembrandt's *The Syndics*, a painting whose atmosphere and composition have frequently been compared by art critics to those of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*.16 That day, the old man shows Cornélius "une réussite plus rare que les autres : la fleur, blanche et violacée, avait presque les striures d'un iris". This 'hybrid' flower resembles an iris, a symbol of Spring, and its violet coloring suggests a mixture of opposites, a perpetual exchange of chthonian red and celestial blue.17 Furthermore, the word 'iris' in Greek originally meant rainbow, a symbolic bridge between Heaven and Earth which in China represented a marriage of yin and yang, a "union de contraires".18 As he reveals his symbol of perfection to Cornélius, the Syndic, continuing to act

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17 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 1020. The *Dictionnaire* also states that violet is considered "le symbole de l’Alchimie" and "la couleur du secret".

18 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 71. We are also reminded of the Greek Iris, goddess of the rainbow, messenger of the gods, link between Heaven and Earth, and "le correspondant féminin d’Hermès", See Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 524.
as a priest-like intermediary between the divine and the terrestrial, solemnly states that "God is the painter of the universe."

Looking alternately at the flower and the canal, the latter reflecting "des plates-bandes, des murs de brique, et la lessive des ménagères", the Dutch artist sees his whole life in these varied objects: the canal, a "terne miroir plombé", is an image of Prime Matter, the flower beds, of celestial purity, while the red brick suggests Fire and the Sun and the white laundry evokes Water and the Moon. What he perceives here is the duality of life, the opposing forces of the universe he was able to reunite within his body but never reconcile in his mind. He remembers "des expressions d'avarice, de sottise ou de férociété notées sous tant de beaux ciels", finding no interface between Man and Divinity, between the Profane and the Sacred. Cornélius continues: "... les rixes à coup de couteau sur le seuil des tavernes, le visage sec des prêtres sans gages et le beau corps gras de son modèle" (p. 1213). His is a diurnal vision characterized by a symbol of division ("couteau") placed at a point of union ("seuil") and separating antithetical principles ("sec" and "gras").

Finally, the artist recalls another tulip garden in Constantinople (a meeting place of East and West) which he was commissioned by a Pacha "to immortalize in its brief perfection". Enclosed within a marble wall, this garden is another sacred space, and the imagery describing it evokes an interface of opposites: "... les tulipes rassemblées palpitaitent et bruissaient, eût-on dit, de couleurs éclatantes ou tendres. Sur une vasque un oiseau chantait ; les pointes des cyprès perçaient le ciel pâlement bleu" (p. 1214). Here, the senses of sight, sound and touch are intermingled, while the bird, a symbol of celestial elevation, sits in a horizontal basin of water
(Matter), and the cypress trees piercing the sky are *axis mundi* linking Heaven and Earth. However, the image of these "merveilles" is ultimately ruined by the presence of a one-eyed slave and by the flies swarming around the empty socket of his missing eye. Removing his glasses, the painter sadly concludes that God should have limited himself to painting landscapes. Thus, despite the Syndic's defense of Nature's perfection and his function as an intermediary between the divine and the terrestrial, Cornélius is still incapable of consciously resolving the conflict he sees between human profaneness and celestial purity.

Besides Pierre Horn's comparison of the roles played by Cornélius and Wang-Fô, the only other critical mention of "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg" is a brief comment made by the Farrells: "...this story has little to do with the East, but does agree with the other stories in tone."\(^{19}\) Although we find the tone here to be quite different from that of the narratives treated in our first two chapters, there are in fact numerous similarities between this tale and the others in the collection in terms of familiar themes, imagery and symbolism. For instance, the role of intermediary between Heaven and Earth is played not only by the Syndic, but also by the Old Man ("La Fin de Marko Krallévitch"), the Sage ("Kâli Décapitée"), the Virgin Mary ("Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles"), the Dame-du-village-des-fleurs-qui-tombent ("Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi"), and others. Similarly, the symbolism of the Idiot or "The Fool" of the Tarot functions here just as it does in "L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides", "Kâli Décapitée", and "La Fin de Marko

\(^{19}\) Farrells, *Counterpoint* 63.
Kraliévitch. Evoking the imagery of the Last Supper and the sacrament of the Eucharist are Marko’s banquet, the Syndic’s “calices” and Rembrandt’s Staalmesters. Of course, the theme of Alchemy which dominates all of the tales is also found here, most notably in the mysterium conjunctionis observed in Nature, experienced within the painter’s heart and imagined through his dreams. Finally, although the sun is almost nonexistent in this final ‘nouvelle’, it is symbolized nonetheless by the orange sphere bloated with water, as well as by certain descriptions of light which bring to mind the characteristic chiaroscuro atmosphere of Rembrandt’s masterpieces. However, in “La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg”, the pale light which fecundates Nature to create the perfection of the Syndic’s tulips is generally placed in sharp contrast to the darkness of the Earth and of the lead-like water of the canal. Thus, the progression of solar imagery spanning the collection ends here on a note of ambiguity. The twilight, the black sun, the dawn, the zenith, none of these phases of the sun’s journey are emphasized in the final tale, indicating that the circle has finally been broken, a fact which leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty and a question about the future: will Man oppose and ultimately destroy the Wheel of Time or will the Cycle of Nature continue on in its endless movement towards Eternity?

The title characters in the last and first “nouvelles orientales” clearly present us with two differing visions of the universe, which can be qualified respectively as diurnal and nocturnal, the former characterized by opposition and antithesis (Cornelius) and the latter associated with synthesis and reconciliation (Wang-Fō). Obviously, this tenth and final tale, like the two before it, ends on an extremely melancholy note, one which
contrasts with the glorious image of rebirth marking the conclusion of "Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé". Unlike most of the earlier stories examined in which we find a blending of illusion and reality, a reconciliation of conflicts or a synthesis of opposing forces, "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg" leaves the reader hanging, unsure as to whether the Dutch painter will ever realize the genius which begins to dawn within him as he contemplates his still life, whether he will ever find a way of transforming his dreams into reality in order to attain, as did the Chinese artist and alchemist before him, an Elixir of Immortality and Eternal Life.

This contrast between the Chinese artist and the Dutch painter also suggests an opposition between East and West, a fact which seems to explain why Yourcenar felt compelled to include this tale in her Nouvelles orientales and to strategically place it at the end of the collection. Was she not implying that, whereas Oriental philosophy and mysticism glorify the eternal cycles and the synthesis found in Nature, Western thought and religion, having lost sight of these phenomena, tend instead to stress the conflict between Good and Evil or Light and Dark, between the antithetical forces of the universe? Could not the disparity between Wang-Fô's and Cornélius' visions of the world be a reflection of precisely this distinction between East and West, as well as Mme Yourcenar's subtle means of inviting her Western readers to reevaluate their mode of thinking? "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg", the final story in the collection, thus leads us from "nouvelles orientales" to "récits occidentaux", to an examination of two longer narratives set in Europe which will ultimately take us towards a meeting of East and West.
Chapter 4 - East Meets West

1. An Eternal Triangle

As we have mentioned earlier, the period between the world wars, specifically the decade of the 1930's, was a particularly prolific time in Marguerite Yourcenar's literary career, and the common element one finds in almost all of the works dating from this period (i.e., *Feux, Les Songes et les sorts, Nouvelles orientales*, etc.) is the importance given by the author to myth and dreams. Although *Le Coup de grâce*, a short novel first published in 1939, is not as obviously based upon mythical themes as are the stories of *Feux* or the *Nouvelles orientales*, there is nonetheless a network of imagery and symbols in this narrative which can be defined as mythical in nature. In a discussion of this particular period in her life, Yourcenar explains:

> It was a period of chaotic production. My work in those years was, I think, based on a highly poetic notion of what life was about, and my characters were, as I said earlier, very close to mythical figures... In other words, my metaphysical thinking in those days expressed itself through myth. *Coup de Grâce* is somewhat different. Reality, because it was so powerful, takes precedence. But some of the characters – the Portglaves and heroic Sophie – are to a certain extent still represented as figures of mythical magnitude. Myth for me represented a way of approaching the absolute, a way of delving beneath the human surface to discover what was durable, or, to use a rather big word, eternal.¹

In general, critics who have studied *Le Coup de grâce* have neglected this important aspect of the work, concerning themselves instead with its

¹ Yourcenar, *Épes* 67.
classical style, or its principal philosophical and psychological themes. For instance, Henri Hell, who finds in this novel the concision and purity of form characteristic of a Racinian tragedy, emphasizes the theme of misogyny which, he states, is portrayed through the character of Eric. This notion of misogyny and the related theme of homosexuality have frequently been treated in scholarly examinations of *Le Coup de grâce*. According to Pierre Horn, Eric's homosexuality is the reason for his coldness and it is reinforced by the "pleasurable perversity and cruelty" involved in his encouragement and rejection of Sophie's love; however, Horn also qualifies this homosexuality, or misogyny, as "a haughty view of personal relationships that applies to both sexes equally, with the exception of Conrad". His definition of Eric's homosexuality is interesting and its implications will be discussed in our study of this particular character. Unlike other critics, who have tended to emphasize Eric's role in *Le Coup de grâce* and minimize the importance of the other characters, we believe that each member of the triangle -- Conrad, Sophie, and Eric -- has a precise and fundamental function in the story, and our study will therefore be devoted to an examination of each of these three individuals. Our symbolic interpretation of the specific roles of these characters, of their relationships to one another, and of the imagery used to describe them will ultimately reveal what Mme Yourcenar calls their "mythical magnitude". More importantly, it will establish certain parallels between *Le Coup de grâce* and the *Nouvelles*


two works published only one year apart. It is significant that Jean Blot finds that Le Coup de grâce "a bénéficié de l'expérience acquise par l'auteur, notammant grâce aux Nouvelles orientales", mentioning, for instance, certain stylistic similarities (such as the introduction of the narrator in the first pages of the novel, followed by his first-person confession), as well as what he describes as a tendancy towards sadism: "la composante sadique développée dans les Nouvelles Orientales va s'épanouir ici avec impunité".

We agree that the two works are closely related, but it is neither their form nor their "sadistic" elements which concern us here; we will focus rather on the "imaginaire", on the mythical symbolism linking the two works, as we study Conrad's asceticism, Sophie's elemental nature, and the function of the intermediaries (Eric and Kratovicé) in a drama which unfolds against a Baltic backdrop of civil war, social upheaval, and unrequited love.

Conrad, A Brother of the Sword

According to Pierre Horn, Conrad is the one member of this "homo-heterosexual triangle" who "remains a shadowy figure" throughout the course of the story. Nevertheless, he plays a central, albeit passive, role in this drama which is viewed by the reader through the narrator's eyes. His importance is initially signaled by the fact that he is the first of the brother/sister pair to be mentioned by the narrator, when he calls him "dans

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4 Blot, Youcenar 129-31.

5 Horn, Youcenar 23-26.
Conrad resembles a Center in the mysterious flux of Life, an axis in the Wheel of Time. It is therefore somewhat surprising that in Völker Schlöndorff's film adaptation of *Le Coup de Grâce* this character's role in the drama is considerably minimized, and the symbolic significance of his death entirely ignored.

Although there are many similarities between Eric and his cousin Conrad, we read that "la différence entre Conrad et moi était absolue et subtile, comme celle du marbre et de l'albâtre" (p. 90). This distinction is revealing in terms of the the two characters' symbolic roles: whereas Conrad is as pure as the translucent whiteness of alabaster, Eric is like the opaque greyness of marble, marked by impurities. However, both stones, like both of these men, are characterized by their coldness. The physical similarities between them lead people to take them for brothers: They are "pareils, élancés, durs, souples, avec le même ton de hâle et la même nuance d'yeux" (p. 90). Yet, Conrad's hair is "d'un blond plus pâle", again signaling his purer nature, and according to Eric, their hearts beat with "un synchronisme admirable, bien qu'un peu plus faiblement dans sa poitrine que dans la mienne" (p. 89). Thus, Conrad, who is characteristically more pure and frail than his virile cousin, holds a superior position in Eric's eyes. The narrator's description of their activities during his idyllic childhood retreats at Kratovicé, Conrad's family estate, further reveal the similarities and "subtle" differences between the two friends:

Je me souviens de bains dans l'eau douce des lacs, ou dans l'eau saumâtre des estuaires à l'aurore, de nos empreintes de pieds identiques sur le sable, et bientôt détruites par la succion profonde
de la mer; de siestes dans le foin où nous discutions des problèmes du temps en mâchant indifféremment du tabac ou des brins d’herbe... Je reviens des parties de patinage, des après-midi d’hiver passé à ce curieux jeu de l’Ange, où l’on se jette dans la neige en agitant les bras, de façon de laisser sur le sol des traces d’ailes ; et de bonnes nuits de lourd sommeil dans la chambre d’honneur des fermes lettones, sous le meilleur édredon de duvet des paysannes qu’avaient tout à la fois attendries et effrayées, par ces temps de restrictions alimentaires, nos appétits de seize ans (p. 89-90).

