

The Tragedy of Man and Salvation Through Art: Marguerite Yourcenar's Reflections on Human Condition in *Oriental Tales*

SONG Xin-yi

Peking University, Beijing, China

Written between 1936 and 1938, then continuously reworked in the following decades, *Oriental Tales* appeared for the first time by Édition Gallimard in 1938 and reappeared in 1963 in a revised version. This work covers most of the ancient cultures: Greek fables, Balkan ballads, Hindu or Chinese apologues, and Japanese medieval novels. This collection of tales has a so eccentric, exotic, distant, and archaic color that the author Marguerite Yourcenar did not hesitate to name it "Oriental". The temporal and geographical remoteness of the stories reveals no less the depth of Yourcenar's critical considerations on the human condition in general or in concrete terms. Man, entangled in the labyrinth of the world, is doomed to tragedy. Art, such as the writing that is in the making, presents a salutary way out.

Keywords: tragedy, salvation, Yourcenar, art, *Oriental Tales*

Oriental Tales (Nouvelles Orientales) is one of the representative works by Marguerite Yourcenar. This collection of short stories covers most ancient oriental cultures and reveals critical considerations on the human condition by the French writer. This study analyzes Yourcenar's thinking about the human condition in two aspects: the tragedy of human destiny and art as a way of salvation.

The Man Lost in the Labyrinth of the World

In *Oriental Tales*, the image of the man suffering from a capricious and precarious destiny is essential in all the tales. The Yourcenarians characters, sometimes tormented by natural disasters, other times tested by human catastrophes, never manage to take their destiny into their own hands. Most of them are struggling to escape the fatality of death.

The Impossible Salvation of Marko

The unknowable fate takes dramatic form in the adventures of Marko, a Serbian Christian hero. This one, of tall stature, tied secret relations with Turks. He had a mistress, the widow of the Pasha of Scutari, whom he often visited during his Turkish stays. One day, Marko had drunk so much that he lost patience and insulted the young woman. The next day, Turkish soldiers, warned by the widow, came to surprise him at his lodgings. Marko, to escape, jumped out of the window and rushed into the sea. Struggling against the waves, he was caught by the Turks. Passing himself off as dead, he must undergo nearly all kinds of torture, including crucifixion and burning, but does not react, trying to contain his pain. The last attempt to verify his death was to have young girls dance around him. Unable to resist it, he smiled, but thanks to the help of one of the dancers,

he managed to get rid of the Turkish soldiers and finally killed the widow. This story seems to suggest the helplessness of human beings in the face of fate. In certain circumstances, disaster befalls him despite his resistance; in other circumstances, chance or unforeseen forces, such as the dancer's help, will save him from danger.

In *The End of Marko Kralievitch*, Marko was killed at the hands of a mysterious and banal passerby. During an ordinary party, Marko noticed an elder he had never seen. Marko asked for his identity but got no response. Furious, Marko tried to drive the elder away by punching him. Then he said that "I like to do what I want" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1209). However, Marko fell to the ground and died. The elder left and said that "I let people do what they want" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1209). The death of the protagonist is both enigmatic and significant. Enigmatic, because no detail is known. Significant, because his death is fatal. "Since it is like that, it is like that" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1209)—these last words of Marko already indicate that he had no intention of resisting the Last Judgment. Whether the elder is a vengeful Turk, the Christian coming to punish his lack of filial piety, or even the personified death, the end of this tale will never change.

A Poignant Fatalism

This same subject of the impossibility of fate is expressed more directly in *The Milk of Death* and *Aphrodisia, the Widow*. In the first story, the author portrays the touching image of a despairing mother who seizes the last moment of her life to feed her baby. In a remote Balkan village, three brothers were building a tower that often collapsed. One day, they decided to sacrifice one of their wives, the one who would bring them the meal the next day at noon, to a superstition that a building will remain standing if a person is buried under the construction. The eldest hoped it would be his wife, as he did not love her and was only waiting to remarry. However, she deciphered this plot thanks to his mumbled words in dreams. The second intended to warn his wife and finally made her stay at home. Only the younger kept his word. The next day, the wife of the youngest, begged by her sisters-in-law, brought the meal to the three men. The brothers first killed the youngest while trying to send him away, despite his constant plea. Understanding her plight, the young woman asked the brothers to keep her breasts to feed her son three times each day and to leave her eyes free to see him. For the next two years, milk flowed from the young woman's breasts until the weaned child turned away from his mother himself. In this story, the beautiful sacrifice of the young woman contrasted sharply with the cruelty of a gypsy who, having injured two eyes of her son, begged others to have pity on them and made it her livelihood. Here, existence presents itself as a complex of chance and necessity. All the benefactors are not necessarily rewarded, while the malefactors, like the gypsy, remain in the world.

