

## Marguerite Yourcenar'ın *Cehennem* Adlı Eserindeki Bir Soylu Konutunun İç Dekorundaki Simgeler

Emblems in the interior decor of "A Noble Abode" in Marguerite Yourcenar's *The Abyss*

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### ÖZET

*Bu makalenin amacı Marguerite Yourcenar'ın "Cehennem" adlı eserindeki simgeleri ve simgesel anlatıyı araştırmaktır. Bu amaçla, "Cehennem" de simgelerin kullanımı üzerine kısa bir inceleme yapılmış, "Bir Soylu Konutu" bölümünün çözümlemesi sunulmuştur. Bu bölümün yorumu simgesel yapı modeli ile yapılmış ve "Bir Soylu Konutu" bölümündeki sanatsal objelerdeki ve süslerdeki simgelerin, metin ve imajlar arasındaki etkileşimi ortaya çıkaracak şekilde oluşturulduğu görülmüştür.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Simgeler ve simgesel anlatım, simgesel yapı modeli

### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to examine emblems and emblematic discourse in *The Abyss* by Marguerite Yourcenar. A brief overview of the use of emblems in *The Abyss* is followed by an analysis of the chapter: "A Noble Abode". A close reading of this chapter is conducted through the model of the emblematic structure and it is proposed that the emblems that reside in the ornaments and the objects of art in "A Noble Abode" constitute an interaction that takes place between image and text. Of all the objects that constitute the interior decor of this sumptuous home, the tapestries are of special importance to this study. The silent content of these tapestries are used to illustrate the cruelty and hypocrisy that reign in this home. Finally by focusing on the central character of Martha Ligre the interaction between this major figure and the objects that decorate her home are explored. Yourcenar leads the reader to the inevitable conclusion of discord between that which is depicted in the emblems and the lives of the inhabitants of "A Noble Abode".*

**Key Words:** Emblems and emblematic discourse, model of the emblematic structure

Reading *The Abyss* by Marguerite Yourcenar through the template of emblems and emblematic discourse is the object of this analysis. Images that can be attributed to emblem books are present throughout *The Abyss* by Marguerite Yourcenar and comprise what I shall call an emblematic discourse. This paper will concentrate on one of the chapters: “A Noble Abode” where the emblem is present in many forms. Focusing on the central character of Martha Ligre I will show how Marguerite Yourcenar uses emblematic discourse to convey the truth behind Martha’s masque and how she is an important component in the emblematic discourse of “A Noble Abode” in that she embodies and signals many of the negative aspects of human personality and behavior that cause human misery. This chapter contains examples of emblems as defined by Daniel Russell in the following definition: “an emblem draws a moral lesson from the work of art to which it is attached or onto which it is grafted, by describing that work in a certain way” (Russell, 1985).

In general, capitalization, mottos and maxims are present in *The Abyss* and constitute emblematic discourse and style “where the emblematic relationship was meant to point out and emphasize a lesson of practical morality for everyday life...” (Russell, 1985). Incorporating emblems in the text of the novel brings forth Yourcenar’s own moral values and what she considers to be the Cardinal Virtues and the Deadly Sins. The author uses her own version of emblematic structure and style to emphasize cruelty, greed, cowardice, hypocrisy, insincerity as evils that are the cause of pain and suffering among humans. In the same vein, one of the Deadly Sins that pervade *The Abyss* is Envy. Envy follows Zeno wherever he goes and is ultimately part of his downfall. It is interesting to note that Envy is depicted in emblems as a hideous, grotesque, foul mouthed, repulsive female creature who is designed to inspire fear, disgust and horror. This female figure is present in the descriptions of Johanna and of Catherine. Like two Chimera designed to instill terror, these two women appear strategically at the outset (Johanna) and at the closing (Catherine) of the novel. The word “envy” is not used in the novel to define these two women, but the descriptions of Catherine and Johanna, and their language inspires the same kind of feeling that was intended in the emblems depicting Envy as a horrible female creature. Catherine is also likened to Lamia and Lemure, mythological female figures who are dangerous and who cause great harm and suffering. The women in Zeno’s life are also called “sirens” and “succubus” both dangerous and powerful female creatures who inspire fear and horror. There are also references to Scylla and Charybdis, both menacing, mythic female creatures who figure in emblems.

