

Marguerite Yourcenar: Japan and the Cult of the Aging Body

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Abstract

Marguerite Yourcenar's reputation was built on philologically inspired novels featuring heroes of the Western tradition, such as the emperor Hadrian in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* and the partly invented figure of Zénon Ligre in *L'Oeuvre au noir*. Less known is Yourcenar's interest in Japanese culture, which, far from being limited to her late travels, she cultivated from an early age by reading all genres of Japanese literature. Not only are Yourcenar's Japonist writings understudied, but they are normally slighted by scholars as just another example of her universalism. In the existing scholarship on Yourcenar, short stories such as "Le dernier amour du prince Genghi," in *Nouvelles Orientales*, as well as "Basho sur la route," in *Le tour de la prison*, are often read as validation of her literary inclination to the philosophical aloofness of the old age. Contrary to this interpretation, I will argue that Yourcenar's passion for Japanese culture was propelled by her desire to expand her epistemological schemes beyond European boundaries. In other words, Yourcenar was not only describing cultural differences but she was internalizing Eastern ideas on memory, loss, and the decaying body. These ideas, as well as Yourcenar's Japanese-inspired understanding of temporality and afterlife, manifest in her literary work in frequent images of rivers, sea waves, and tides.

Keywords: Yourcenar; Japan; Waves; Time; Afterlife; Memory; Body; Loss; Motherhood

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Introduction

Lauded with international acclaim for her best-selling novel *Mémoires d'Hadrien*,¹ Marguerite Yourcenar remains a tutelary deity in the pantheon of French literature. To literary critics she is known as a formidable connoisseur of Western Classics and Antiquity, yet Yourcenar was also a fervent Orientalist and a quibbling scholar of Japanese culture, literature and philosophy. Home-schooled by an extremely liberal father, she began reading Japanese novels in her teens; from a very young age, then, she understood and appreciated Western values as juxtaposed with their Eastern counterparts. As she wrote herself, "I have thought more than once that my sensitivity would have been different if happenstance had not seen to it that I became acquainted with *Atsumori* and *Sumidagawa* at the same time as *Antigone*" (Yourcenar 1981a p. 346; as cited in Savigneau 1993 p. 648). In advance of many of her contemporaries, Yourcenar understood that Japanese culture had approached the great existential themes of love, death and beauty from a psychological angle alternative to the European one. While critics have often maintained that Yourcenar was interested in "la pâte humaine" (the human fabric)² regardless of geographic boundaries, I will argue that the author's positions on human nature were inspired by these early Oriental readings, as well as by an original appropriation of Japanese literature and philosophy. By nuancing the critical tenet of Yourcenar's universalism, in this essay I will not only maintain that Yourcenar's attention to the Japanese literary tradition was directed to the representation of a specific type of human fabric, but I will also demonstrate that Yourcenar's frequent recourse to images of rivers, sea waves and tides sheds light on the resonance that Asian philosophies had on her sense of time, loss, and the aging body.

Japonism in Yourcenar

Yourcenar originally read Japanese texts of all genres in French and English translations, as her interests as a young writer were not selective. She approached a variety of works spanning from Noh theatre to Haiku poetry, and yet it was the *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu that captivated her imagination more than anything else.³ In a fundamental passage of her long interview with Matthieu Galey that would be published as *Les yeux ouverts* (Yourcenar 1984), Yourcenar confessed:

Whenever I am asked what woman novelist I admire the most the name Murasaki Shikibu comes immediately to my mind. I have extraordinary respect, indeed reverence, for her work [...] she was the Marcel Proust of medieval Japan: a woman of genius with a feeling for social gradations, love, the human drama, and the way in which people will hurl themselves against the wall of impossibility. Nothing better has ever been written in any language. (p. 87)⁴

¹ While in my analysis I will adopt the original titles of Yourcenar's writings as well as the original

² The expression is used by Yourcenar herself (1980a p. 217). It is then reappropriated by various scholars with different connotations. See Sperti (1988): Sperti connects the expression to what she defines as an autobiographical impossibility. See Viala (2008): Viala puts the emphasis on Yourcenar's desire to situate her characters against a large historical background (p. 108). See also Bonali-Fiquet (1999 p. 81); Aleo, Campagne, & Puleio (1992 p. 468).

³ Savigneau (1993) highlights Yourcenar's passion for the Japanese literary tradition, as well as her alignment of Noh Theatre and Greek tragedy (p. 346).

⁴ For this passage, I have used Goldhammer's translation.