A comment from the narrator tells us the morality of the story: "[she has] her destiny around her neck like a blessed medal, invisible to everyone, on which God himself would have inscribed what kind of death she was destined for, and in what place in her sky" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1165). Mankind lives like the scapegoat, since "I may change: my fate does not change. All figures could be inscribed on this fatal circle" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1066).

Impasse in Front of You

The final story, *Aphrodisia, the Widow* deals with the story of a young woman who died of indiscreet love. Aphrodisia, the protagonist of the story, was both the widow of an old priest who fell victim to the famous bandit Kostis and his secret mistress. One day, the village peasants seize Kostis and kill him to avenge

the priest. They threw his body in the village cemetery, cut off his head, and planted it in the fork in the village square. While hiding his heartache, Aphrodisia decided to bury him discreetly. After having transported the body of the man in the coffin of her husband, she set out to recover the head of this one and hide it at her home. However, a village peasant (Basil) discovered her and took her for a thief. Pursued by him, she took a path that led to the top of the hill and counted on fleeing the village definitively by taking advantage of this opportunity. Unfortunately, she fell from the top of the mountain with her lover's bleeding head, unaware that the path was only a rocky track. The outcome of this story is undoubtedly tragic: It reveals, on the one hand, the vain struggle of a woman in fatal danger without noticing it; on the other hand, even if she does not flee and allows herself to be brought back to the village by Basil, she could not avoid being killed, as an adulterer and accomplice of Kostis, by villagers even crueler than the bandits. Whether she returns to the village or not, death will take her. Love is therefore an inevitable "punishment" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1113) for Aphrodisia.

Between Memory and Forgetting: The End of Genghi

In an interview with Matthieu Galey, Yourcenar expressed his great admiration for the medieval Japanese writer Mourasaki Shikibu for "her feeling of the passage of generations, of their loneliness and at the same time their bond through life and death" (Yourcenar, 1980, p. 110). Shikibu's genius for describing fatality marked his major work, *Genghi-Monogatari*, the epilogue of which Yourcenar is in charge of telling in his pastiche "The Last Love of Prince Genji". The French woman of letters introduced memory and oblivion as subjects to the "human drama" that the Japanese writer wrote of "how beings come up against the impossible" (Yourcenar, 1980, p. 111).

For Genghi, all things, all beings, and all hearts share a common end: death. The only way to give value and meaning is through memory. By keeping natural time artificially (memorization), people can combine "being-there" and "having-been-there", make reappear everything that no longer exists, and thus eternalize. On the contrary, forgetting would lead to nothingness while maintaining absolute parallelism between past and present.

It is indeed from this artificial aspect of memory that the sadness of Genghi and that of the lady of the village of the flowers which tumble fall arise. Having reached his 50th year, the old prince left the city to end his days in a hermitage on the side of the mountain. He was trying to turn the page on the past and make himself forgotten by the world, although the frequentation of one of his mistresses disturbed his tranquility and constantly reminded him of his former existence. Of the latter's three visits to Genghi, the first awakened in him the most poignant memories of dead days through the woman's sleeves which "remained impregnated with the perfume used by his deceased wives" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1170); the second discouraged him more since physical contact with her disguised as a farmer reminded the blind prince of the memory of his rival, that is to say, the handsome prince with lively eyes whose image kept him awake every night; the third even worse, the song of the visitor who introduced herself as a noble provincial made him think again of his youth and repel all the more the barren state of the present. The last blow hit him when the lady told him that she had never heard of Prince Genghi. Surprised at being forgotten so quickly, the dying old man felt abandoned by the world and no longer concealed his weakness or his loneliness while saying that "I feel like a man swept away by a flood, who would like to less to find a corner of land left dry to place a few yellowed letters and a few fans with faded shades" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1176).