Here, the two places where they swim at dawn can be symbolically linked with the two men: the pure fresh-water of the lakes evokes Conrad, while the sullied salt water of the estuaries suggests Eric. Despite such differences, their footprints in the sand are identical, implying that a mysterious bond exists between the two cousins sometimes taken for brothers, like that linking soulmates or alter-egos. Linda Stillman, calling Conrad “Eric’s double”, attributes this type of “identification and love for an object representing one’s own self... to an oral-sadistic hostility projected against the primitive parental images, and especially against the mother”. In general, we find Ms. Stillman’s psychoanalytical interpretation of Eric’s character to be somewhat exaggerated: Quite simply, Eric’s identification with his handsome relative stems from his desire to resemble a man he greatly admires and even idealizes, a man who embodies a spiritual purity he himself longs to possess. However, Stillman’s comment about Eric’s repressed hostility towards a maternal figure — although she is once again alluding to Mme Yourcenar’s personal life — is not entirely inaccurate. Eric’s conception of purity involves a negative (or diurnal) attitude towards all women, and in the passage quoted above, the

6 Stillman, “Phallacy” 272.
image of the sea with its powerful suction, representing the Mother as well as the Devouring Abyss, suggests the inevitable cycle of Time and Death which the two boys unconsciously try to oppose by leaving traces of their feet and bodies ("jeu de l’Ange") in the Earth. The notion of purity is further evoked in this passage by the symbolism of angels’ wings and eiderdown, the latter serving to shield the boys in their sleep, in this "lourd sommeil" which is akin to death.

Conrad is characterized not only by the purity of his soul, but also by a certain tendancy towards femininity. Described as “déliant”, sensitive, beautiful and passive, he has “une innocence d’enfant, une douceur de jeune fille, et cette bravoure de somnambule qu’il mettait autrefois à grimper sur le dos d’un taureau ou d’une vague” (p. 93). Thus, he seems to manifest a dual nature through his feminine sweetness and his typically masculine heroic bravado. Similarly, Eric, comparing his friend to Sophie, states: "Du frère et de la sœur, c’était Conrad qui répondait paradoxalement le plus à l’idée qu’on se fait d’une jeune fille ayant des princes pour ancêtres" (p. 112). It is also noteworthy that Conrad has difficulties in his attempts to smoke a pipe (p. 115), whereas his sister appears frequently and quite naturally with her "pipe paysanne". This type of sexual ambiguity recalls Wang-Fô’s intermingling of the sexes ("Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé"), suggesting the image of the hermaphrodite as a symbol of perfection and totality. This theme is subtly implied in Le Coup de Grâce by the interesting image of a scar on Conrad’s lip which "lui donnait l’air de machonner distraitement des violettes" (p. 93). The violet shade of his scar suggests a union of antithetical colors, and we are further reminded of the alchemical
significance of the blue flower, sometimes called "The sapphire blue flower of the hermaphrodite".\footnote{Jung, \textit{Alchemy} 80.}

Finally, Conrad’s purity, innocence and feminine passivity all form part of a more important aspect of his character, namely his asceticism. Yourcenar explains in fact that Eric’s attachment to his cousin "s’inclut dans ce qui est pour lui une discipline héroïque et, paradoxalement, une forme d’ascétisme".\footnote{Rosbo, \textit{Entretiens} 80.} We find many indications in the text of the theme of asceticism and purification linked with this mysterious character. He is associated, for instance, with the color white through his light blond hair, his "pâleur de nacre", and his extreme purity which is frequently emphasized by the narrator. In this regard, the terminology used by Eric to describe his friend’s courage is noteworthy: "En fait de crainte, Conrad était absolument vierge" (p. 145). It is also significant that Conrad is often pictured working high “dans la tour” of Kratovicé (p.103), the tower clearly symbolizing celestial elevation and hermetic isolation. Conrad’s characteristic aloofness also involves a detachment from physical reality and terrestrial profanity. We read, for example, that “C’était une de ces natures pétrie de songes qui, par le plus heureux des instincts, négligent tout le côté irritant et faussé de la réalité, et retombent de tout leur poids sur l’évidence des nuits, sur la simplicité des jours” (p. 101). Here, we are reminded of a recurrent theme in the \textit{Nouvelles orientales}, that is, the notion of a world of illusion, another dimension in which the privileged initiate perceives "les plus secrètes réalités" ("L’Homme qui a aimé les Néréides"). This theme
also recalls the artists Wang-Fô and Cornélius ("La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg") who, like Conrad (a poet writing in the style of Rilke), remove themselves from physical reality in order to fully immerse themselves in the realm of their dreams.

Conrad's heroic asceticism has mythical origins which are in fact explicitly, although quite indirectly, revealed in the text. After Sophie's departure from Kratovicé, Eric describes the change in atmosphere at the house:

Il avait suffi de la disparition de Sophie pour faire régner dans cette maison sans femmes (car la tante Prascovie était tout au plus un fantôme), un calme qui était celui du couvent d'hommes et de la tombe. Notre groupe de plus en plus réduit rendait dans la grande tradition de l'austerité et du courage viril ; Kratovicé redevenait ce qu'il avait été aux temps qu'on croit révolus, un poste de l'Ordre Teutonique, une citadelle avancée de Chevaliers Porte-Glaives. Quand je pense malgré tout à Kratovicé comme à une certaine notion de bonheur, je me souviens de cette période autant que de mon enfance (p. 144).

This reference to the "Chevaliers Porte-Glaives", that is, to the Livonian Brethren of the Sword who united with the Teutonic Knights in the thirteenth century to fight paganism and convert the Baltic region to Christianity, recalls the role of the Monk in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" as well as other tales which treat the conflict of paganism and Christianity (or of East and West). These legendary knights were characterized, as is Conrad, by their chastity and heroism, and the theme of purification is clearly evoked in this passage by the ascetic atmosphere reigning in this house which now resembles a monastery. Historically, the Teutonic Knight was "the embodiment of two great ideals - the monastic and the chivalric -
and the representative of a powerful lordship". This notion of nobility, linked with a vision of a sacerdotal class, is an essential part of Eric's idealized conception of purity, one which is embodied by his princely, austere friend, Conrad. According to Eliade, the lifestyle which characterized the German Order of the High Middle Ages can be traced back to Teutonic mythology, to the time of Odinn-Woden, a sovereign god of war and protector of the Männerbünde (male secret societies), who embodies the ancient concepts of "the sacred character of royalty and the religious valorization of death on the battlefield". For Eric, Conrad exemplifies the grandeur of war: He is "l'idéal compagnon de guerre" (p. 93), and a person who only feels at home "à l'intérieur d'une armure" (p. 145), the latter description clearly an allusion to the Teutonic Knights. In addition, Conrad is frequently compared to a 'chevalier': Eric imagines him as a "jeune officier de la Garde, élégant, timide et bon cavalier" (p. 90) or as "un officier blessé des campagnes de Charles XII, ... un chevalier du Moyen Age" (p. 147). Finally, it is noteworthy that six out of the thirty-seven "Grand Masters" (or highest ranking officers) of the Teutonic Order were named Konrad.

Ultimately, after abandoning the protective "armour" of Kratovicé, Conrad dies heroically on the battlefield of a small village called "Novogrodnoc", a name evoking the Russian town of Novgorod where in 1242,

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9 Michael Burleigh, *Prussian Society and the German Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 67. Burleigh continues: "In the Order the nobleman was still a somebody".


the legendary Alexander Nevsky defeated the crusading Teutonic Knights. Discussing how the deprivation of his fragile friend's "armure" results in his "dissolution", Eric is reminded of the "répugnant flétrissement des iris, ces sombres fleurs en forme de fer de lance dont la gluante agonie contraste avec le dessèchement héroïque des roses" (p. 145). He laments that, like the iris, Conrad is left to the mercy of the sticky dampness of the terrestrial world, unable to die (like the pure rose) in utter dryness, that is, in the noble, ascetic manner in which he lived. The analogy drawn between Conrad and the iris brings to mind the Syndic's iris-like tulips in "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg", which symbolize a union of opposites such as that evoked in the following passage from Le Coup de Grâce: "... ce mélange de dénouement et de grandeur, de marches forçées et de chevelures de saules trempant dans les champs inondés par les rivières en crue, de fusillades et de soudains silences, de tiraillements d'estomac et d'étoiles tremblant dans la nuit pâle comme jamais depuis je ne les ai vus trembler, c'était pour moi Conrad, et non la guerre" (p. 146).

Another parallel between Le Coup de Grâce and "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg" is established when Eric, contemplating his dear friend's death, mentions Rembrandt's The Polish Rider: "Ce jeune homme dressé sur un cheval pâle, ce visage à la fois sensible et farouche, ce paysage de désolation où la bête alertée semble flairer le malheur, et la Mort et la Folie infiniment plus présentes que dans la vieille gravure allemande..." (p. 146). Kenneth Clark, calling this painting one of Rembrandt's most "mysterious" works, discusses the Christian Knight's "feminine beauty" and his connection with the theme of Death.12 In fact, the "vieille gravure allemande"

12 Clark, Introduction to Rembrandt 59-60.
mentioned in the text is an allusion to Dürer’s *Rider, Death and the Devil* (which is often compared to *The Polish Rider*), and the image of this “cheval pâle” suggests the pale white horse of the Apocalypse, which represents the Moon, foreshadows death and whose rider is sometimes compared to the victorious Christ. It is also interesting to note that, in the mythology of Lettish paganism, the dead were said to fly away “on horseback into the air toward the other world”.

Conrad’s valorous death on the battlefield and the final sacraments delivered him by a priest brought under duress by Eric are a fitting end for this mythical figure who embodies the ideals of the Teutonic Knights. According to Michael Burleigh, “When death started to lay its hand upon a member of the Order, he received the last sacrament and made his confession to the priest-brothers”. Eric unconsciously senses that the heroic and sacred nature of his cousin’s death will ultimately earn Conrad a place in a land of eternal life, one perhaps resembling the Heavenly palace of Valhalla renowned in ancient Teutonic mythology. He states: “J’avais le curieux sentiment d’avoir mené Conrad à bon port : tué à l’ennemi, bénis par un prêtre, il rentrait dans une catégorie de destin qu’eussent approuvé ses ancêtres ; il échappait aux lendemains” (p. 147). Serving as a sign, as the final proof of Conrad’s immortality, is the fact that he dies at dawn, at a moment when the sun’s return announces a joyous reawakening and rebirth.

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13 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 179, 226.


Sophie, Goddess of the Earth and Sun

Most critics who have examined *Le Coup de Grâce* have tended to treat Sophie only in relation to Eric, that is, as the unhappy victim of an unrequited love, neglecting not only her relationship with her brother, but also the fundamental symbolic role she plays in her own right. In an interview with Patrick de Rosbo, Mme Yourcenar states that Sophie is in fact as important a figure in the novel as Eric, and that "Elle représente en quelque sorte la terre elle-même".\(^{16}\) This revealing comment adds to our understanding of this character's symbolic function, one which clearly sets her apart from the other two members of the triangle.

There are many indications in the text of Sophie's association with the Earth. For instance, when she looks at her face in the mirror, "La glace lui renvoya des yeux d'enfant et d'ange, un large visage un peu informe qui était la terre même au printemps, un pays, des campagnes douces traversées de ruisseaux de larmes; des joues couleur de soleil et de neige; une bouche dont la rose bouleversant faisait presque trembler; et des cheveux blonds comme le bon pain dont nous n'avions plus" (p. 109). Whereas Conrad represents the coldness and the spiritual height of the Sky, Sophie embodies the warmth of freshly baked bread and of the Earth in Springtime. Yet, she also exudes a certain innocence and purity (her angelic, child-like eyes and tears) which signal the alchemical conception of Spirit (Sky) contained within Matter (Earth). Eric recognizes the common element between Conrad and his sister when he sees in Sophie's eyes "le rayonnement d'une âme

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\(^{16}\) Rosbo, *Entretiens* 89.
royale" (p. 98), and later, when he observes: "Le frère et la sœur étaient également purs, intolérants et irréductibles" (p. 136).

