



The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays

Marguerite Yourcenar , Richard Howard (Translator)

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Seven of Yourcenar's most important critical essays, on subjects ranging from the Historia Augusta to Piranesi's engravings. Essential to the understanding of the searching and remarkably informed spirit of this protean writer.

The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays Details

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Author : Marguerite Yourcenar , Richard Howard (Translator)

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From Reader Review The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays for online ebook

Marc says

A wide variety of essays written in very diverse time periods (the years 1950 to 1980). Personally I found the essays about Piranesi and Thomas Mann the most successful; Yourcenar shows her erudition without becoming too pedantic.

Kelly says

No time to give it the attention it deserves just at present. I will return.

Micha says

So I can't remember how I heard about this book, only that it intrigued me a lot. I'd heard of Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, and I'm curious about it, but I still don't know what led me here, since I wasn't familiar with Piranesi by name. It might've been the Thomas Mann essay, or perhaps Cavafy, not that I've read any Cavafy, but he's a poet so deeply in line with my interests that I've got to now. The critical introduction to Cavafy was my favourite essay of the lot, though throughout this collection Yourcenar's style and thought process are so intricate and intelligent. A curious and thought-provoking collection.

Eric says

I really did think Borges unique in a genius that allowed him, in his nonfictions, to select a tidbit from a superannuated encyclopedia, extract an incident from the most obscure chronicle—or, conversely, from the collective media memory of widely disseminated, easily recognizable historical caricatures—and, with a certain pace of retelling, a special pattern of emphasis, fashion a spare fable full of spectral images and unsettling suggestions. I was wrong. “Everything has been said: we shall add no new facet to the history of their château, and of their own lives. Yet let us venture to reinvestigate the known facts—they are often less so than is supposed.”

Fernanda says

“La visita a las viejas moradas nos puede conducir, sin que nos demos cuenta, a unos puntos de vista que no nos esperábamos.”

Marguerite Yourcenar es la maestra de historia, literatura y arte que nunca tuve.

Sus ensayos son una delicia para el intelecto que está en busca de más, no se conforman con lo común y demuestran el carácter pedagógico que hay en absolutamente todo lo que nos rodea.

Susannah says

She takes erudition so far, it's genius. It has to be innate.

Nigel Massey says

The best nuanced and unsentimental perspective on Cavafy I ever read. She seems to have a knack of looking beyond superficial atmosphere to get to the heart of things. The title essay is excellent too. What she sees in the Piranesi etchings enabled me to see inside myself. I've not read any of Yourcenar's novels yet, and this makes me very interested in exploring them. The Dark Brain of Piranesi

Sunny says

I have to admit that I totally loved memoirs of Hadrian by Yourcenar and for months was banging on about how I, Claudius was a copy of Yourcenar's novel. I also have to totally admit that a lot of her essays in this short book were well beyond me. Maybe I need to mature a little before I can fully understand the points that she was making. It reminded me of the first time that I had an espresspo – it was such a rich drink and I couldn't understand how people could drink something so concentrated and intense. Similarly, this book was also packed with detail and a richness that I guess I couldn't fathom. She provided essays on the Historia Augusta (a collection of old Roman biographies), Agrippa d'Aubigne (a French poet), Piranesi (an artist who etched lots of pictures of Rome and various fictitious prisons from that region), Selma Lagerlof (the first female ever to win the Nobel prize for literature), Constantine Cavafy (a Greek poet) and a section on the humanism and occultism of Thomas Mann (the dude who wrote "The Magic Mountain".)

Eric Norris says

Esoteric, elegant, eminently enjoyable. I especially like the essays on the literary value of the Augustan History (the bios of the later Emperors of Rome); and the speculations on the origins and development of Piranesi's prison engravings and how those interior psychological landscapes created out of acid-etched copper plates are populated by humanity, space and time; and the long essay on the poetry of Cavafy, his eroticism, of course, but more importantly his relationship to himself and his past, both cultural and personal. The reflections on occult subject matter in the work of Thomas Mann, an author I haven't read in 25 years, was a refreshing, though hasty, tour of the more mystical qualities of his major works.

Probably not a book for everyone--since the essays presume a more than passing familiarity with the authors and works she discusses--but a must-read for all Yourcenar fans.

Hadrian says

It should be apparent from my assumed name and image on here that I hold Yourcenar's literary work in high esteem. At least, I consider the *Memoirs of Hadrian* a superb book. It is something austere, deeply tragic and forlorn. But Yourcenar did not write only one book.