Reflecting on her fascination with Murasaki, Yourcenar wrote that she particularly admired the way in which accidents, heartbreaks and deaths were, in the stories of this eleventh-century female writer, at once “tragic, delicious and ephemeral” (Yourcenar 1984 p. 116; my translation).⁵ It thus comes as no surprise that these same emotional qualities would often coalesce in her own novels. In fact, Murasaki’s ability to express the ineffable constituted a constant point of departure for Yourcenar, who endeavored to emulate the older author from her early writings to her late novels and essays.

Though it is possible to discern traces of Japonism in Yourcenar’s early writings, it is in the *Nouvelles Orientales* that her first incontrovertible tribute to Chinese and Japanese culture emerges. Even more significantly, the two short stories in this volume that are set in the Far East – namely “Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé” (set in China) and “Le dernier amour du prince Genghi” (set in Japan) – address the themes of death, beauty and the decaying body in ways that anticipate what would become Yourcenar’s trademark approach to life and literature. It is important to clarify that, while the stories comprising the *Nouvelles* were collected and published in a single volume in the early 1960s, the two aforementioned stories had already appeared in *La Revue de Paris*, in 1936 and 1937 respectively. As well, there are striking similarities between the inner reflections of Yourcenar’s main Western heroes, Hadrien (*Mémoires d’Hadrien*) and Zénon (*L’Oeuvre au noir*), and those of Wang-Fo and Genji in the *Nouvelles*, so that even Yourcenar’s presumed devotion to the Mediterranean must be reconsidered in part.⁶ Finally, in her monograph, *Mishima, et la vision du vide*, Yourcenar (1980b), drew several analogies between her fictional characters and the twentieth-century Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, in order to illuminate the philosophical reasons underlying Mishima’s suicide. As Yourcenar herself wrote in the afterword to *Anna Soror* (Yourcenar 1982), a sensibility is not necessarily changed by time and, in her writings at least, themes and emotions returned after several years like waves of an ever-present consciousness.

Temporality

Japanese Buddhism influenced the development of Yourcenar’s most complex characters both from within and outside of her texts.⁷ Taking my cue from Yourcenar’s belief in immutable sensibilities, I aim to address Yourcenar’s perception of temporality and her ambivalent relationship to motherhood, two topics often

⁵ The original wording of Yourcenar, “à la fois tragiques, délicieux, et fugitifs” has been translated by Arthur Goldhammer “as combining tragedy, delight and a certain fugitive quality.” I propose a translation closer to the text in order to show how the three emotions are meant to overlap.

⁶ See Catinchi (1995). Catinchi relays Yourcenar’s theory by which the Eastern world (L’Orient) creates a vivifying and erotic myth of life that the Western world (L’Occident) turns into tragedy. According to Catinchi, “Yourcenar found at a Mediterranean crossroad [...] the trace of a line of descent by which the West attempted to reconnect with the founding East” (p. 227; my translation). See also Real (1995). Referring to Yourcenar’s essay “L’Andalousie et les Hespérides” Real observed, “The Mediterranean is, in Yourcenar’s view, a space oriented, magnetized by a positive polarity, the East – Greece [...]. On the East, there is an opening towards the Eastern world, that is towards a transcendental and magic way of thinking” (p. 195; my translation).

⁷ Commenting on the lack of the substantial changes in the second edition of *Anna Soror* (Yourcenar 1982), Yourcenar wrote, “If I insist on the essentially unaltered content of those pages, it is because I see them as the ultimate proof of that relativity of time whose obviousness has slowly dawned on me” (p. 242; my translation).

observed by critics yet seldom put into conversation. I would like to suggest that Yourcenar's internal sense of time was determined by the impossible trauma of losing her mother at birth, thus informing a visual imagery made of sea waves and tides cyclically bringing wreckages to the shore. Furthermore, I will show how this archetypal imagery substantiates her descriptions of old age, as well as death as disappearance. The modulations of this pattern and the function played by Japanese culture in its determination are therefore central to my reading of Yourcenar's texts.

The main element of cultural dissonance that Yourcenar noticed in Japanese literature was a different perception of time.⁸ This Oriental temporality first struck Yourcenar in the saga of Murasaki. She then corroborated her intuition through in-depth studies of Oriental philosophies and Japanese theatre, and ultimately through the examination of Yukio Mishima's tetralogy *La mer de la fertilité* (Yourcenar 1980b). When she finally appropriated this aspect of Japanese culture and made it her own, time in her fiction became circular – as opposed to progressing along a straight line – and also oscillated between density and rarefaction. Indeed, there is a marked difference in narrative structure between *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (Yourcenar 1951), a novel unfolding primarily in chronological order, and the spatiotemporal circles run by Zénon in *L'Oeuvre au noir* (Yourcenar 1968). *Le tour de la prison* (Yourcenar 1991b), meanwhile, a collection of travel diaries and other impressions that Yourcenar penned in the last years of her life, is meant to mimic and evoke the circularity of Zénon's journey away from and back to Bruges (which also echoes Yourcenar's relation vis-à-vis Belgium, as her native land).⁹ On the verge of suicide, Zénon reflects, “that the spiral of his travels had brought him back to Bruges, that Bruges for him had been reduced to the area of a prison, and that his destiny was ending on this narrow rectangle” (p. 351).