Described as "solide comme la terre", Sophie exhibits not only an elemental nature, but also a strength, a vitality and a link with Life which serve as a contrast to her brother's frailty, passivity and "pâleur" of Death. Speaking of Sophie, Eric states that "L'éclairage prudent et concentré d'une lampe transformait en rayonnement la pâleur de son visage et de ses mains" (p. 97). The text's emphasis on the girl's "radiance" -- and her "moyen de s'éclipser" (p. 96) -- implies solar light: Thus, while Sophie seems to reflect the warm rays of the Sun, her brother, by virtue of his feminine passivity and his association with the lunar symbolism of the white horse of the Apocalypse, suggests the pale light of the Moon. This interpretation is particularly interesting when we take into consideration Eliade's description of the two major deities in Lettish folklore: Saule, the goddess of the Sun, who blesses the soil and is imagined as both a mother and a young girl, and her husband, Meness, "the god of the moon, who seems to have the role of a warrior god".17

Closely related to Sophie's affinity with the sun is her masculinity, an aspect of her physical appearance and personality which is frequently emphasized by the narrator. He states, for instance: "La nuque hâlée de Sophie, ses mains gercées serrant une éponge m'avaient rappelé subitement le jeune valet de ferme Karl chargé d'étriller les poneys de notre enfance" (p. 112). For Eric, Sophie's manly appearance is linked with a certain baseness or lack of nobility which opposes Conrad's aristocratic nature. It

17 Eliade, Religious Ideas, III, 26. Eliade also mentions the considerable number of Earth and Water goddesses, or "Mothers", in Lettish mythology (p. 27).
is significant, for instance, that from Eric's perspective she resembles a valet who curries horses while her brother plays the role of a knight in armour. Nevertheless, she does exhibit a divine or sacred character, although still a masculine one, when her legs sheathed in silk remind Eric not of those of a young goddess, "mais d'un jeune dieu" (p. 116). In the following passage, the narrator reveals how Sophie's masculinity causes him to have certain misconceptions about her:

Tout me prédisposait à méprendre sur Sophie, et d'autant plus que sa voix douce et rude, ses cheveux tondus, ses petites blouses, ses gros souliers toujours encroutés de boue faisaient d'elle le frère de son frère. J'y fus trompé, puis je reconnus mon erreur, jusqu'au jour enfin où je découvris dans cette même erreur la seule part de vérité substantielle à quoi j'ai mordu de ma vie (p. 99).

Exhibiting more masculine traits than Conrad, Sophie appears to Eric to be the opposite of a woman, to be "her brother's brother". Here again, Sophie's masculinity is associated with a certain "grossiereté paysanne", and the image of mud encrusting her shoes is one which is used recurrently throughout the text as a symbol of her base nature and as a contrast to her brother's asceticism. Elsewhere, we find an opposition between the girl's boots, which are covered with mud (Matter) and her eyes, resembling Conrad's (p. 113), which reflect celestial purity. According to Chevalier, mud, as a mixture of Earth and Water, symbolizes primordial Matter, which can be considered either as the fertile beginnings of creation or as the start of a process of degradation, thus "identifiée aux bas-fonds, à la lie, aux
It is clearly the latter view to which Eric subscribes and which ultimately causes him to be repulsed by Sophie.

Despite her obvious masculinity, Sophie is still very much a member of her sex. The narrator explains: "Sophie n'était pas plus capable de n'être pas femme que les roses le sont de n'être pas des roses" (p. 103). Similarly, in "la vie de caserne" at Kratovicé, amid this monastic brotherhood of knights, there remains between her and la mère Loew "la franc-maçonnerie des femmes" (p. 139), indicating that she belongs to a separate secret society from which Eric and Conrad are exempt. Thus, like her brother, Sophie manifests an ambiguous sexuality and shares in the symbolism of the hermaphrodite. Eric's description of her dancing ("elle tourbillonnait comme une flamme, ondulait comme une fleur, glissait comme un cygne") symbolically implies a *mysterium conjunctionis* of masculine purification (fire) and feminine fecundity (flower) resulting in one of the most common alchemical images of totality, the swan, which represents "l'union des opposés (eau-feu), en quoi l'on retrouve sa valeur archétypale d'androgyne".  

Not only are there common elements linking Sophie to her brother, but there also exists "une affinité d'espèce" between her and the man she loves. Aware of this bond between them, Eric mentions that they were born the same week of the same year, and that she is thus "vouée aux mêmes astres". But there is a more fundamental similarity between them which distinguishes the two of them from Conrad. In Eric's words, they are both "sullied", Sophie because she was raped and himself through his experience.

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18 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 143.

19 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 334.
at a whorehouse: “souillée, son expérience avoisinait la mienne, et l’épisode
du sergent équilibrait bizarrement pour moi le souvenir unique et odieux
d’une maison de femmes à Bruxelles” (p. 98). Thus, Conrad, “ce fragile
garçon”, resembles his sister’s lost innocence (p. 134) and of the three
members of the triangle, only he has not fallen from Grace, only he has
retained his childlike virginal purity.

Eric’s attitude toward Sophie, whom he alternately rejects and
encourages, requires further examination. At one point, when he sees her
wearing curlers, he compares her to “une Méduse coiffée de serpents” (p.
109), an image reflecting Eric’s negative view of Eros, his diurnal
conception of the feminine principle as an archetypal Devouring Mother or as
a destructive Black Sun. Similarly, we are reminded of his description of
the Hungarian woman he slept with in Paris, who stuck to him, he says,
“avec la ténacité de poulpe auquel ses longs doigts gantés de blanc faisaient
penser” (p. 111). Like the monstrous Medusa who embodies the sexual
drives, the octopus represents “des monstres qui symbolisent
habituellement les esprits infernaux, voire l’enfer lui-même”.20 The “love
scene” which takes place between Sophie and Eric on the night of the aerial
bombing not only clarifies the latter’s ambiguous attitude towards his
friend’s sister, but also has the important symbolic function of an
initiation. Standing on the balcony beneath the wasp-like enemy planes, the
couple hears the “tapage plus affreux que la mort” of a shell falling on the
iron roof and the braying of two horses which are sacrificed in their place
(“payèrent pour nous”) that night. After their symbolic death, Eric turns off

20 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 758.
the lamp, "comme on la rallume après avoir fait l’amour". Radiating light like one of Aunt Prascovie’s icons, Sophie lifts her hands "marquées par la rouille" (recalling the alchemical connection between rust and Prime Matter) and throws herself against Eric’s chest. Describing his feelings at that moment, the narrator states:

Cette femme, pareille à un grand pays conquis où je ne suis pas entré, je me souviens en tout cas de l’exact degré de tièdeur qu’avait ce jour-là sa salive et l’odeur de sa peau vivante. Et si jamais j’avais pu aimer Sophie en toute simplicité des sens et du cœur c’est bien à cette minute, où nous avions tous les deux une innocence de ressuscités. . . . Ce corps à la fois défait et raidi par la joie pesait dans mes bras d’un poids aussi mystérieux que la terre l’eût fait, si quelques heures plus tôt j’étais entré dans la mort. Je ne sais à quel moment le délice tourna à l’horreur, déclenchant en moi le souvenir de cette étoile de mer que maman, jadis, avait mise de force dans ma main, sur la plage de Scheveningue, provoquant ainsi chez moi une crise de convulsions pour le plus grand affolement des baigneurs (p. 121-22).

Following this initiatory death, evoked by the darkness and the bombing, Eric senses that they have been reborn, that they have thus attained a primordial purity, which he calls "une innocence de ressuscités". In this scene, Sophie seems to play the role of Eric’s initiator into the mysteries of the Death and Rebirth, a role which is symbolized by the otter jacket she always wears: Chevalier states that the otter is "l’esprit initiateur, qui tue et ressuscite".21 Here, for the first time, Sophie’s affinity with the Earth is viewed positively (and nocturnally) by Eric, as an entry into the maternal womb of Death (alchemical nigredo or reduction to the prima materia),

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21 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 384.
followed by a resurrection (albedo or purification). However, at almost the same moment, he is repulsed by the memory of a starfish, another image of the Devouring Mother, which reverses this momentary nocturnal vision of Eros and Thanatos back to a diurnal one. Eric's ambivalent reaction to Sophie can be explained on a symbolic level: as an incarnation of both the Earth and the Sun, she can be linked either with fecundity and rebirth, or with devouring death and destruction.

After an argument with the man who has spurned her, Sophie finally leaves Kratovicé never to return. Eric watches her leave from high above in Conrad's room, "cette chambre qui sentait le camphre et la naphtaline", campher designating in Hindu terminology "le blanc pur" and implying "un corps très noble". Standing in contrast to this symbol of purity is the image of his sister walking through the mud: "Sophie marchait péniblement, arrachant du sol avec effort ses lourdes bottes qui laissaient derrière elle des empreintes énormes" (p. 136). Here, we are reminded of the young boys' footprints in the sand which are washed away by the sea; Unlike Eric and her brother, who detach themselves from the terrestrial world in an attempt to oppose the flow of Time, Sophie, embodying the Earth and the cycle of Nature, inevitably leaves large traces in the ground.

Her absence from the story following her departure from Kratovicé can be likened to the disappearance of the sun at night. This idea is implied by the symbolism evoked in Eric's account of her reappearance in the conclusion of the novel, after her capture with the group of Bolshevik soldiers she had previously joined. Seeing her descend from the top of a

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22 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 161. He quotes: "Ça va est blanc comme le camphre".
ladder in a hayloft, he observes: "Soudain, je reconnus tout en haut des marches une chevelure emmêlée et éclatante, identique à celle que j'avais vu disparaître sous la terre trois semaines plus tôt" (p. 151). Her "brillante" blond hair resembles the rays of the Sun which previously disappeared beneath the Earth. Now her face is like the "champs labourés sous un ciel d'automne", where earlier in the novel it was compared to the Earth in Spring (p. 109), indicating that the cycle of Nature will soon be repeated. The narrator states that whereas almost all his memories of Sophie are nocturnal, the last one, that is, this moment when he will execute her (at her request), has "la couleur blafarde de l'aube" (p. 119). It is interesting that the novel concludes with an image of dawn, in that it began (in the pages preceding the narrator's confession) at a suspended instant just before sunrise: "On atteignait l'heure entre loup et chien" (p. 85).

Linking Sophie's death to Conrad's are not only the image of the rising sun (signaling rebirth) but also the manner in which they both die. It is significant that whereas she previously played the role of servant in the "barracks" of Kratovicé, she now exhibits a certain aristocratic air, addressing Michel with "le signe discret et péremptoire d'une maîtresse de maison qui donne un dernier ordre au domestique en présence de ses invités". Sophie now seems to fascinate Eric because, like Conrad, she is "revêtue ... du double prestige d'être à la fois une mourante et un soldat" (p. 154), and thus embodies the sacred nature of a heroic death. In Eric's eyes, Sophie now closely resembles her brother, a fact which gives him the impression of seeing his friend die twice (p. 156). Finally, he is forced to shoot her, and he does so "comme un enfant effrayé qui fait détourner un pétard pendant la nuit de Noël". This mention of Christmas, like the image of dawn, announces
both the beginning of a new cycle and the birth of a divinity, which in *Le Coup de Grâce* is Sophie, goddess of the Earth and Sun.

Eric and Kratovicé, the Intermediaries

As confessor and narrator of the story, Eric plays a central role in *Le Coup de Grâce*, not only because it is from his perspective that the drama is revealed, but also because he serves as a link between the other two members of the triangle. Although many Yourcenar scholars have discussed Eric’s importance from a psychological, philosophical or historical point of view, they have neglected his fundamental symbolic function as intermediary, one he shares with the castle of Kratovicé.