The Dark Brain of Piranesi is a lot of seven essays which show a deep and probing intellect everywhere - Roman history to contemporary Greek poetry to Swedish novelists and Italian etchers. Yourcenar somehow manages to draw crisp arguments and careful investigations in all of these. A favorite method is to draw comparisons across the varying disciplines of art. The sketches of imaginary prisons by Piranesi bring to her mind the opiate dreams of De Quincey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; the blunt fixations of the Roman historian Suetonius brings to mind the portraits of Hans Holbein.

Hans Holbein the Younger, Portrait of William Warham

From these various examples Yourcenar extracts manifold truths. Piranesi's sketches are bewildering, whether they are Roman ruins or of Borgesian labyrinths. They are, to Yourcenar, winding circles of hell, but with God or the Devil curiously absent from the picture. They defy space and time. They render the world into a living hallucination.

Giovanni Piranesi, The Gothic Arch

One essay which was most stunning to me was the long review of the Historia Augusta, a primary source of Roman history written somewhen in the 4th century, and a collected biography of over a century of Roman Emperors. It begins with the emperor Hadrian and ends with the minor emperors Carinus and Numerian, and is one of the main sources of her own masterly novel. But Plutarch's *Lives* this is not - the book is studded with factual errors and exaggerations, and unvarnished gossip and exaggeration. Yourcenar spends some time listing these errors like a disappointed history professor with a red pen. But it does contain a deeply human cast of characters. All of their grotesque faults and follies and gnashing emotions reveal a world which to her is deeply modern. As such, modern characters were an inspiration to the ancients.

She confesses that one inspiration to the melancholy emperor Hadrian was Sir Winston Churchill. Churchill?! The happy warrior of the British Empire with the weight of five centuries on his shoulders, as the Emperor Hadrian? But in retrospect it makes sense. Was it not Churchill, who said at the conference of Tehran, that he wanted to 'sleep for a billion years', and that all of human history was 'specks of dust which had settled in the night on the map of the world'? These two somber guardians mirror each other. As for Hadrian's lost lover, Antoninus, Yourcenar searched for contemporary examples of male beauty. She settled for Nijinsky, the ballet dancer.

But to return to the Historia Augusta. This mediocre history is in itself a valuable history of imperial decline. The course of empire ran from its marble-columned peak with the Five Good Emperors in the late 2nd century AD, and it would fall into oblivion over two hundred years later, staggering from crisis, violent usurpation, and collapse in between. In a passage which echoes Yeats' 'Second Coming', she sees the tattered history of Rome as reflecting a crumbling empire. I quote:

The evils by which a civilization dies are more specific, more complex, more deliberate, sometimes, more difficult to discover or to define. But we have learned to recognize that gigantism which is merely the morbid mimetism of growth, that waste which makes a pretense

of wealth in states already bankrupt, that plethora so quickly replaced by dearth at the first crisis, those entertainments for the people provided from the upper levels of the hierarchy, that atmosphere of inertia and panic, of authoritarianism and of anarchy, those pompous reaffirmations of a great past amid present mediocrity and immediate disorder, those reforms which are merely palliatives and those outbursts of virtue which are manifested only by purges, those unacknowledged men of genius lost in the crowd of unscrupulous gangsters, of violent lunatics, of honest men who are inept and wise men who are helpless. The modern reader is at home in the *Historia Augusta*.

Such is the core of her writing and historical analysis. All nations, all peoples, are different. All times, all settings, contrast to each other. Yet all of them are still casted and played by people, and it is the various moods of people which drive human history.

Yourcenar demonstrates her skill here as more than a novelist, but a deeply knowledgeable thinker, one at ease in the spires of French chateaux and musing amidst the ruins of Rome.

Danielle Aleixo says

“Ah, mon bon chateau” is a piece of art. The other essays of the book (published in Brazil as “Notas à margem do tempo”) are just fine compared to that one. A beautiful account on the passage of time.

Mar says

I barely started to read it

AC says

Yourcenar is a genius. The essays that most captured me in this volume were the astounding meditation on cultural decay in the *Historia Augusta* (a key passage of which Hadrian cites in his review); and her studies of a medieval French castle (“Ah, mon beau château...), which is surprisingly rich, and of Selma Lagerlöf. The essay on Mann looks interesting, though I have not read Mann; likewise, on Cavafy --

At any rate, a worthy addition to her *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1954).