For Yourcenar, the author of *Feux*, “to stop being loved is to become invisible” (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1123). If this belated love had left the heart of the lady in the village with falling flowers of tenderness, it follows that the prince’s existence would never fade to a blank paper. For this woman, however, it was in the slowing of the prince’s breathing that she saw approaching death and its eternal oblivion.

Realistic Dimension of Human Tragedy

The tragedy of human existence is rooted in social reality, which corresponds well to a Yourcenarian idea dating from the same period: “we always speak as if tragedies happened in a vacuum: they are nevertheless conditioned by their setting” (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 105). For example, a speech at the beginning of *The Milk of Death*, a speech given by the narrator, a French engineer, seems to allude to the political circumstances of the 1930s:

I need a Whiskey and a story in front of the sea... The most beautiful and least true story possible, and which makes me forget the patriotic and contradictory lies of the few newspapers I have just bought on the quay. The Italians insult the Slavs, the Slavs the Greeks, the Germans the Russians, French Germany, and, almost as much, England. All are right, I imagine. Let’s talk about something else... (Yourcenar, 1982, pp. 1158-1159)

Later, this same engineer begins to criticize modern society, which, according to him, works against the laws of nature, and then expresses the wish for a return to Antiquity:

what we lack is realities. The silk is artificial, the foods detestably synthetic, [...] the women sterilized against misfortune and old age. [...] In the legends of semi-barbarian countries, we still encounter these creatures rich in milk and tears, of which we would be proud to be children. (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1159)

Subsequently, some names of mythical characters, such as Andromaque, Antigone, Griselda, and Isolde, are evoked to designate generous women with altruistic spirits. In this regard, we believe that the author is suspicious of science and technology. Another example comes from “Our Lady of the Swallows”. Thérapion monk who, in the name of justice and progress, pledged to exterminate the original Greek goddesses of “the youth of the world, of the time when man did not yet exist, and when the earth did not only give birth to trees, beasts, and gods” (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1188), is a metamorphosis of modern civilization, artificial, and morbid, at the antipodes of the classical world.

If “hope is only the distrust of being with regard to the precise forecasts of his mind” (Valéry, 1960, p. 990), all these textual clues illustrate well the suffering of a Yourcenar obsessed with the crisis of Eastern Europe between two wars. In the years 1934 and 1938 when these short stories were created, Yourcenar, this reader of Valéry who, at the same time, had the presentiment that “we others, civilizations, we now know that we are mortal” (*Ibid*, p. 988), had been traveling for a long time on the Old World and seen with its own eyes deep economic, military, and cultural crises. The decline of Europe serves as the basis for her pessimistic judgments about human destiny¹.

¹ Yourcenar expresses distrust of modern civilization more concretely in her essays from the 1960s, where she dreamed of “a world without artificial and unnecessary noise”, “without speed, without shedding of human or animal blood”, “without mechanical”, “without neon signs”, “without the useless and irritating comings and goings of electric lights”; “who would strongly hate the idea of renewal and despise the notion of novelty; “where we control the population of the globe”, “we practice both intellectual activities and work on the land”; “where plastic and aluminum are replaced by metals and woods; wool and linen replace the deplorable products of modern chemistry”. Please see Yourcenar, M. (1999). *Souhaits*. In *Sources II* (pp. 239-241). Paris: Gallimard.