Afterlife

An obligation of current scholarship is to re-evaluate the role played by Yourcenar's Buddhist studies in refining her ideas on the afterlife, so as to curb the critical tendency to associate her Japonism with a specific phase of her career. Jan Walsh Hokenson (2002) has argued that Yourcenar's early knowledge of Noh Theatre informed the imagery of her early writings, such as *Dialogue in the Marecage*. In particular, according to Hokenson, Yourcenar welded together Western and Eastern medieval traditions by unconsciously infusing this play with the wisdom of both Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Noh Theatre. More specifically, in Hokenson's view, the two lives of Yourcenar's Pia, her life of imprisonment and her after-life of revenge, and more importantly the way in which these two lives are tied to a specific location – that is, the tower where her jealous husband Sir Laurent imprisons her – recall the narrative structure of Noh. Though I agree with Hokenson on the impact exerted by Noh Theater on 1930s France and on Yourcenar's quite unique treatment of death, I also believe that the “fantasmatic” was for Yourcenar more than a juvenile

⁸ In-depth studies of time throughout Yourcenar's oeuvre can be found in Gaudin (1994). A concise yet effective analysis of the topic is in Blot (1984). Yourcenar herself addressed the topic in a number of essays that appeared separately and were then collected posthumously in a single volume (Yourcenar 1993).

⁹ As the author makes clear herself, the title is a quotation from *L'Oeuvre au noir* (Yourcenar 1976) where Zénon exclaims, “Who would be so foolish to die without having at least done the tour of his prison” (p. 16).

infatuation. Indeed, throughout her *oeuvre* the “fantasmatic” is either refined or made organic through images of waves or the rivers: natural symbols of that eternal return which Yourcenar learned from Japanese Buddhism.

In Yourcenar’s early story “Le dernier amour du Prince Genghi,” the writer elaborates on the death of Prince Genji, which was left unaccounted for in Murasaki’s eleventh-century saga *The Tale of Genji*. Notably, she not only designed a conclusion whose content could have stemmed from eleventh-century culture, but she also recreated the rhythm and sensibility of Murasaki’s writing, all while reflecting on Buddhist reincarnation. In the story, we read of Genji’s last days when, having been forced to leave the court and adopt the life of a hermit, the old man is blessed with the love of a younger woman whom he eventually decides to reject. However, as the narrative continues, we learn that this woman is not the peasant she pretends to be; in fact, she had previously served as the fifth lady-in-waiting of the prince and, importantly, as one of his many mistresses. Incapable of renouncing the prince’s love and attention, she returns to him under various disguises, and finally convinces him to accept her in his company. But the story concludes with a gust of tragic irony. In the hours preceding his passing, Genji invokes all his past loves (including the two different women his old mistress has pretended to be) but he forgets the name of the fifth lady-in-waiting.

While readers remember “Le dernier amour du prince Genghi” for its salacious nature and the cynical irony of its ending, the story also offers evidence of Yourcenar’s robust attempt to incorporate Buddhist ideas on the afterlife within a Japanese setting. On his deathbed, Genji exclaims (Yourcenar 1985):

I cannot complain of a destiny I share with the flowers, the insects, and the stars [...]. I am not sorry to know that objects, beings, hearts are perishable, because part of their beauty lies in this misfortune. What pains me is that they are unique [...]. Other women will blossom, as striking as those I once loved, but their smile shall be different, and the beauty spot that was my passion shall have moved along their amber cheek barely an atom’s width. (p. 67)