The mention of Prometheus by name, at the end of the novel, is significant in terms of emblems. During the final interaction between the Canon Campanus and Zeno, this single mention of Prometheus opens the door to a number of associations and links with the protagonist and with the novel. The resemblance between Prometheus and Zeno goes to the core of what Zeno does in life: like Zeno Prometheus was also knowledgeable about machines, astrology and herbal medicine for the healing of the human body: “Then he [Prometheus] began to teach man all the things that make him better than the beasts: how to build, how to use tools and metals, how to understand the positions of the stars, and how to use herbs for healing.” (Stapleton, 1986). Prometheus is depicted in the emblems by Geoffrey Whitney (1967) where the Mythic figure is being punished eternally by the gods, but what is staged in *The Abyss* are parallels to other aspects of the story of Prometheus in Greek Mythology.

Before addressing the topic of emblems in “A Noble Abode” a brief overview of a preceding chapter “A Walk on the Dunes” is called for. This chapter contains a number of emblematic “signs” where the names of boats, the blind musician, the formless aspect of the sea, the derelict church which is invaded by the tide, the sign and name of the inn: The Pretty Dove, all turn out to be signs that mean something different from what they appear to be. In other words, the signs are deceptive and Zeno who all his life has trained to “read” signs (signs of Alchemy, of herbs, of the body) is cautious and does not trust these signs. This chapter is reminiscent of Albrecht Durer’s woodcut picture of Sebastian Brant’s “Ship of Fools”, depicting dangerous dinghies navigated by the devil and by the Antichrist (Adelson, 1994). The woman present in the latter part of this chapter is also reminiscent of the frightening chimera, previously mentioned, in whose actions and words are inscribed cruelty, greed, selfishness and ignorant superstition (her attitude vis-à-vis the killing of the owl). This woman is also associated with timelessness, chaos and disorder of the elements: “It rains in all year round”. (276)

The interior decor of “A Noble Abode” comprises a number of emblems that define the esthetic tastes of it’s occupants, but more importantly reflects aspects of their lives, values and moral caliber. The interior decor of this home is “polished”, “varnished”, “waxed”, “gleaming”, “planed” and the one adjective that sets the true tone of this home is “cold”, not even the fire mentioned in the quotation below can offset the general tone and feeling of coldness and emptiness that fills this home and invades the soul of it’s inhabitants: “...a fire burned between two cold and polished pilasters;...” (321)

In “A Noble Abode” the interior design of a luxurious mansion is described, and within this chapter a number of definitions of the emblem are evident. Gold and silver are also prominent in the objects that fill this “Noble Abode”. These numerous mentions of gold and silver refer us to the following definition of the word emblem: “...like the gold and silver decorative appliqués on tableware which Romans called emblems, the Renaissance literary emblem was conceived as a detachable piece...” (Russell, 1985). Although tableware is not mentioned in the “Noble Abode”, gold and silver participate in the decor of the house in the form of “...a few books showing their backs...of leather stamped with gold...” (321) and “silver trophies”(321) and “a gold or silver bauble” (322) In addition, mirrors that multiply images are mentioned in describing a Florentine cabinet encrusted with precious substances.

There are objects, ornaments, tapestries and medallions, which constitute emblems in their own fashion and these *objets d’art* are part of the emblem discourse in this chapter. “A Noble Abode” begins with a description of the paintings on the ceilings depicting “generosity” (320) and “clemency” (320) with “inspiring scenes from secular history, and from Greek Mythology.” (320) These emblematic scenes and the virtues and human qualities they depict are what is expected from this home by the Canon Bartholomew Campanus in his letter requesting help for Zeno from his rich and powerful relatives. And yet, the exact opposite resides in the “Nobel Abode”: Martha and Philibert Ligre are miserly with their money as well as with their actions and they are lacking in compassion. The awaited clemency for Zeno is not forthcoming due to the cowardice and miserly characteristics of the Ligres. In this context the emblematic signs do not signify what they depict but rather they imply the opposite, which is far worse in terms of Zeno’s fate: generosity and clemency are cruelly ironic in their sumptuous representation. In the same vein, the “medallions representing the Cardinal Virtues:...” (321) are emblems that, in this context accentuate and recall their opposites: the Deadly Sins.

The tapestries named at the end of the chapter are of special interest in terms of emblematic discourse because these tapestries relate edifying stories that contain a moral lesson. Interestingly enough, the word *tapisserie* appears in relation to emblems, where Daniel Russell explains that “the native French tradition [of emblems] included illustrated proverbs *dit pour faire tapisserie...*” (Russell, 1985). The fact that these priceless artifacts are obtained like booty due to the assassination of their owner, the Duke of Battenbourg (his death is described in detail in a previous chapter: “A Walk on the Dunes”), and the manner

in which Martha looks forward to adding these tapestries to her collection of wealth, contributes to the general feeling that emanates from this house.