Art: Possible Salvation of the *Chosen People*

How Wang-Fô Was Saved

It is not difficult to notice that, of the 10 short stories in the collection, only the Chinese tale has a comic ending, which contrasts with the tragic ending of the other tales. The aged painter Wang-Fô wandered in the kingdom of Han, living in misery but disdaining money, with his disciple Ling as his only companion. One day, when the two were sleeping in an inn, the militia arrested them and took them before the Emperor. The latter has grown up in a closed space cut off from the secular world. There, he was surrounded by paintings by Wang-Fô. When he discovered, at the age of 16 years old, the outside world with his own eyes, he noticed that the real world was only a pale reflection of Wang-Fô's paintings. He felt a strong resentment because he found himself unable to love it as it was. The Emperor, therefore, announced to the painter that his eyes would be burned and his hands cut off. During the "last meal of the condemned", the painter was asked to complete an unfinished canvas from his youth. The elderly painter executed it on the spot and saw himself, miraculously, sailing on the waves of his canvas in the company of Ling, whom the Emperor had just killed. At the end of the tale, they disappeared forever on the sea that Wang-Fô had just invented, abandoning the world.

What saves Wang-Fô and his disciple is art. The aged painter, in his youth, has not yet contemplated landscapes enough nor tasted the vicissitudes of life. After having experienced joys and sorrows, he finally reached aesthetic perfection and thus managed to link reality to the imaginary. For Ling, his resurrection results from the magic effect of his master but also his faithful service to him. This young man, from a wealthy family, would have led a very comfortable existence. But as soon as he met Wang-Fô, he began to consider art as the superior truth and to discover spiritual overcoming. Wang-Fô indeed gave him "the gift of a new soul and perception" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1141) since he took the habit of admiring, through artistic eyes, things that had once been appalling or ignorable. To support the master, he exhausted his fortune, begged for food, watched over his sleep, and encouraged him in every possible way. When the militia arrived, "aware of that they would come to arrest him" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1142), Ling was wondering who would help Wang-Fô to cross the ford of the river tomorrow. Even at the hour of execution, he leaped forward only to keep his blood from staining Wang-Fô's robe. Returning to life, he murmured: "Only the Emperor will keep a small marine bitterness in his heart. These people will not get lost inside a painting" (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1149). His words mean, as does his resurrection, that only a limited number of people will be entitled to immortality. The Emperor who aspires to artistic beauty or suffers from it is no less a passionate disciple of the painter. However, he is a poorly educated disciple, stuck between reality and the artistic world. The protagonist of *The Man Who Loved the Nereids*, another story in the collection, seems to allude to Ling. Pan égyptis, son of a wealthy peasant, lost his speech, sight, and reasonability for having seen the Nereids, beautiful and dangerous fairies, followed them, and finally ended his life as a beggar. Pan égyptis can be considered the counterpart of Ling: they are lucky or unlucky to have been chosen, to be able to look at the divine bursts of art with their naked eyes.

The Melancholy of Cornelius Berg

Undoubtedly, Cornelius Berg is not part of this limited number. This old Dutch portrait painter, having all his life considered human faces too much, therefore turned away from them with an irritated indifference, began to create still lives, but ended his artistic career because of the drying up of talent. Spending long hours at the bottom of smoky taverns, "he sat down, his face turned towards the wall, his hat over his eyes, so as not to

see the public”², remained silent. This image of the drunken and depressed artist no doubt alludes to a self-portrait of the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, whose verses Yourcenar was reading and translating into French just around the same time as the writing of these short stories. If, for the poet, only wines can cure language impotence and give him pleasure with “semi-real pleasures/semi-forged in my mind”, the same is true for Cornelius Berg. All day, the latter not saying a word, “drunkenness alone gave him back his tongue” (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1211).

One day, Cornelius was invited by a tulip lover to give his opinion on a new variety of flowers. Enamored with the botanical phenomenon under which nature creates new colors based on given materials, the latter exclaimed: “God [...] is a great painter”; “God is the painter of the universe” (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1213). These words said, Cornelius plunged into meditation and sadly confessed: “God is the painter of the universe. [...] What a misfortune [...] that God did not limit himself to painting landscapes” (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1214). In fact, these two sentences will serve as a key to understanding Cornelius’ sadness. In the first place, the old painter who dreamed of equaling Rembrandt with his works and declared that “God is the painter of the universe” had to admit that no one is the best painter in the world, nor he nor Rembrandt. Life is the best painter in the world, a master of inexhaustible colors and shapes. As for him, he is only a brush of the God-Life. He has done nothing throughout his career other than to represent in a limited category the diversity of life. Secondly, the phrase “God did not limit himself to painting landscapes” could be interpreted as another: God created men. The elder finally finds that instead of being a creator, he is only a creature. In such a sense, our Dutch painter is a failed Wang-Fô.