Linking all three members of the triangle in the novel is Kratovicé, the place where they spend their childhood together and where they are later reunited during the war. This house clearly represents a primordial refuge, or mystical Center, an image we encountered frequently in our study of the *Nouvelles orientales*: Eric calls it an "espèce de paradis calme, sans interdiction et sans serpent" (p. 91), and an "Eden septentrional isolé en pleine guerre". Kratovicé thus resembles the mystical, Northern land of the Hyperboreans in Greek mythology which functions as a paradise, a refuge, "une sorte de pays d’Utopie". Like the Hyperboreans who were said to dwell "sous un ciel toujours pur", the people of Kratovicé exist in an atmosphere which is "mortelle aux microbes de la basesse", and Eric says

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he lives there "à coté d’êtres essentiellement purs" (p. 145). Compared to a “navire”, this castle resembles the boat transporting souls to the world beyond, a symbolic link between Life and Death. Like a mystical Center, Kratovicé is located at a point of interface where opposing forces meet, "sur la frontière, dans une espèce de cul de sac où les sympathies ou les relations de famille oblitéraient parfois les passeports" (p. 89). This image of a cul-de-sac also implies the isolation and hermetic closure of the alchemical vessel, or "œuf philosophal", where transformations occur. Finally, the "bois de bouleaux" surrounding this house evokes the symbolism of an axis mundi, the silver birch being the most sacred tree ("la porte du ciel") for Siberian shamans, as well as representing a union of the male and female, of the Sun and the Moon.25 Although speaking largely from a historical and psychoanalytical (Freudian) perspective in his discussion of the significance of the "Chevaliers Porte-Glaive" in Le Coup de Grâce, Jean Blot seems to hint at the possible alchemical symbolism evoked by this Baltic region where opposites merge:

Pour une autre raison encore, ces pays et ce temps devaient captiver l’imagination européenne et plus particulièrement celle de Yourcenar : marche où le catholique devient orthodoxe, où le Slave et le Germain se confondent, elle est la terre crépusculaire et glacée des transmutations raciales et religieuses. Nous en retrouvons la trace dans L’Œuvre au Noir.26

Within the walls of this axis mundi, "œuf philosophal", or mystical Center, Eric will share with Conrad "une entente spontanée des esprits, des


26 Blot. Yourcenar 134.
caractères, des corps", a union similar to the one he will later unconsciously experience with Sophie. Early in his confession, he remembers the happiness his relationship with Conrad brought him:

... j'ai connu le bonheur, le vrai, l'authentique, la pièce d'or inaltérable qu'on peut changer contre une poignée de gros sous ou une liasse de marks d'après-guerre, mais qui n'en demeure pas moins semblable à elle-même, et qu'aucune dévaluation n'atteint. Le souvenir d'un tel état de choses guérît de la philosophie allemande ; il aide à simplifier la vie, et aussi son contraire (p. 91).

Thus, their union is associated with the purity of gold, with the archetypal alchemical symbol of a synthesis, which in Eric's mind serves to explain in simple terms the mysteries of Life and Death. The narrator further mentions that with Conrad, Mind and Body -- or Spirit and Matter -- are reconciled: "A son côté, l'esprit et le corps ne pouvaient être qu'en repos" (p. 93).

Eric is aware that the brother and the sister are both pure and completely "irreducible", and that, like Conrad, Sophie manifests "une nature inaltérable, avec laquelle on pouvait conclure un pacte précisément aussi périlleux et aussi sûr qu'avec un élément". Stating that Eric is not insensitive to feminine attraction, Yourcenar explains that Sophie is as much a part of his life as is Conrad (and sometimes more) and that she represents "cet élément féminin ... le contraire presque du raidissement héroïque d'Eric".27 Thus, because they embody principles which are "almost" antithetical, Eric's touch creates within Sophie's body a transformation of blood into honey, the latter a common image in the Nouvelles orientales for

27 Rosbo, Entretiens 81, 89.
the Elixir of Immortality: "Quand je la touchais, j'avais l'impression que tout le sang au-dedans de ses veines se changeait en miel" (p. 105). Similarly, during their moment of intimacy on the night of the aerial bombing, Eric experiences a symbolic rebirth as a result of their mysterious embrace.

However, despite such indications that a *mysterium conjunctionis* is achieved through Eric's union with both of his cousins, it is neither his relationship with Conrad nor that with Sophie which reflects a perfect synthesis of opposing principles. Here, Yourcenar's comment that Eric is "almost" Sophie's antithesis is revealing: it suggests that perhaps a more perfect pair of opposites exists among the members of the triangle, that it is the ascetic Conrad, not Eric, who embodies this "raidissement héroique" (Spirit) which contrasts with the image of Earth (Prime Matter) represented by his sister. Here, the theme of incest is evoked, a notion which, in fact, is explicitly mentioned by the narrator in his account of the reasons for Sophie's attraction to him:

Passablement né, assez beau, suffisamment jeune pour autoriser toutes les espérances, j'étais fait pour rassembler les aspirations d'une petite fille séquestrée jusqu'ici entre quelques brutes négligeables et le plus séduisant des frères, mais que la nature semblait n'avoir douée d'aucunes velléités pour l'inceste. Et pour que l'inceste même ne fit pas défaut, la magie des souvenirs me transformait en frère aîné (p. 100).

Thus, rejecting an incestuous impulse to unite with her opposite, Sophie turns instead to someone who resembles Conrad, someone in whom she can see the reflection of her brother. Eric, who in fact is called "le frère prodigue" upon his return to Kratovicé, seems to accept this brotherly role and acts "fraternally" with his friend's sister (p. 118). Similarly, when
Sophie kisses him for the first time, the narrator's reaction is significant: “je ne pouvais m'empêcher de songer avec une certaine mélancolie que c'était là mon premier baiser de jeune fille, et que mon père ne m'avait pas donné de sœur. Dans la mesure du possible, il est bien entendu que j'adoptai Sophie” (p. 96). Thus, perceiving Sophie as a sister, Eric himself displays incestuous impulses. Whenever he finds Sophie beautiful or feels attracted to her, it is precisely because at that particular moment she reminds him of her brother, when her eyes resemble his, when she dies heroically as he did, or even when she is ill from having drunk too much: “Je n'aurais pu lui dire que cette pâleur, ces taches, ce danger, et cet abandon plus complet que dans l'amour étaient rassurants et beaux; et que ce corps pesamment étalé me rappelait celui de mes camarades soignés dans le même état, et Conrad lui-même...” (p. 117). The theme of incest is further reinforced when Eric draws a parallel between husbands and brothers, stating that “L'aveuglement des frères vaut celui des maris, car Conrad ne se doutait de rien” (p. 100-101). Finally, there is an emphasis on the idea of the purity of a love uniting the brother and the sister when Eric states that Sophie's “tendresse pour son frère avait continué à sourdre à travers sa passion pour moi, invisible comme une source dans l'eau salée de la mer” (p. 134). The liquid imagery used here brings to mind Eric's recollection of his childhood at Kratovicé, of summer mornings spent swimming with Conrad in "fresh-water lakes" or "salt-water estuaries": The latter is sullied -- like Eric himself or Sophie's love for him -- while the former is as pure as Conrad or as a union between this brother/sister pair.

The theme of incest has important implications in terms of the central role it plays in alchemical thought: for the alchemist, the symbolic union of
a brother and sister represents a perfect synthesis of opposites. As Jung
explains, a brother/sister incest constitutes "the prototype of the royal
marriage" (symbolizing a conjunction of the Sun and the Moon), and "this
endogamous mating is simply a variant of the Uroboros, which, because it is
by nature hermaphroditic, completes the circle in itself".28 Although such
an incestuous union never actually takes place in Le Coup de Grâce, it is
significant that it is discussed openly in Eric's confession and that he is
aware of the pure nature of Sophie's love for her brother.

There is, in fact, very little contact between Conrad and Sophie in the
novel, the only obvious link between them being through the person of their
cousin Eric, who clearly has a close relationship with each of them. Thus, it
would seem that he serves as an intermediary between these two
antithetical beings, and through his mysterious unions with each of them, he
succeeds in linking, and even symbolically joining, the opposing principles
they represent. Because both the brother and the sister are pure creatures
manifesting a divine, "inalterable" nature, their synthesis through the
intermediary of their cousin implies the recreation of a primordial unity in
which Earth and Sky/Sun and Moon are one. Furthermore, in the story's
conclusion when Eric shoots Sophie, he states: "je m'accrochais à l'idée que
j'avais désiré achever Conrad, et que c'était la même chose" (p. 157). Thus,
in his mind, they are already one; yet when he kills Sophie, he is in fact
uniting them for the last time, in death.

It is interesting that Eric is indirectly responsible for both of their
deaths, and that he shares in the last moments of each of their earthly

28 Jung, *Alchemy* 413. See also 153 and 235.
existences, thus playing the role of an intermediary between Life and Death. Shortly after Conrad expires, Eric speaks of a "mysterious interval" between the dead and the living: "Mais je sais bien qu'il restera toujours entre morts et vivants un écart mystérieux dont nous ignorons la nature, et que les plus avertis d'entre nous sont à peu près aussi renseignés sur la mort qu'une vieille fille sur l'amour. Si le fait de mourir est une espèce de montée en grade, je ne conteste pas à Conrad cette mystérieuse supériorité de rang" (p. 148). Although he is unaware of it, Eric, like Kratovicé, fills this gap, this "écart mystérieux", and through his function as an intermediary, he helps Conrad -- and Sophie -- to attain a "supériorité de rang", that is, to achieve eternal life through a rebirth resembling the image marking both of their deaths, the symbol of the sun reappearing gloriously upon the earth's horizon at dawn.

In Volker Schlöndorff's film version of Le Coup de Grâce, many of the major symbolic elements we have treated in this study are unfortunately lost. For instance, as we have already noted, Conrad's importance is extremely minimized, his asceticism and mythical resemblance to a "Brother of the Sword", as well as his function as Sophie's antithesis, being entirely absent in the film. In addition, Sophie's evocation of the Earth (and her link with the Sun) do not emerge through Margarethe von Trotta's interpretation of this character. The role of Eric, on the other hand, is not only skillfully acted, but is also more clearly defined in terms of his attitude towards Sophie. For instance, in the scene where we witness their encounter on the night of the aerial bombing, Matthias Habich's fine portrayal of the character's emotional reaction at this moment and
immediately afterward admirably reveals Eric's ambivalent attitude. Yourcenar, however, laments that an important aspect of Eric's character is neglected by the director's omission of a scene where he admires the intellectual superiority of his Jewish enemy, Grigori Loew. Overall, Schlöndorff is quite successful in his cinematographic depiction of the atmosphere of the region during this specific period in history, in particular, through his haunting images of Kratovíc, this "navire abandonné pris dans une banquise". Interestingly, one of the most prominent characters in the film is one who, in fact, plays only a minor role in Yourcenar's novel, that is, Conrad's and Sophie's Aunt Prascovie; in the film version, her senility and mindless chatter are highlighted, adding to the mysterious and even surreal atmosphere reigning in this castle which has been transformed into a barracks during wartime. Thus, although many of the fundamental aspects of the novel's rich symbolism do not come across on screen in Schlöndorff's adaptation, the film is nonetheless quite an admirable account of both a historical event and an unrequited love.

It is neither the novel's political and historical content nor its account of a simple love triangle which have concerned us in our study of Le Coup de Grâce, but rather its imagery and symbols, which establish a parallel between this 'récit occidental' and other works dating from the same period in Yourcenar's literary career. Stylistic similarities in the author's early works have been discussed by such scholars as Henri Peyre, who finds in

29 Yourcenar, *Éyes* 217.
them a "haughty rigidity and some coldness". Our studies of *Le Coup de Grâce* and the *Nouvelles orientales* reveal a number of parallels between these two works, one of the most notable being the importance given to myth. Yet, other common themes emerge, such as the intermingling of sexual roles (suggesting the image of the hermaphrodite), the notion of a world of illusion in which a select few perceive life's truths, the elemental nature of certain characters, the idea of asceticism linked with purity, and the role of an intermediary between opposites. The alchemical symbolism which dominates all of the oriental tales is far less evident in *Le Coup de Grâce*; however it is still evoked here through certain images and by the notion of a union between brother and sister. Although this theme of incest does not appear in the *Nouvelles orientales*, it is clearly the central element in another work written during the 1930's, that is, the short story in *Comme l'Eau qui coule* entitled "Anna, soror...", which will be the focus of the next section of this chapter. Completely disregarded by critics who have examined *Le Coup de Grâce* is this theme of incest, one which symbolically links all three members of the eternal triangle: Conrad, Sophie and Eric, who symbolize respectively, the Celestial, the Chthonian and an intermediary between the two. Through the symbolic link offered by both Eric and Kratovicé, a union of opposites is achieved which will lead to a primordial unity, to the end of a cycle and a new beginning in the endless


31 Only Eric's fraternal attitude towards Sophie is mentioned, although never fully examined. See Joseph Epstein, "Read Marguerite Yourcenar!," *Commentary* 74 (Aug., 1982), 62.
flux of Time.