The tapestries themselves depict different stands taken by Martha and her personality traits: *the Worship of the Golden Calf* (328) represents Martha's preoccupation with gold (wealth) which plays a major role in Martha's life and in her decisions; *Saint Peter's Denial* (328) echoes the pivotal moment in which Martha denies her brother (like St. Peter denies Christ), a choice she must live with forever. This moment of betrayal pushes her further into the vice of cowardice and hypocrisy. *The Burning of Sodom* (328) involves the burning at the stake of the young monks (referred to as the Angels) in one of the previous chapters: "The Indictment". But more importantly, this image represents a lifelong secret fear of Zeno's that he will be burned at the stake for his homosexual practices, if not for his writings and thoughts. *The Scapegoat* (328) reflects Martha's role in the sacrificing of Zeno who is punished in part to satisfy the rabble and to be made an example of. *The Jews Thrown in the Fiery Furnace* (328) implicates Martha as one of the persons responsible for what awaits Zeno as a result of his trial. This reference is taken from the Old Testament (Daniel: 3:20) where the Jews are thrown in the fiery furnace but they come out unscathed. The scene in question could also imply, in this context, that although Zeno will be condemned to death by fire, he will escape this fate. The textual component of the emblem structure is missing from the Tapestries in "A Noble Abode", instead a story is attached explaining how they are to be acquired. It is in Yourcenar's narrative, embroidered around these inscribed tapestries that we have part of the meaning, the other part being how each Sacred Story named, runs parallel to stages in Martha's life.

The allegories mentioned above evidently do not correspond exactly to Martha's actions and experiences but they have enough of a resemblance to suggest especially the role she plays in Zeno's demise. These "episodes from the Sacred History" (329) are ironic given that Martha no longer believes in God and she could easily be one of the participants in worshipping the golden calf (her house is filled with gold and her power is defined by gold), in betraying Christ, in making scapegoats of innocent victims and in condemning people to death by fire. Martha is the one who holds the power in the dynamic between herself and Zeno's fate. Martha exemplifies the powerful and cruel tyrant in scenes of the tapestries she is so delighted to acquire. These tapestries depicting scenes from the Sacred History, filled with allusions to damnation and punishment will be replacing the pagan and sensual paintings depicting among others Ganymede, a mythic figure associated with

homosexuality. In Martha's gesture, then, of replacing the homosexual, the pagan emblem (the Hall of Ganymede) with the Sacred Biblical stories which symbolize Martha's own position, we see a duplication of her denial of Zeno. This betrayal is emphasized and mirrored in the tapestry scene of *Saint Peter's Denial*.

If we look at Martha through these tapestries we see that she stands for cowardice and hypocrisy. These Biblical stories carry two sides: the right and the wrong, the good and the bad, a betrayer and a betrayed, a liar and a person lied to. Martha, as a female figure, stands for the betrayer, the coward, the hypocrite, the liar. Another possible component linked to the tapestries is Martha's resemblance to Arachne. The female figure of Martha contains overtones of Arachne, a mythical female figure known for weaving spectacular tapestries. This similarity, this connection is too strong to overlook: Martha/Tapestries, Arachne/Tapestries. This association leads us to the characteristics of Arachne who stands as a symbol for meanness, hopelessness, miserliness and human frailty, all of which can be seen in Martha's personality.

Certain well recognized images are alluded to in the Tapestries of the Sacred History and these tapestries lend a certain atmosphere to the description of the splendor of the home, however their true implication and meaning within the discourse of the text lie elsewhere. The references are evident but part of the formula is missing (deliberately, perhaps) because in conjunction with Martha's cowardice, greed, selfishness and hypocrisy, these tapestries contain a whole other dimension. In a way, it could be put forth that Yourcenar has re-structured the emblem in that she has added a dimension to emblematic structure: the titles refer to the Biblical stories which are told to add moral texture to human life and to give a moral lesson, and yet in this context these titles become part of the evil that resides in this house of horrors. The true text of the emblem is the inevitable commentary and conclusions provided by the reader's interpretation. The moral allegories reside in the stories of the tapestries but they ring untrue. And thus these moral allegories are more instrumental in defining the *lack* of virtues that reigns in this home. The same goes for the Medallions picturing the Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance, all of which are non-existent in the actions of Martha and of Philibert. Clemency and generosity mentioned at the opening of the chapter, the first powerful words we hear as we enter this home, are dazzling, almost blinding in the context of the paintings that decorate the ceilings, and yet none of it is true. This composition of emblematic structure constitutes "an epigram which describes something, so that it signifies something else." (Russell, 1985).