Conclusion

“[Panegyotis] left the world of facts to enter that of illusions, and I happen to think that illusion is perhaps the form that the most secret realities take in the eyes of the vulgar” (Yourcenar, 1982, p. 1183), this voice of the narrator of *The Man Who Loved the Nereids* agrees well with those of *Dreams and Fates*, stories also dated from the years 1936-1938. According to the preface to *Dreams*, the dream expresses the inner and higher life. On the one hand, “art and poetry resemble the beautiful sequences of dreams, such as we detach them from the whole to isolate them more or less consciously in our memory” (Yourcenar, 1991, p. 1606); when we write or dream, “the soul always chooses”. On the other hand, the subject of artistic creation is the “Other” in relation to man in the general sense.

This gift of dreaming, like the gift of second sight, has nothing to do with the liveliness of intelligence, and a man of exceptional genius may very well be an idiot in his dreams. On the other hand, certain mystical aspirations, certain renunciations, and certain dangerous atmospheres of pure pain or pure loneliness are favorable to the birth of hallucinated dreams. (Yourcenar, 1991, p. 1536)

In this respect, Wang-Fô, Ling, and Pan égyptotis are all a reflection of the author herself.

² Here are the relative verses of Cavafy: “Body and soul I surrendered/I went/To the semi-real voluptuousness/Semi-forged in my mind/I went through the luminous night/And I tasted wines heady/Of those that the heroes of pleasure drink (*I Went*, 1913); “I stay there, I dream. I brought to Poetry/Desires and sensations, faces and lines/barely glimpsed, uncertain memories/unfinished love...” (*I Brought to Poetry*, 1921) (“Corps et âme je me suis livré/je suis allé/Ves les voluptés sémi-r éelles/S émi-forg ées dans mon esprit/je suis all épar la nuit lumineuse/Et j’ai goûté à des vins capiteux/De ceux que boivent les héros du Plaisir” (*Je suis all é* 1913); “Je reste là je rêve. J’ai apporté à la Poésie/Des désirs et des sensations, des visages et des lignes/à peine entrevus, des souvenirs incertains/d’amour inachevés...” (*J’ai apporté à la poésie*, 1921). Please see Cavafy, C. (1992). *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

What is clear is that *Oriental Tales* captured Yourcenar's efforts to grasp the human world and to do so to as broad, as acute, and as profound an extent as possible. It also revealed, like other Yourcenarian stories written in the 1930s, the complexity, and contradiction of existence, through the successive examination of emotions such as love, hate, or rage, as well as reflections on human phenomena, such as illness, old age, memory, and forgetting. Behind these fictions, as varied as they are multicolored, the profile of a disoriented and anxious modern man emerges: He is a prisoner of the labyrinth of the world. To get out of it, Yourcenar offers a way out, if not the only way out: Art would serve as Adriane's thread. To find your salvation, you have to embrace art, you have to be in art, and you have to live as an artist.

References

- Cavafy, C. (1992). *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale.
- Level-Scott, C. (2009). Femme et fable: L'ambivalence idéologique dans *Nouvelles orientales* de Marguerite Yourcenar. *Dalhousie French Studies*, 2(88), 87-97.
- Savigneau, J. (1990). *Marguerite Yourcenar: L'invention d'une vie*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Todorov, T. (1989). *Nous et les autres. La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine*. Paris: Seuil.
- Valéry, P. (1960). Regards sur le monde et autres essais. In *Œuvres, Tome II* (pp. 911-1120). Paris: Gallimard.
- Yourcenar, M. (1980). *Les yeux ouverts. Entretiens avec Matthieu Galey*. Paris: Centurion.
- Yourcenar, M. (1982). *Œuvres romanesques*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Yourcenar, M. (1991). *Essais et mémoires*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Yourcenar, M. (1999). *Sources II*. Paris: Gallimard.