In this novel, we encounter once again a contrast between, on the one hand, the cycles of Time and Nature (represented by the elemental Sophie, an incarnation of the Earth), and, on the other, a negation of Chronos (illustrated by the ascetic Conrad, a heroic Brother of the Sword). Generally reflecting a diurnal attitude through his idealization of his cousin, Eric nonetheless undergoes a reversal when he positively valorizes Death as an entry into the Terra Mater during his moment of intimacy with Sophie, a vision, however, which he subsequently rejects. It is interesting that in this “western narrative”, the role of intermediary is played both by a character espousing a diurnal view of Time (Eric) and by a nocturnal symbol of a mystical Center (Kratočíve). Thus, this conflict, which in our previous chapter (A Broken Circle) also reflected an opposition between Occidental and Oriental thought, remains unresolved here; it is in our final study, Valentine’s Vision, that we shall truly arrive at a meeting of East and West.
II. Valentine’s Vision

Comme l’Eau qui coule (1982) contains three short stories which were originally published in 1934 as part of a collection entitled La Mort conduit l’attelage, a work itself consisting of three stories: “D’après Dürer”, which later developed into L’Œuvre au Noir; “D’après Rembrandt”, which was entirely rewritten to create two of the novellas in Comme l’Eau qui coule (“Un Homme obscur” and “Une Belle Matinée”), and “D’après Greco”, which, with some minor additions and stylistic improvements, ultimately became “Anna, soror...”. Yourcenar tells us in her “Postface” to Comme l’Eau qui coule that “Anna, soror...” was, in fact, first written in 1925, and that the 1982 version “reproduit dans sa quasi-intégralité le texte de 1935, lui-même presque identique au récit écrit en 1925 par une jeune femme de vingt-deux ans” (p. 1024). Praising Mme Yourcenar’s gift for prose fiction in both the novel and novella form, Walter Kaiser believes that Comme l’Eau qui coule “contains her finest stories”.¹ Professor Kaiser presents a fine character study of Nathanaël (“Un Homme obscur”) with particular emphasis on the description of this character’s death in the story’s conclusion, which Kaiser calls “one of the most beautiful passages she [Yourcenar] has ever written”, stating: “this quintessential man lies down on those eternal dunes for his final sleep, and as he does so, he seems to dissolve into the landscape itself, returning to the earth of which he was made, dust to dust, as a vast silence descends upon the universe”.²

¹ Kaiser, Liberty 109.
² Kaiser, Liberty 131-7.
Nowhere has "Anna, soror...", the first story in the collection, been studied as admirably or with as much depth of understanding; it has, in fact, received very little critical attention. Pierre Horn, who summarizes the story's plot as he examines its principal themes, nevertheless calls it a "gripping tale" which is at once "intense and corrosive". With the publication of Walter Kaiser's English translation of Comme l'Eau qui coule in 1987 (under the title Three Lives and a Dream), the collection received more attention, most of which was quite favorable. It was reviewed, for instance, by such scholars as John Sturrock, who, preferring "Un Homme obscur" to "Anna, soror...", criticizes the latter's "stiffness", and John Gross, who states that the colors in "Anna, soror..." "are at once richer and more severe than those of the preceding stories".

This Western 'récit' describes an incestuous love between a brother and sister, a theme which, as we have seen, is subtly evoked in Le Coup de Grâce, while openly presented here as the central element of the narrative. In her "Postface", Mme Yourcenar emphasizes the importance of the theme of incest in literature, citing various examples which range from the story of "deux incestueux au cœur pur" in Tis Pity She's A Whore (p. 1024) to "l'union de deux êtres d'exception appariés par le sang" in Confidence africaine (p. 1026). She concludes: "Que l'inceste existe à l'état de possibilités omniprésentes dont la sensibilité humaine, attirante pour les uns, 

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3 Horn, Yourcenar 72.


révoltante pour les autres, le mythe, la légende, l'obscur cheminement des songes, les statistiques des sociologues et les faits divers en font preuve" (p. 1030). Thus, she reveals that here again in "Anna, soror...", as in her other works written during the 1930's, the principal theme is intimately linked with the symbolism of numerous myths, legends and dreams. It is from this universal perspective that we shall examine Anna and Miguel's relationship in an attempt to establish parallels between this novella and the other works we have treated thus far. Naturally, a number of conflicts emerge as a result of the incestuous union described here, the most notable being one which we have encountered frequently in both the Nouvelles orientales and Le Coup de Grâce and which is the central focus of this chapter, that is, the opposition between Christianity or Occidental thought and ancient or Oriental forms of mysticism. Thus, following our treatment of the theme of incest, we shall study this fundamental conflict as it is reflected through the attitudes and actions of don Alvare and his wife donna Valentine, with special emphasis on the theme of purification and the role of the intermediary.

Anna and Miguel, An Eternal Love

As Pierre Horn rightfully observes, Yourcenar presents the provocative theme of an incestuous love affair "with considerable self-restraint" and "ever so delicately". Anna and Miguel de la Cerna's relationship develops gradually throughout the course of the story, beginning quite innocently as a

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6 Horn, Yourcenar 72.
deep feeling of fraternal affection between two special beings until it is eventually recognized as a burning passion which is then alternately rejected and repressed or accepted and encouraged. The growth of this love, which will ultimately be consummated, and the attitudes of each member of the couple require examination, particularly in terms of their mythical significance and symbolic function.

In their early youth, the brother and sister closely resemble one another, a fact which is frequently emphasized by the textual descriptions of the two children. We read, for example, that "Miguel à cet âge ressemblait beaucoup à sa sœur; n'étaient les mains, délicates chez elle, dures chez lui par le maniement de la bride et de l'épée, on les eût pris l'un pour l'autre" (p. 855). Furthermore, Anna's face is so similar to his own that when Miguel sees her "il crut voir son propre reflet au fond d'un miroir" (p. 863). This notion of mirror images is also indicated by the fact that the two siblings are frequently pictured seated or standing opposite one another and that their rooms in the fortress of Saint-Elme "se faisaient face" (p. 856). Thus, as children, the brother and sister reflect an almost perfect symmetry, although it is already evident that Miguel's "roughness" opposes Anna's "delicateness", a difference which will become more and more pronounced as the story progresses. We can state that at an early age Anna and Miguel embody a kind of primordial unity, but despite its near perfection their symmetry also implies duality and internal opposition.

Anna is characterized by her spirituality and her "horreur du Mal"; she looks towards the heavens with her personal conception of God for explanations about her earthly existence. For instance, she understands love and passion only in terms of God and Christ: "le vocabulaire ardent et vague
de l'amour de Dieu émovait davantage Anna que celui des poètes de l'amour terrestre, bien qu'au fond presque identique" (p. 671). Thus, when she receives the holy communion, her lips appear as if prepared for a kiss (p. 863) and when looking at religious representations, she thinks of the saint who "brûlait sans doute d'être relevée par Jésus" (p. 858). Particularly interesting is her visit to a church on Maundy Thursday where she sees amid the statues of saints and virgins shrouded in violet the dark figure of Christ, and lifting her own veil, begins to kiss the wounds on its feet. All the imagery here signals a sacred union, the violet shrouds of mourning suggesting Death as a passage towards resurrection, the blood of Christ's wounds evoking the fires of passion, and the removal of Anna's veil implying an initiatory revelation of secret or intimate knowledge.7 Her brother, overwhelmed by his jealousy, immediately stops her, and when she tells him of her decision to enter a convent, he explodes: "Et je vous permettrais un amant parce qu'il est crucifié?" (p. 880).

In the same scene at the church, Anna is described as being "plus blanche que la chair des cierges", both her whiteness and her association with candles signaling her innocence. The young girl's link with the color white is frequently emphasized in the text: she is covered with a "couche blanche" during her mother's funeral procession (p. 867), and is later "plus blanche que son linge et tout occupée en Dieu" (p. 873). Thus, her pale white complexion is clearly a reflection of her purity and her spiritual elevation. Another image evoking Anna's purity is water, not the dark swamp water which her brother will contemplate, but the cool, clear, fresh water of rain,

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7 See Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 1021, 831, 1026.
which, as we have seen, is a common symbol in Yourcenar’s work for an unsullied nature. We read, for example, that the Latin words she utters in prayer “s’égrenaient dans le silence comme les gouttes d’une onde froide et calante” (p. 873). By virtue of her connection with whiteness and clear water, Anna seems to possess the immaculate character of the Moon.

Even as a young child, Miguel is distinguished from his sister by the “roughness” of his hands, and unlike Anna, who is characterized by her “whiteness”, he is later described as a “jeune cavalier tout en noir” (p. 901). Whereas the young girl manifests a celestial nature and an orientation towards the spiritual realm, Miguel displays an interest in earthly pleasures. For instance, while the sister is preoccupied with thoughts of God’s love, the brother, following his father’s example, begins to frequent bars where “Il essaya des courtisanes” (p. 874), however, this practice is quickly abandoned after he encounters a prostitute named Anna.

Miguel’s experience with the Saracen girl near a marsh is particularly noteworthy in terms of the boy’s inclinations toward the world of the Chthonian. An examination of the imagery describing his frequent outings, one of which will lead to this important encounter, is revealing:

Certains jours, passant outre aux interdictions de donna Valentine, Miguel se levait à l’aube, sellait lui-même son cheval, et se lançait à l’aventure très loin dans les terres basses. Le sol s’étendait noir et nu ; des buffles immobiles, couchés par masses sombres, semblaient dans l’éloignement des blocs de rochers dévalés des montagnes ; des monticules volcaniques bossuaient la lande ; le grand vent passait toujours. Don Miguel, voyant la boue grasse rejaillir sous les sabots de son cheval, freinait brusquement au bord d’un marécage (p. 858).
The "terres basses" towards which Miguel embarks immediately signal an opposition with the loftiness of Anna's spiritual preoccupations, and the black, naked earth contrasts with the whiteness of her skin. Symbolically evoking both Death and the humid element of Nature, the dark buffalo here are also associated with rocks (Earth). The image of "monticules" which "bossuaient la lande" recalls the priest's grave in "La Veuve Aphrodissia", suggesting Matter and the first signs of differentiation. Also symbolizing base Matter is "la boue grasse" beneath the horse's hooves, which is reminiscent of the mud covering Sophie's boots in *Le Coup de Grâce*. Finally, the swamp where Miguel stops is generally an image of "la matière indifférenciée, passive et féminine", as well as a symbol of the Unconscious (sometimes linked with sensual pleasures) or an initiatory labyrinth.

Not far from this swamp, Miguel comes upon an ancient colonnade just before sunset, and these columns clearly evoke an *axis mundi* linking Earth and Sky: "Des fûts striés gisaient comme de gros troncs d'arbres ; d'autres, tout debout, doublés horizontalement par leur ombre, se dressaient sur le ciel rouge ; la mer embrumée et pâle se devinait par derrière" (p. 858). It is here in the mist shrouding these sacred ruins that the young nobleman will have a surreal encounter with a mysterious, yellow-eyed Saracen girl. Obviously, her eyes, her gray coloring, her "sifflement" and the movements of her bare feet on the stone slabs ("dalles") serve to assimilate this Arab girl to the viper that appears here, as well as to the other reptiles, ants and

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8 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 133.

9 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 611. For Gilbert Durand, the swamp is an archetypal image of "l'eau noire" and "néphaste" which is associated with Death and contrasts with the clear, fresh water of fountains and springs. See Durand, *Structures* 103-110.
spiders which "rampaien dans l'herbe". It is significant that Miguel initially calls the girl "ma sœur", and then proceeds to kill the viper whose "tête triangulaire" emerges from between the stones. This viper not only symbolizes the boy's unconscious, sexual (and incestuous) drives which he tries to repress by killing it, but it also implies an agent of transformation, a means of regeneration through death,\textsuperscript{10} and its triangular head evokes totality. Thus, this scene can be interpreted as an initiatory experience resulting in a revelation which is the girl's warning that there are "serpents ailleurs qu'ici".

Miguel's mysterious encounter with the Saracen is repeated that same night in his dreams, although here the vipers are replaced by enormous scorpions, and the girl, whose dark feet dance gently upon these creatures "comme sur un lit d'herbes sèches", is now very clearly linked with Anna. Her feet become whiter and whiter until "Miguel, se penchant pour les embrasser, reconnaissait les pieds d'Anna, nus dans leurs mules de satin noir" (p. 860). This dream parallels the scene where Anna kisses the feet of the statue of Christ at church, perceiving in her brother the same saintly qualities as those embodied by the son of God. Here the contrast or duality between the brother and sister is quite clear: Whereas Anna sublimates her incestuous passion into a spiritual love for a divine, celestial being, Miguel's sexual drives lead him to associate his sister subconsciously with the chthonian images of the Arab sorceress and the viper. Furthermore, both of these important scenes consist of a revelation or initiation into the secrets of Death and Rebirth, secrets which are intimately linked with the

\textsuperscript{10} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 1021.
notion of a mysterious union. Finally, there is a foreboding of events to come when Miguel encounters the Saracen "détentrice du charme" for the second time near a spring. Seeing her face reflected in the "rond formé par la source" (a mystical Center), Miguel hears her say: "... votre sœur vous attend près d'ici avec une coupe pleine d'eau pure. Vous boirez ensemble" (p. 861). The image of this "coupe" evokes the related symbolisms of the Holy Grail, the Eucharistic chalice and the alchemical vase, all of which contain the essence of a revelation and an Elixir of Life, the object of the magnum opus and the result of a mysterium conjunctionis.\textsuperscript{11}

Following his encounter with the Arab girl and not long after his mother's death, Miguel, finally yielding to his desire to spend time with his sister, begins to come to her every afternoon "à l'heure où du soleil emplissait la chambre" and sit "en face d'elle" (p. 870). An image of generative force, the sunlight filling the room must be linked with Miguel and the kind of influence he will have upon his sister's life. Unlike Miguel, the latter is still unaware at this point of the true nature of her feelings for her brother; however, immediately after the incident at church on Maundy Thursday, she comes to understand her own desires as well as the reasons for her brother's violent reaction that day. Later, at night, Miguel goes to the door of her room: "Il sentit qu'elle s'y appuyait aussi ; le tremblement de leurs deux corps se communiquait aux boiseries. Il faisait entièrement noir : chacun écoutait dans l'ombre le halètement d'un désir pareil au sien" (p. 881). This scene represents the beginnings of a symbolic union, the darkness and the wood (through which their bodies seem to meld)

\textsuperscript{11} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 300-302.
suggesting a reduction to Prime Matter (or a return to innocence), and the threshold of the door serving as a point of interface or meeting place of opposing principles. However, the *opus* remains incomplete, for when Miguel opens the door, "il n'y avait plus personne de l'autre côté du seuil" and Anna's footsteps can be heard in the total darkness of the "long corridor voûté", an image evoking the entrance into the maternal womb. Their love will not be consummated until the following night, "dans cette nuit du Vendredi saint", when the brother and sister embrace after standing at opposite angles on the balcony beneath a sky which "semblait resplendissant de plaies" (p. 883). Again, the notion of miroir images is implied here by the position of the siblings, while the redness of the sky's "wounds" not only reflects the fires of the couple's passion but also signals the "œuvre au rouge", the latter being reinforced by the symbolism of Good Friday, with its image of a crucified divinity whose death will lead to rebirth.