Yourcenar very carefully places these images and this emblematic discourse in this chapter where Appearance chillingly does not harmonize with Being. This chapter is an emblem of the discord between “l’être et le paraître”.

“The Noble Abode” is described with a definite intent as are emblems written and pictured with a moral message directed at the reader. In this “Noble Abode”, all wealth and splendor, all the depictions of beauty, virtue, generosity, and abundance are not what they “seem”, (i.e., appear) to be. This house is a warning sign placed strategically in the Novel where none of the signs mean what they say and in this respect, this chapter, could be defined in terms of the emblem “as a detachable piece” (Russell, 1985).

The combination of the description of plastic arts and accompanying text (the story) contribute to the emblem-like quality and feel present in the “Noble Abode” According to Daniel Russell: “in the 16th century...it would appear every time someone talked about an emblem he was in fact talking about a composite invention involving at least an epigram and a work of plastic art...*A peinture* was a painting, but it was also a written description; an *histoire* could be a painting or drawing as well as the argument of a textual exposition.” (Russell, 1985). The chapter reads like an emblem and is structured by emblematic discourse as well as ornaments and objects that carry other meanings of the word “emblem”. The pictures/paintings at the opening of the chapter and their inscription of “generosity” and “clemency” yield one form of the emblem.

The Medallions “representing the Cardinal Virtues” (321) are mentioned but not pictured, are *inscribed* but not *described*, we are unable to “see” these (this silence is perhaps deliberate) but we are left to imagine them. This is another form of the emblem, where an ornament depicts a known and recognized symbol.

The “Florentine cabinet” (320) presents a special kind of emblematic composition, where the description is detailed but no significant inscription is present. The precious stone and substances: jasper, ivory and ebony which are encrusted on to where the columns and figures are multiplied with mirrors: this piece of furniture could be taken apart piece by piece and each element stands for, mirrors the complexity and depth of evil and lack of compassion present in this house. Jasper, ebony and ivory symbolize the mineral, the vegetative and the animal worlds, comprising the three realms. Of the three, jasper carries special significance within the context of *The Abyss* in that this mineral is used as a touchstone in Alchemy and is used to reveal the veracity of elements, intended to reveal

“truth”. The “inset mirrors”, “small twisted columns” and “secret drawers” add to the gaudy and complex nature of the atmosphere that pervades this house. The surface appearance, like the “secret drawers” and the “mirrors” on this cabinet invite the observer to look further and also warn the observer of meanings beyond the obvious and the apparent. The mirrors are part of the rest of the house which is “polished” and “gleaming”, “planed” and mirror-like. This mirror-like aspect implies a reality beyond the appearance, as well as an infinite multiplicity of what the mirrors reflect on the cabinet.

Once again, the mirror is especially important to Martha because she is lucid regarding the cowardice and hypocrisy that pervade her soul and her existence, as illustrated in the following quotation: “nothing compared to the lie she had lived all her life.” (324) and of Zeno, Martha knows “...he had sensed the fatal vice of cowardice that she bore within her... he had been the rebel that she had not dared be;...” (323) The lucidity Martha shows vis-à-vis her vices and her inner world serve to multiply and magnify the vices she carries. The fact that she is aware, she “sees” and yet chooses to participate in the evil renders Martha irredeemable in the eyes of the reader. We cannot empathize with her, nor can we forgive her. It is interesting to note that Yourcenar weaves this character’s vices in such a manner that she remains human and normal and thus Martha is not provided an escape route by attaining the proportions of the evil creatures that populate mythology.

To recapitulate, a “perfect order” reign in the “Noble Abode” but this is in reality a mausoleum-like dwelling: it is emptiness that defines this mansion. This emptiness is present in two dimensions: first of all, in the lack of compassion, generosity and clemency of Martha and Philibert and secondly in the hollowness of the messages of moral virtues and lessons depicted in the art objects. This house of splendors and sumptuousness is in reality a house of horrors: a truly chilling atmosphere reigns in this house where the owners are surrounded by artifacts, gold and silver ornaments and wealth that accentuate their cruel nature which is reflected and duplicated infinitely in the mirrors, the polished surfaces of the house.

Yourcenar, in working within the emblematic structure has re-structured the emblem in that the emblems as signs (the medallions, the tapestries, the paintings, the objects) serve as the reader’s guide to interpret the complexities of the text, and moreover to interpret the complexities of the owners of this “Noble Abode”. The images and their inscriptions express noble human characteristics but these are in sharp discord with the actions and personalities of Martha and Philibert. Thus the interaction between text and the image

exposes the discord between the representation in the emblems and the moral being of the Ligre's.

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