As early as 1937, Yourcenar had already developed a perspective on reincarnation as the return of the ever-changing. That said, in her attempt to show the manifestation of successive living forms of the “same,” she was, at that point, still relying on physical clues such as the “beauty mark,” which she had apprehended from Japanese folklore and literature. When readdressing the topic of Buddhist reincarnation fifty years later, within the context of her critique of Mishima’s tetralogy *La mer de la fertilité*, she would rebuke the Japanese author for using the very same *topos* of the “beauty mark.” This is because Yourcenar has learnt to see this choice as a vulgarization of the Buddhist philosophy that she had thoroughly studied by this time. She affirmed (Yourcenar 1986), “The insistence throughout the four volumes of the *Sea of Fertility* on the three beauty spots which appear at the same place on the pale skin of Kiyooki, the swarthy skin of Isao, and the golden skin of the Thai princess irritates rather than convinces” (p. 65). Far from being a question of resurfacing physical appearances, for the older Yourcenar the “fantasmatic” had to represent the resurgence of an attitude or behavior which serendipitously threw the observer back to a significant moment of his or her past life. This was, according to Yourcenar, what Buddhist theory

predicated, and this was the effect she had tried to conjure up in her works from the mid-1960s on. A now more erudite Yourcenar could in fact specify that the Buddhist denial of “being” and its emphasis on the notion of “passage” had to be considered in terms of conservation or dispersal of energy (p. 60). It was this more ethereal representation of Buddhism that Yourcenar would integrate in her late work.

Memory

As she continued to contemplate the return of the ever-changing, Yourcenar’s great themes of memory and loss progressively acquired not only depth but levity. More specifically, that loss of memory which had led to tragic consequences in her early work generated lighthearted existential interrogations in her late productions. For instance, whereas the fifth lady-in-waiting of Genji’s story reacted to her obliteration from the list of mistresses with a theatrical exploit of emotional and physical pain, in writing on Mishima’s *Le temple de l’aube* Yourcenar celebrated the Japanese characters’ subdued acceptance of oblivion. By focusing on the conclusion of Mishima’s novel (Yourcenar 1986), Yourcenar not only depicted a Satoko incapable of recalling Kioyaki and Honda or the relationship that once united them, but ended with Satoko’s quote, “memory is like a phantom mirror. It sometimes shows things too far distant to be seen, and sometimes it shows them as if they were here” (p. 92). In fact, as these lines suggest, for Yourcenar, time had acquired the quality of dreams, so that what we remember is nothing but fragments of life cyclically and somewhat creatively brought to the surface. Based on these philosophical ideas, then, in *L’Oeuvre au noir* Yourcenar (1968) wrote of the aging Zénon – probably the most “Japanese” of her Western characters – that “Life itself [...] as regarded by a man who was about to leave it, was also acquiring the strange instability of dreams, with their peculiar sequence of events” (p. 307). Finally, having been deprived of all teleological hopes, including the hope of being remembered, Honda, Genji, Zénon and the majority of Yourcenar’s characters end up with nothing left but a decaying body – that is, a body for which pain represents the only gateway to knowledge.

The suffering body

In “Basho sur la route,” an essay dedicated to the famous seventeenth-century poet and included in *Le tour de la prison* (Yourcenar 1991b), Yourcenar defends a type of knowledge derived from the passive experience of life, as opposed to the active experience of learning. She explains, “To suffer is a Japanese faculty, pushed sometimes to masochism; yet the emotion and the knowledge in Basho are born from this submission to the event or the accident” (p. 15; my translation). Similarly, in treating Yukio Mishima as a modern Basho and by focusing in particular on the rigor of his daily training, Yourcenar suggests that for the Japanese writer the body was intellectualized to a high degree – that is, it was seen as an instrument of knowledge. Besides, as Yourcenar underlined, this principle was already valued in Greek and Latin cultures as “*ou mathein, alla pathein*” or “*non cogitate, qui non experitur*,” two expressions she translated as “not to learn, but to suffer” (Yourcenar 1980b p.87; my translation). Interestingly, when meditating on the concept of passivity in relation to her own life, Yourcenar (1984) described it once again with an aquatic metaphor: “One must toil and struggle to the bitter end, one must swim in the river that both lifts us up and carries us away, knowing in advance that the only way out is to drown” (p.

260).¹⁰ For Yourcenar, “subir” (to suffer) means accepting death rather than pursuing it. Hence, in examining Mishima’s final resolution, she adopts the perspective of the Buddhist priest who, at a distance of centuries, walks among the ashes of the forty-seven Ronins who killed themselves according to the ritual Seppuku and reflects upon the absurdity of dying over a question of etiquette – though she also admits “everything is absurd” (p. 75; my translation). For the same reason, the severed heads which outlive Mishima and his companion after their suicide appear to Yourcenar more heroic than them since, through their stolid existence, those heads give themselves naturally to their inevitable fate of consumption, disappearance and oblivion. The image of the wave (*vague*) that has so distinctly marked the visual art of Japan – hence Yourcenar’s imagery¹¹ – returns here once again as the agent of ultimate annihilation. In the conclusion of her monograph on Mishima, Yourcenar (1986) writes, “Two heads placed one next to the other as skittles, almost touching each other [...]. Two stones,¹² rolled along by River of Action, which the immense wave has for a moment left upon the sand, and which it then carries away” (p. 151-52; my emphasis).