Three days later on "la Pâque de l'ange" and "aux premiers feux du jour" (indicating the start of a new cycle), Miguel leaves Saint-Elme forever, after having embraced Anna "sur le seuil d'une chambre". Praying in church on this day when an angel was once said to have spoken to the women waiting outside Christ's tomb, Miguel feels, "avec un étourdissement d'ivresse, cet allégement du corps qui semble libérer l'âme" (p. 884). This impression of a liberation of Spirit/Soul from Matter/Body must be seen as a result of his mysterious union with his sister, and, as we shall later see, don Miguel's eventual death at sea will serve as a divine sacrifice (similar to Christ's), ultimately earning him eternal life. When Anna herself is close to death many years later, she murmurs "mi amado" when presented with a crucifix, and the last words of the story read: "Ils pensèrent qu'elle parlait à
Dieu. Elle parlait peut-être à Dieu” (p. 901). Thus, she still associates her brother with a divinity, and in her mind, their incestuous relationship has been reconciled as a sacred union with God. Yourcenar explains in her "Postface" that Anna, as an old woman, "continuera d’unir sans perplexité son amour irrepentant pour Miguel et sa confiance en Dieu" (p. 1027). Finally, in the epitaph she leaves on her dead brother's tomb, Anna refers to their eternal love ("AETERNUM AETERNI DOLORIS AMORISQUE"), this perfect love uniting brother and sister and transcending the confines of Time and Death. Many Hall explains this phenomenon in alchemical terms when he states: "To the mystic, the Philosopher's Stone is perfect love, which transmutes all that is base and 'raises' all that is dead".\(^\text{12}\)

Don Alvare and the Theme of Purification

The theme of purification is linked with many of the central characters in "Anna, soror...", although interpreted differently by each of them. We will consider in particular don Miguel's and don Alvare's attitudes towards Sin and Death, both of which reveal a type of purification and a precise vision of the world.

On the day following Miguel's first symbolic encounter with Anna through the door to her room, the young nobleman goes to see his father "à l'heure de midi" to inform him of his plans to leave immediately on a boat, "une de ces galères armées pour la chasse aux pirates qui croisaient de Malte à Tanger" (p. 882). It is significant that Miguel visits his father at the moment of the

\(^{12}\) Hall, *Secret* XCVII.
sun's zenith, in that it signals the young man's movement towards spiritualization and purification, as opposed to an immersion in the material world as is represented by the antithetical position of the Nadir.\textsuperscript{13} His decision to "hunt" pirates, or to become engaged in a heroic venture, can be traced back to certain tendencies he exhibits in his youth. For example, even as a child, his hands are "durcies" as a result of their contact with "the bridle" and "the sword". Furthermore, he is frequently referred to as a "cavalier", and the two "genets de Barbarie" with which he is presented on his nineteenth birthday arouse his interest in riding and hunting, causing him to move far from Anna's room in the fortress in order to be closer to the stables.

Thus, after their incestuous union on Good Friday, it is Miguel's "traditions d'honneur" which lead him to a decision to seek a heroic death at sea as a form of purification: "il se lançait vers la mort comme vers un achèvement nécessaire" (p. 884). The thoughts he expresses at church on that Easter Monday reveal an attitude which closely resembles that of Eric in Le Coup de Grâce: "Un obscur instinct, hérité peut-être de quelque ancêtre inconnu ou nié qui avait combattu sous le Croissant, l'assurait que tout homme tué dans un combat contre les infidèles est forcément sauvé" (p. 884). The young Spanish nobleman shares with Eric a belief that a chivalrous death in battle ensures salvation, both men reflecting a diurnal conception of the possibility of opposing Time and Death through a valorous fight. For Miguel, of course, such a heroic death will be equivalent to Christ's sacrifice, thus serving as a form of purification, a means of

\textsuperscript{13} Chevalier, Dictionnaire 1035.
absolving his sin and saving himself from damnation. It is interesting to note that, according to Chevalier, a Knight of the Holy Grail such as Perceval "devient pour les autres une incarnation de l'hostie",\textsuperscript{14} in that Miguel, although refusing "la communion pascale" that day, feels "l'influence de l'hostie" descend upon him in the form of a "ray of sunlight". Only a few weeks after his departure, the young man finds the heroic death he was seeking: his ship, victorious in a battle against the "infidel" (a "nef sarrasine"), drifts for many days at the mercy of the wind and waves until it is finally brought to "une grève" in Sicily. The image of his body drifting on a ship until it reaches its final resting place may be interpreted as a symbolic Night Sea Voyage, leading Miguel to a place beyond Life and Death, to a Land of Eternal Life.

After his son's death, don Alvare is pushed "plus avant dans l'ascétisme et la débauche", two contradictory tendencies which characterize the marquis de la Cerna throughout the course of the story. He is constantly torn between a need to purify himself through asceticism and a desire to completely immerse himself in the earthly pleasures of the material world, never finding a means of reconciling the two. We read earlier that "Sous le masque, aux heures d'abbattement où l'on se livre à soi-même, don Alvare passait pour préférer les prostituées moresques dont on marchande les faveurs, dans le quartier du port, avec les tenancières de bouges accroupies sous une lampe fumeuse ou près d'un brasero" (p. 854). This image of a mask, recurring frequently in the text's descriptions of don Alvare, can be

\textsuperscript{14} Chevalier, \textit{Dictionnaire} 234.
seen as a "médiateur entre deux forces", allowing this "gentilhomme" to move between the two worlds which alternately attract him. Despite the pleasure he derives from them, Don Alvare is a man who inherently distrusts women (he is "naturellement enclin à se défier des femmes"), a fact which causes him to sequester his beautiful wife in the fortress of Saint-Elme. Thus, he seems to manifest a certain misogyny, and this tendency will also play a role in his attitude towards Religion and Death, as well as in his concept of purification.

When he is not frequenting prostitutes in his masked disguise, don Alvare is preoccupied with his attacks of "hypocondrie religieuse" (p. 854), that is, his "crises de terreur mystique durant lesquelles il se croyait damné" (p. 882). The marquis' view of death is clarified during his son's funeral, when his thoughts reflect a tendency towards asceticism: "dans l'esprit du gentilhomme toutes sortes de visions passèrent, arides comme le sol d'une sierra, âpres comme uncilice, poignantes comme un Dies irae" (p. 887). His visions are marked by images of dryness, sterility, and harshness, and his idea of death, opposing a nocturnal view of the eternal cycle of Time governed by Mother Nature's fecundity, is intimately linked with his fear of the Day of Judgement (Dies irae), "l'idée de ces châtiments éternels infligés à des créatures de chair". The mention of a monk's "cilice" recalls Thérapion in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", whose asceticism and attitude towards sensuality parallel in many respects those of don Alvare. When the latter imagines the torments of Hell, knowing that both he and his son are damned, he begins to feel a strong link with Miguel: "A ce fils, qu'il avait peu

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15 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 617.
aimé, il se sentait maintenant rattaché par une parenté plus intime et plus mystérieuse : celle qu'établissent entre les hommes, à travers la lugubre diversité des fautes, les mêmes angoisses, les mêmes luttes, les mêmes remords, la même poussière" (p. 887). Looking at Anna and holding her responsible for Miguel's death, don Alvare is filled with hatred and horror. Thus, he feels a certain affinity with all the members of his sex, a feeling of belonging to a group whose downfall is inevitably caused by women. This misogyny recalls Eric in *Le Coup de Grâce*, who, like both Thérapon and Alvare, represents a diurnal vision, one which is linked with notions of purification and asceticism and characterized by opposition and negation.

Despite the ascetic inclinations he displays after his son's death, don Alvare continues to lead a life of debauchery, although still torn between "ses dévotions et ses plaisirs". However, after being exiled to Flanders, he begins to think about his past, recalling that he never loved any living creature "corp et âme", and with age the conflict within him begins to diminish. He now turns more than ever to an ascetic lifestyle ("les exigences de la chair se taisaient avec l'âge ; cette triste victoire l'obligeait à se retourner vers son âme"), aware that he will soon have to yield to "la grande main terrible", an image reflecting his Christian fear of God and his certainty of the finality of Death. Finally, he decides to "die to the world", specifically to the material world, by giving himself completely to a life of asceticism. Standing at the threshold of the monastery of Saint-Martin in Naples, at a point separating the two antithetical forces which have divided him throughout his life (Matter and Spirit), don Alvare covers his eyes with his hat (recalling Cornélius) to blind himself to the Earth's attractions, and enters the place where he will begin a new life.
Once inside, he is tormented for a moment by his old "horreur du grand abîme", but is soon reassured by the thought that the walls of the monastery will protect him from the devouring abyss: "don Alvare savait que les portes de l'enfer ne prévaudraient pas contre elles" (p. 897). Again, we are reminded of both Eric and Conrad (Le Coup de Grâce) who are confident that their resemblance to the monastic "Brethren of the Sword" will serve as a protection against the confines of Death. Although don Alvare will never learn to reconcile the conflicting forces within him and his vision will continue to be marked by opposition, he finds a means of dealing with life's duality through his acceptance of an ascetic life of penitence, a final form of purification before the ultimate Day of Judgement.

Valentine and The Cycles of Nature

Directly opposing don Alvare's vision of Death and God is that of his wife donna Valentine, a character whose importance is signaled by Yourcenar in the "Postface" where she describes Valentine as "un premier état de la femme parfaite telle qu'il m'est souvent arrivé de la rêver" (p. 1027). This woman's perfection is indicated symbolically in the text by her comparison with a flower (p. 853), and she is characterized by her "singulière gravité" and her calm, indicating that she possesses the type of moderation so often advocated by mystics and philosophers. Hers is clearly a Platonic mysticism, one which sharply contrasts with her husband's Christian fear of Death: Brought up under the guidance of "la mystique amie de Michel-Ange", she never prays, but is often seen reading The Banquet or meditating before the bay.
Donna Valentine's influence upon her children is profound and certainly far stronger than that of their father. We read: "Miguel passait de longues heures assis à côté d'Anna dans la petite pièce dorée comme l'intérieur d'un coffre, où courait, brodée sur les murailles, la devise de Valentine: Ut crystallum. Dès leur enfance, elle leur avait appris à lire dans Cicéron et dans Sénèque..." (p. 855). United in this tiny, golden room as if within an embryonic cell or "alchemical egg", the two children are privy to a spiritual treasure, implied by the image of a "coffer", which is the revelation of their mother's "motto", her secret Truth about the mystical significance of crystal. According to Chevalier, transparent crystal, "un des plus beaux exemples d'union des contraires", is a substance which acts as an intermediary between the visible and the invisible: In Christian symbolism, the Virgin Mary is a crystal which is penetrated by the divine light of Christ without breaking. The link which crystal establishes between Valentine and the Virgin Mary is reinforced by the fact that her children worship her like "une Madone" (p. 855). It is significant that the Farrells' only mention of "Anna, soror..." is their brief statement about Valentine's saintly character (her "piety is matched only by her wisdom"), one which they discuss in connection with the Virgin Mary who appears in "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles". They are the only critics to make this important connection between the two characters; however they fail to examine the implications of such a comparison, in other words, the role of intermediary

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16 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 266-7.

17 Chevalier, *Dictionnaire* 314.

18 Farrells, *Counterpoint* 100.
which is played by both women. Other indications can be found in the text of Valentine’s resemblance to the Virgin Mary. The following passage is exemplary:

Elle avait, dans une cassette, une collection d’intailles grecques dont plusieurs étaient ornées de figures nues. Elle montait parfois les deux marches qui menaient aux profondes embrasures des fenêtres pour exposer aux derniers rayons du soleil la transparence des sardines, et, tout enveloppée de l’or oblique du crépuscule, Valentine elle-même semblait diaphane comme ses gemmes (p. 855).

Like the Virgin, Valentine is as diaphanous as these gemstones which are penetrated by the heavenly, golden light of twilight. It is interesting that these translucent “sardines”, sharing the symbolism of crystal, are a form of chalcedony, a word derived from the Greek khalkedon, meaning “mystical stone”. Descriptions of dusk, such as those dominating our first chapter, frequently appear in connection with donna Valentine, and like this mystical woman evoke a meeting point between Light and Darkness. Another symbolic indication of Valentine’s role as intermediary is the analogy made between her voice and a “cloche d’argent”, the bell (recalling “la Fin de Marko Kralliéwitch”) being suspended at an interface between Heaven and Earth and linking the two. Here, Valentine is associated with silver, an element which contrasts with the goldness of the Saint-Eime fortress where she is sequestered throughout most of her life. The “énorme courtines du fort Saint-Eime” are described as being “crépies d’or”, the verb ‘crépir’ denoting “roughcast” gold, or perhaps a preliminary form of the precious metal in the alchemical process. Thus, Valentine’s emprisonment in the fort may be seen as a blending of the antithetical elements of silver and gold.
Of course, Donna Valentine's role as intermediary is not purely symbolic in nature; her mediation between Anna and Miguel as well as between Don Alvare's views and her children's actions has very real consequences. Frequently pictured together, the mother, brother and sister seem to form a triangle, and one of their most noteworthy communal experiences takes place on the esplanade of the Acropoli castle where they contemplate the night sky:

Le vent était tombé avec la chute de la lumière. La chaleur avait crevassé la terre du jardin ; les étroites flaques luisantes des marécages s'éteignaient une à une ; on n'apercevait les feux d'aucun village ; sur le noir dense des montagnes et de la plaine se bombait la noirceur limpide du ciel. Le ciel, le ciel de diamant et de cristal, tournait lentement autour du pôle. Tous trois, la tête renversée, regardaient. Don Miguel se demandait quelle planète néfaste se levait pour lui dans son signe, qui était le Capricorne. Anna, sans doute, pensait à Dieu. Valentine songeait peut-être aux sphères chantantes de Pythagore (pp. 861-2).

All three experience a mysterious communion with Nature, the beauty of which reflects the perfection of Spirit contained in Matter: the light (Spirit) gleaming in the marsh puddles (Matter), the notion of "limpid blackness" at the place where the clear Sky meets the dark Earth. Clearly suggesting the cycles of Life and the constant flux of Time is the turning movement of the crystalline, adamantine sky around a pole or axis. The three family members silently look up at Nature's harmonious beauty as if in prayer, each of them interpreting it in a different, and significant, manner. Miguel, thinking in terms of astrology, imagines the "ill-fated" planet rising in his sign of Capricorn, a sign which, like the boy himself, is characterized by ambivalence, "livré aux deux tendances de la vie, vers l'abîme et vers les
hauteurs". Anna, of course, thinks only in terms of God, reflecting her own
singuarily spiritual nature. But the most interesting interpretation is found
in Valentine's mystical communion with the Cosmos, in her vision of the
Pythagorean "musical spheres" which express the harmonic relationships
between planets, constellations and elements. Although she remains
silent, the mother profoundly influences her children by teaching them to
understand and respect the perfect synthesis found in Nature.

Shortly before her death and after having received the Extreme Uction
"without emotion", Valentine, explaining that she has seen thirty-nine
summers and winters, tells her children not to fear because "Rien ne finit"
(p. 865). It is a nocturnal view of Life which she conveys to Anna and
Miguel, one opposing Alvare's diurnal vision and involving a belief in the
circular movement of time, in the eternal cycles of Death and Rebirth. When
she says to them, "Quoi qu'il advienne, n'en arrive jamais à vous haîr", she
reveals her knowledge of their love, foreseeing their union, and despite her
warning, virtually gives them her permission. Unlike her husband, who is
later tormented by the negative effects his children's incest will have upon
his salvation, Donna Valentine seems to accept what will happen (she says
"Ne vous inquiétez pas. Tout est bien"), an idea which is confirmed by
Yourcenar in her "Postface": "Il semble bien ... que Valentine, dès le début,
perçoive l'amour des deux enfants l'un pour l'autre sans rien faire pour
l'éteindre, le sachant inextinguible" (p. 1027).

19 Chevalier, Dictionnaire 164.

20 Hall, Secret LXXI. Valentine's Pythagorean mysticism is also exemplified by the
fact that she eats only herbs, vegetables and fruit, just as the great philosopher
instructed his disciples to do. See Hall, Secret LXVI.
At her funeral, Valentine's body, dressed in a white robe, is placed at the center of four "flambeaux", and her face "rappelait celui des statues que l'on exhume en fouillant la terre de la Grande-Grèce" (p. 866). Here the notion of immortality is evoked by the woman's resemblance to the durability of ancient stone statues as well as by her position at the center of the torches, an image of the squaring (four angles/torches) of the circle (Valentine herself and her link with the natural cycle). Even after her death, Anna's and Miguel's mother acts as an intermediary between them. When the three are united for the last time in the carriage during the funeral procession to Naples, the two children sit on one side and the mother's coffin is placed opposite them, the latter forming the upper point of the triangle, and it must be noted that during this long voyage, the brother and sister are constantly thrown together by the bumps in the road. Valentine's influence upon her two children remains strong long after her death (they continue to read Plato and Seneca), and it is her mysticism -- not Alvare's Christian conception of Sin -- which, having marked their lives, ultimately allows them to yield to their impulse to unite.

Although Valentine's influence is far greater than her husband's, don Alvare's vision nonetheless affects his children in certain respects. Miguel, in particular, inherits some of his father's ambiguity in terms of the opposing tendencies alternately attracting him. Furthermore, the form of purification the young nobleman chooses as a means of ensuring his salvation parallels his father's ascetic inclinations. Anna, too, temporarily opts for an ascetic lifestyle after her brother's death as an atonement for

21 The three characters also appear to represent the three elements of the alchemical triad: Salt (Anna), Sulfur (Miguel) and Mercury (Valentine).
her sins, wearing a "cilice" and sleeping in an "étroit lit de planches" (pp. 888-9). However, she abandons this practice and after her marriage, although never forgetting her eternal love for Miguel, ultimately finds a peace and calm similar to those displayed by her mother. Not long before she dies, Anna remembers her past: "un geste de donna Valentine, l'enroulement d'une vigne autour de la poulie d'un vieux puit dans la cours d'Acropoli..." (p. 899). All of these images suggest, as does Valentine, either the cycles of Nature or the notion of an intermediary, "enroulement" and pulley describing a wheel of Time, the vine, an axis mundi or Tree of Life, and the ancient well, a link between Heaven, Earth and Hell.22 In the pale autumn sunlight, Anna rereads the "mystiques" and begins to conceive of Death according to a nocturnal vision, "comme si donna Anna, dans sa descente insensible, eût commencé d'atteindre le lieu où tout se rejoint" until she is ultimately able to state, as her mother would have, that "Le temps avait jeté bas ses barrières et rompu ses grilles" (p. 901).

Another character in "Anna, soror...", although only a minor one, reflects a view of the universe very similar to Valentine's: don Ambrosio Caraffa, Miguel's godfather, who later becomes the "Prieur" of the St Martin monastery where don Alvaro takes his final refuge. He is a man who is described as being "bienveillant et calme"; the word "calm" is also used to refer to donna Valentine. When he appears before Alvaro at the monastery, he stands at the threshold of a door (a point of interface) between two monks carrying candles, and we read: "Les flammes pâles se reflétaient dans

22 See Chevalier, Dictionnaire 788, 1012-13. He also mentions that the vine "était consacrée aux Grandes Déeses. La Déesse Mère était nommée au début La Mère-Cep de Vigne ou La Déesse-Cep de Vigne" (p. 1013).
les boiseries" (p. 895). The reflection of the flames in the wood, suggesting Spirit in Matter, recalls the imagery dominating the scene on the esplanade at Acropoli (light reflected in marsh puddles), which, for Valentine, expresses the perfect harmony of Nature. We learn that the Prior spends his time polishing stone, and, like the freemason or the alchemist, he finds "God" (or perfection) in these stones as well as in his flowers (p. 897), the latter recalling the role of the Syndic in "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg".

Placed in direct opposition to this character (as well as to Valentine) is don Alvare, who, unlike don Ambrosio, looks at a flower and thinks only of the "combat que se livrent sous terre les racines, à cette chaleur de sève qui fait de chaque corolle un réceptacle de luxure". This attitude contrasts sharply with that of the Syndic of Haarlem (as of the Prior) who perceives in his tulips a divine perfection, each calyx resembling a sacred chalice containing an Elixir of Immortality. Don Alvare's conception of stones and masonry is equally negative: "Les constructions inachevées, dont l'aspect, comme pour décourager le maître d'œuvre, imite par avance la ruine qu'elles seront un jour, lui rappelaient que tout bâtisseur, à la longue, n'édifie qu'un effondrement". Thus, the ex-marquis not only sees conflict rather than synthesis in nature, but he also dwells upon the destruction of stones rather than their everlasting durability, for he is only capable of imagining the finality of all life's endeavors.

Extremely significant is the last image in this part of the story where don Alvaro and the "Prieur" are compared: "Les arceaux de cloîtres où, dédoublant chaque arcade sur le mur opposé, midi donnait à la colonne de pierre le pendant d'une colonne d'ombre, alternaient noirs et blancs comme une double file de moines" (pp. 897-8). The duplication of the arcades and
the alternation of blacks and whites reflect both the duality of the universe and the difference between Alvare and Ambrosio, the former representing a diurnal vision and the latter, a nocturnal one. Finally, the disparity between the attitudes of these two men is clearly explained in the conclusion of this section: "Ainsi, chacun lisait différemment ce livre de la création qu'on peut déchiffrer en deux sens, et dont les deux sens se valent, car personne ne sait encore si tout ne vit que pour mourir ou ne meurt que pour vivre" (p. 898). The implications of this statement are obvious: one view (Alvare) is characterized by conflict, by the notion of death as an end to be opposed, while the other vision (Ambrosio/Valentine) represents an acceptance of death as one stage in the eternal cycle of Nature.

Through our examination of "Anna, soror...", numerous parallels are established between this short story, *Le Coup de Grâce* and the *Nouvelles orientales*, including such recurrent themes as the intermediary, asceticism and heroic death as forms of purification, incest as an alchemical synthesis of opposites and a return to primordial unity, and the perfect harmony of Nature, all of which seem to characterize the works written at the beginning of Yourcenar's literary career. Perhaps the most important common element in all of these early works is one which dominates "Anna, soror...", that is, the contrast between the West and the East, between Christianity, on the one hand, and other forms of mysticism having origins in the Orient (i.e., Alchemy, Platonic or Pythagorean philosophies, Astrology, etc.), on the other. The former tends to reflect a diurnal conception of the universe while the other mystical systems mentioned are nocturnal in their emphasis upon cyclical time. Our
discussion of "Anna, soror..." reminds us above all of the story entitled "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles", in which the two contradictory attitudes are represented by Thérapion and the Virgin Mary, the latter (like Valentine) serving to reconcile the duality of Life. Joseph Campbell, explaining the schism which caused the mythologies of the Orient and the Occident to diverge drastically, states that "The world no longer was to be known as a mere showing in time of the paradigms of eternity, but as a field of unprecedented cosmic conflict between two powers, one light and one dark". However he goes on to affirm:

Two completely opposed mythologies of the destiny and virtue of man, therefore, have come together in the modern world. And they are contributing in discord to whatever new society may be in the process of formation. For, of the tree that grows in the garden where God walks in the cool of the day, the wise men westward of Iran have partaken of the fruit of good and evil, whereas those on the other side of that cultural divide, in India and the Far East, have relished only the fruit of eternal life... And if man should taste of both fruits he would become, we have been told, as God himself (Genesis 3:22) - which is the boon that the meeting of East and West today is offering to us all.23

It is precisely such a meeting of East and West that Marguerite Yourcenar's early work brings to her readers, and this type of synthesis is exemplified by a character like Valentine, who succeeds in finding a happy medium between her occidental culture and her oriental mysticism.