Conclusion

In an apparently unrelated episode of her travel diary, *Le tour de la prison*, Yourcenar (1991b) once again utilized the image of the wave to reiterate, *mutatis mutandis*, her theory of death as disappearance. In the passage, Yourcenar is distractedly leafing through an old number of the weekly magazine *Life* found in an American motel, when she notices “A snapshot of a woman seen from the back” (p. 40) – a picture, she added, presented by the magazine without any caption or explanation, and uniquely chosen for its beautiful, exceptional, captivating nature. And yet the writer knows the choice was not casual. She explained:

This picture, undoubtedly taken during a trip to California by a husband or a son further back on the beach, had gained the honors of the week because, following the click, a huge tidal wave had taken away the woman, together with the hat she had bought at a department store, the jacket, the bag, the identity papers with the portraits of her children and grand-children. What had been a recognizable shape, cherished or maybe despised [...] had merged into the sea in one fell swoop [...]. I have returned to this woman in my mind several times. I think of her still. At the present time, I am possibly the only person on earth who still remembers who she once was (p. 42; my translation and emphasis)

Yourcenar herself first saw her mother’s image at the age of thirty-four through a randomly found picture, and it is therefore possible that this apparently insignificant

¹⁰ Peyroux (2003) underlies that Yourcenar learned this code of conduct from Buddhist monks and Japanese gardens.

¹¹ The visual component of Japanese and Chinese culture plays a very significant role in Yourcenar’s writings. As reported by Béragère, Yourcenar showed her a book of Japanese paintings which occupied a central place in her study, by confessing (Deprez 2009), “Hokusai has as much to show us as Piranesi does [...]. I would have been a painter [...] had I not got into my head in the 1920 to write all these books” (p. 157). It is of particular significance that the famous painting *The great wave of Kanagawa* by Hokusai was on the first page of the book in Yourcenar’s study.

¹² In my view “wreckages” would be a better translation of the French word “épaves.”

tale of memory and oblivion represented an unconscious tribute to the author's own experience of loss and retrieval. On the other hand, just as in the case of the unknown woman made famous by *Life* magazine, Yourcenar – herself in the process of dying, herself disappearing – was probably the only person who still held the memory of who “she” (her mother) once was. Eventually, as this memory had been brought to the surface by a fortuitous encounter, a tenuous and somehow paradoxical hope for reminiscence arose.

In *Yourcenar, ou le féminin insoutenable*, Doré (1999) argued that following the classic pattern of denial, Yourcenar repeatedly insisted on the insignificance of her mother's death both in her childhood and later in life. Doré also suggested that wrecked objects silently convey a sense of loss. He wrote, “The absence of objects of affection belonging to the mother is affirmed, confirmed and acknowledged by means of a lexicon that brings together erosion, depreciation, and dispersion” (p. 21; my translation). According to Doré, then, writing itself came to substitute for maternal relics for Yourcenar. In my opinion, instead, Yourcenar's imagery of “wrecked” objects, waves, and sea tides situated mourning at the very origin of her sense of temporality and memory. In her *Essais et mémoires*, when referring to the plethora of objects left behind by the mother at the moment of her death, Yourcenar (1991a) wrote:

We know that these knick-knacks have been dear to someone, useful even, precious especially in that they helped to define or elevate the image that this person made for herself. Yet the death of their owner made them as vain as those accessories or toys that one finds in tombs. Nothing can better prove the insignificance of the human individuality we hold so dear than the expediency with which the few objects supporting and maybe symbolizing that individuality have either perished, deteriorated, or gotten lost. (p. 748; my translation)

However, by a twist of fate – and also by a paradoxical twist of her system of thought – Yourcenar proved that such a loss is never definite. As for the woman swept away by the wave, oblivion can always be undone. It suffices for that same wave to come again, leaving on the seashore of consciousness wreckages or traces of what once was,¹³ whether those traces are objects of affection, a mother lost, or a writer on the verge of extinction.

¹³ In rehashing the circumstances of her meeting with Jeanne de Reval – her mother's best friend and a paradigmatic example of motherhood – Yourcenar wrote (1991a), “Some big splashes are scattered through the land at a low tide, as the fragments of an infinite broken mirror” (p. 1273; my translation). Once again the tidal wave is used to symbolize the action of time.

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