Valentine, a character whom Yourcenar greatly admires, embodies the principle elements of the author's own "idéal humain" (p. 1027). Indeed, the writer and her creation seem to possess a very similar vision of the world,

23 Campbell, Oriental Mythology 7, 9.
a fact which once again disproves criticisms aimed at the lack of important female characters in Yourcenar's work. It is interesting, therefore, that Walter Kaiser compares this character to the author herself: "Marguerite Yourcenar's view of life is somber and grave. Like her character Valentine in Anna, soror..., she seems to have 'acquired a singular gravity, and the calm of those who do not even aspire to happiness'".24 The two women share a vision which, although decidedly "somber and grave", nonetheless holds the promise of renewal and rebirth, the hope of a new beginning. Professor Kaiser, too, is aware that, despite Mme. Yourcenar's pessimism about the future of mankind, there is clearly a positivism involved in her view of life:

Yet at the same time, her infinite compassion for all created beings, man or beast, vegetable or mineral, and her radiant sense of the holiness of life itself, however brief and dcommod, save her from blank, nihilistic despair. Her ability to seize and savor the moment as it passes, in all its richness and detail, and her detached, organic view of the succession of those moments which becomes the flow of history give her, if not precisely hope, at least a profound, suffusing acceptance.25

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24 Kaiser, Liberty 133.

Conclusion

Most of the scholars who have studied Marguerite Yourcenar's early short stories and narratives have tended to consider them almost exclusively as examples of the developmental stages of Mme Yourcenar's career as a writer, rather than as works having unique value and importance in and of themselves. Jean Blot, for instance, calls the *Nouvelles orientales* the "premières gravures" of which *L'Œuvre au Noir* and *Mémoires d'Hadrien* "seront les orchestrations",¹ and Pierre Horn expresses somewhat similar sentiments when he states:

Marguerite Yourcenar is now, at age thirty-six, in complete possession of her literary gifts: she has developed a narrative form whose intricacies she understands well,... she has evolved themes that are both human and universal; she has become aware of, and interested in, historical research to better convey eternal ideas, along with a way of thinking and feeling about oneself and the world; and, finally, she has developed an acute understanding of man's frailty and, therefore, his unwillingness to compromise with his emotions, often preferring the darker side of love to the blandness of intolerable mediocrity. *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Yourcenar's next novel and, generally, her first recognized masterpiece, will make full use of her talents, skills and knowledge.²

Ghislain de Diesbach conveys an attitude resembling Horn's, that is, one which praises the works dating from the 1930's, while at the same time minimizing their inherent worth: "Les autres livres de Marguerite Yourcenar, parus entre les deux guerres et dont certains one été réédités, annonçaient

¹ Blot. *Yourcenar* 99.
déjà par la beauté des images, la vigueur du style, l'étrangeté des situations, de futurs chefs-d'œuvre et il est curieux de suivre, à travers ces premiers livres, le développement de la personnalité de leur auteur.\textsuperscript{3}

It is true, of course, that many of the themes presented in such works as the \textit{Nouvelles orientales}, \textit{Le Coup de Grâce} and "Anna, soror..." appear in Yourcenar's later novels, a fact which should signal, however, the originality of these early narratives, works which we consider to be masterpieces in their own right. Many of the thoughts expressed by the Roman emperor in \textit{Mémoires d'Hadrien} (1951) originated in the stories examined in our study. For example, early in the novel, Hadrien discusses the practice of ritual purification, which he calls "ces états proches de vertige où le corps, en partie délesté, entre dans un monde pour lequel il n'est pas fait, et qui préfigure les froides légèretés de la mort" (p. 294). His analogy between icy death and purification was introduced in \textit{Le Coup de Grâce} with the ascetic Conrad whose coldness and deathly palor contrast with Sophie's radiant warmth and earthly vitality. The theme of love, central to the \textit{Nouvelles orientales}, is also treated by Hadrien, whose relationship with Antinoüs comes to equal a participation in the sacred. The notion of the divine or mythical character of love and sensuality is expressed early in the emperor's monologue: "La tradition populaire ne s'y est pas trompée, qui a toujours vu dans l'amour une forme d'initiation, l'un des points de rencontre du secret et du sacré" (pp. 295-6). This belief in the sacred nature of love and the initiatory elements involved in such a relationship can be traced back to Panégyotis' initiation by the Néréides

\textsuperscript{3} Ghislain de Diesbach, "La Chose du monde la moins partagée" \textit{Cahier des Saisons} 38 (1964), 286.
("L'Homme qui a aimé les Néréides"), to the experiences of Genghi and the Dame ("Le Dernier Amour de Prince Genghi"), or of Kostis and Aphrodissia ("La Veuve Aphrodissia"), as well as to the eternal love shared by Anna and Miguel in "Anna, soror...". The importance accorded to Antinoüs in Mémoires d'Hadrien is due not only to the link he offers Hadrien with the sacred but also to the symbolic function of his sacrifice, another theme we have encountered in several of Yourcenar's early works. For instance, like Antinoüs, Ling ("Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé") accepts a sacrificial death as a means of insuring his master's immortality, and Miguel's heroic sacrifice, or voluntary death in battle ("Anna, soror..."), leads him to a land of eternal life. For the Roman emperor, Antinoüs becomes the image and symbol of Greece, this country which has "fertilized the world" with its celebration of the cycles of Nature and Time, an idea clearly dominating all of Yourcenar's works of short fiction. Intimately linked with Hadrien's conception of Greece is the notion of immortality, which he comes to experience consciously through certain communions with nature, the most notable being his description of "la nuit syrienne":

Couché sur le dos, les yeux bien ouverts, abandonnant pour quelques heures tout souci humain, je me suis livré du soir à l'aube à ce monde de flamme et de cristal.... La nuit, jamais tout à fait aussi complète que le croulent ceux qui vivent et dorment dans les chambres, se fit plus obscure, puis plus claire.... J'ai essayé de m'unir au divin sous bien des formes ; j'ai connu plus d'une extase ; il en est d'atroces ; et d'autres d'une bouleversante douceur. Celle de la nuit syrienne fut étrangement lucide. Elle inscrit en moi les mouvements célestes avec une précision à laquelle aucune observation partielle ne m'aurait jamais permis d'atteindre.... Quelques années plus tard, la mort allait devenir l'objet de ma contemplation constante.... Après tant de réflexions et d'expériences parfois condamnables, j'ignore encore
ce qui se passe derrière cette teinture noire. Mais la nuit syrienne représente ma part consciente d’immortalité (pp. 402-3).

Although somewhat more detailed, this experience of the Sacred parallels Valentine’s mystical communion with Nature under the stars at Acropolis ("Anna, soror...") and her perception of the harmony which exists between all the elements of the Cosmos. Similarly, on the summit of Mount Etna, Hadrien experiences "ce phénomène de l’aurore, prodige journalier que je n’ai jamais contemplé sans un secret cri de joie" (p. 428), another revelation of the mystery of rebirth, an idea evoked many years prior to the publication of Mémoires d’Hadrien through the images of sunrise of "Notre-Dame-des-Hirondelles" and Le Coup de Grâce. Finally, the theme of Alchemy, which implicitly structures the Nouvelles orientales and plays an important role in both Le Coup de Grâce and "Anna, soror...", can also be found in Yourcenar’s best known work though the terminology used in such expressions as "l’or vierge du respect serait trop mou sans un certain alliage de crainte" (p. 365), or in Hadrien’s association between sunlight and copper (p. 428). In addition, the notion of an interface between opposing principles (an intermediate point where Spirit and Matter merge) -- this image we have encountered so often in our study -- is clearly alluded to in the following comment made by Hadrien: "La curiosité m’avait pris de ces régions intermédiaires où l’âme et la chair se mélangent, où le rêve répond à la réalité, et parfois la devance, où la vie et la mort échangent leurs attributs et leurs masques" (p. 427).

Obviously, the best example of Marguerite Yourcenar’s fascination with Alchemy and the Occult appears in Œuvre au Noir (1968), and this central aspect of the work is quite admirably studied in a book by Geneviève
Spencer-Noël. We have previously compared the ending of "La Veue Aphrodissia" with Zénon's final vision in L'Œuvre au Noir, described by Yourcenar as both an "allegorical image" of the alchemical "œuvre au rouge" and as a "return to the eternal... indicated by the sound of torrents and by the sun bleeding into the sea". The writer must also be referring to the fundamental image which dominates her Nouvelles orientales, that of twilight, which serves as a basis for the structure of the entire collection.

Mentioning another central element in Yourcenar's short fiction, the symbol of the hermaphrodite, the hero of her L'Œuvre au Noir affirms: "Etait-ce soudain désir en présence de linéaments particuliers d'un corps, besoin de ce profond repos que dispense parfois la créature femelle, ... obscur souci d'essayer !'effet des enseignements hermétiques sur le couple parfait qui reforme en soi l'antique androgyne?" (p. 695). Finally, the writer compares the heroes of her two best known works, stating that "the emperor was by nature a creature of the sun, whereas Zeno was by nature nocturnal. They represent two complementary poles of the human sphere as I imagine it". Thus, Hadrien and Zénon reflect the duality of the universe, the endless number of antithetical elements ranging from Light and Dark to Life and Death, elements which, rather than causing conflict, attract and complement one another in a universal impulse to recreate a divine primordial unity.

4 Spencer-Noël, Alchimie.
5 Rosbo, Entretiens 129.
6 Yourcenar, Éyes 150.
7 Yourcenar, Éyes 150.
Largely because of the success of *L'Œuvre au Noir* and *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Marguerite Yourcenar has come to be regarded a writer of historical novels, and critical studies have frequently focused on this historical aspect of her work. The *Nouvelles orientales*, *Le Coup de Grâce* and "Anna, soror..." also offer a vast perspective of history ranging from antiquity to the Middle Ages to the late Renaissance to the twentieth century. In addition, they take place in a wide variety of locals, which include China, Japan, India, Greece, the Balkans, and Western Europe. However, we believe that the originality of these narratives lies not in their historical content but rather in their evocation of myth to describe the universality of the human experience. It is this universal element, this "mythical magnitude", that we have revealed through our study of three examples of Yourcenar's short fiction, works which certainly deserve to be recognized as masterpieces of contemporary French literature.

Our examination of the *Nouvelles orientales* proves that these ten tales share much more than an Eastern orientation, and that their particular positions in the collection are far from arbitrary. The common element linking all of these stories is the foundation of alchemical thought and mythical symbolism upon which they are all constructed, and their placement in the collection is based upon the progressive stages of solar imagery which they reflect. Thus, we find a movement from a predominance of images of twilight towards the completion of a full circle of the sun's daily journey (from dusk to dusk) until the cycle, beginning to continue on a symbolic path from Death to Rebirth, ultimately ends on a note of ambiguity. The only non-Eastern tale in the collection, "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg", serves as a conclusion to the *Nouvelles orientales*, its purpose being to
reveal to the reader the disparity between Oriental and Occidental thought and to force him to reevaluate the Western conception of Time. This final tale leads to our study of two other "Western" works, *Le Coup de Grâce* and "Anna, soror...", both of which also rely upon Alchemy and Myth in their presentation of themes which parallel those found in the *nouvelles orientales*. One of the central elements in both of these "Western" narratives (as well as in "La Tristesse de Cornélius Berg") is the contrast they present between a "diurnal" and a "nocturnal" perception of Time, the former generally represented by Occidental thought or Christianity, and the latter, by Oriental philosophy, mysticism or the hermetic sciences. Representing a meeting of the East and the West is Donna Valentine ("Anna, soror..."), a character whose calm, sense of moderation, mysticism, profound respect for the beauty and harmony of Nature, and belief in the everlasting cycles of Time all bring to mind the writer herself. Valentine's vision resumes, for us, the essence of Marguerite Yourcenar's philosophy of life and her ideal of humanity.

On December 17, 1987, Marguerite Yourcenar passed away near her home in Northeast Harbor on Mount Desert Island, Maine, leaving behind her a legacy of novels, short stories, poems and plays whose beauty will remain as timeless as that of a character such as Donna Valentine. Some scholars may be inclined to remember her through her two best known heroes, Hadrien and Zénon, or to pay tribute to her genius by quoting the thoughts of these characters on such topics as humanism or immortality. We prefer to think of a "lesser" character like Valentine, uttering on her deathbed the words "Rien ne finit", or to imagine the great Chinese painter Wang-Fô entering his masterpiece, a work surpassing the beauty of Nature, and
disappearing on his jade-blue sea into the twilight on an eternal journey towards the Land of the Immortals.
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