Traditions of the Japanese noo theater in Marguerite Yourcenar’s play «Le dialogue dans le marecage»

French literature has long developed a tradition to regard the East as an exotic space, contrasted to the West, as the non-Christian world is opposed to the Christian one, ancient culture is opposed to modern civilization, and the mystic sphere is opposed to material one. The East is interpreted as a historic and cultural space rather than a geographical one. A specific geography of the East is formed, including not only Near, Middle, and Far East, but also Greece and the Balkans, which were perceived as Islamic countries even by Byron’s and Delacroix’ contemporaries [5: 114].

While in the 18th century the East was associated, first and foremost, with Islamic civilization, the 19th century authors began to apprehend it not only as “the magic East of wizard-peoples,” [3: 54] but also as the East of the first Christian sages. In the European mind the East and the West are still contrasted, there being two trends: some authors emphasize the absolute aesthetic and cognitive distance between the east and the west (Leconte de Lisle), while others (Gustave Flaubert, Nerval, and Alfred de Le Poitevin) endorse the idea of continuity or even unity of the ancient Oriental culture and the modern Occidental civilization though viewed as a type of contrast of the ancient and modern civilizations.

Marguerite Yourcenar develops the latter trend. In her interview to the journalist Mathieu Galey, which became the basis of her book Les yeux ouverts, she speaks about her passionate love of Japanese and Chinese literatures, which she came to know in English translations when she was 20 years old [5: 114]. Marguerite Yourcenar acknowledged that studying religions of the East had influenced her views making it possible for her to look into the depth of her own soul and to return to the Christian mentality of her early childhood [5: 43].

A peculiar intertwining of the Western and Eastern traditions can be found in one of the earliest works of the author – her drama Le Dialogue dans le marécage (The Dialogue in The Mire) (1929) [4].

The text emerged under the impact of several lines from Dante’s The Divine Comedy, representing the monologue of Pia dei Tolomei. Her ghost appears among those who died of violent death in the monologue of Pia dei Tolomei. Her ghost appears among those who, having confessed before death, took it with peace in soul and, therefor, have a hope of eternal salvation. Matteo Bandello described two more similar stories about women taken away by their jealous husbands to secluded castles where, keeping permanent silence, the jealous men watch their wives’ slow deaths. Stendhal wrote that those events happened in Italy of his days. However, mentioning the same details – a semi-destroyed castle in an unhealthy area, a stubborn silence of an insulted man, a young beautiful woman slowly dying away – makes it possible to suggest that both the case in Piedmont and the history of Countess Valamara are variations of Stendhal, who was apt to mystify, on the theme of Pia dei Tolemei’s fate. (In his book Rome, Naple, and Florence, Stendhal calls the Piedmont case “the anecdote of revenge” discovered in “a slightly known book”: [14: 173]. In another case Stendhal pretends to be a witness of this story. See: [12: 425].)

It should be noted that each author writing about those bygone events solves his/her own tasks. In Dante’s work, Pia’s ghost appears among those who, having confessed before death, took it with peace in soul and, therefore, have a hope of eternal salvation. Matteo Bandello tells us a story of Madonna Pia as one of many tragic incidents that happened in Italy. For Stendhal it is a magnificent illustration of “the Italian character”. By her gentle reserve in misfortune his Pia reminds of the characters from Italian Chronicles – Duchess di Palliano and
Beatrice Cenci. However, whatever objective the authors set, the main character of the story is always a victim. The dominant motifs of each variation on the theme “a beautiful woman, a prisoner of a secluded castle” – are lack of her freedom and her death.

In Marguerite Yourcenar’s play, the history of Maremma’s prisoner appears as a real happening, the history of a private life – not only Pia’s but also Sir Laurent’s – that is the name of Pia’s husband in the play.

The play action takes place at the gate of a semi-ruined castle in Siena’s Maremma. The time of the action is a summer day, slowly turning to evening. The action begins on midday. Twelve years after Pia’s confinement, Sire Laurent, accompanied by a young Minorite Candide starts for Assise to die there like St. Francis. Love for another woman and death of his beloved make him recall long-forgotten Pia. He visits the castle wishing to release the prisoner from custody, with little belief that she is alive. The first scene of the play is Sir Laurent’s confession addressed to the young friar. It is the story of his having brought Pia to that castle, making her walk all the way long under the heating summer sun. He took away all her attires and decorations, deprived her of her servant Simona because her name sounded just like Pia’s beloved Simon. Sir Laurent ordered to destroy the rose garden that surrounded the castle and, leaving Pia with two servants, forgot about her. The scene ends in the appearance of two old servants of Pia who tell him that their mistress is alive and, moreover, is young, beautiful, and kind. The servants do not recognize Laurent as their master – for them he has been dead for a long time.

Pia refuses to leave the castle and return to Siena – the captive feels free while the one who imprisoned her remains a captive of his own passions – jealousy, rage, and arrogance.

The images of the play, written under the spell of the four lines by Dante, retain symbolic meanings of The Divine Comedy. The bog is not just the precise locality, Siena’s Maremma, and not just the characteristics of Sir Laurent’s external environment. It is the description of his internal state, “the scenery of his mind”, time and again gripped by outbursts of rage like by gusts of wind at the thought of Pia’s unfaithfulness. The character is purged in the bog of rage like are sinful souls of the raged from Dante’s Hell who are getting drowned in the Stygian bog. For Sir Laurent the travel to Assise, interrupted by visiting his family castle, the place associated with torturous thoughts about the past, is similar to trip to Hell.

The image of rose crowning The Divine Comedy appears in the final part of the play. In response to the character’s entreaty to leave the ruining castle, Pia orders the servants to give him bread and wine but, on hearing that he is not hungry, she offers him a rose. While the servants to give him bread and wine but, on hearing that he is not hungry, she offers him a rose. While bread and wine are associated with the Christian ritual of receiving communion, the polysemiotic symbol of rose reminds us of Dante’s Eden rose, embodying the elated spiritual unity, opposed to Hell dissociation, as well as of sensual love, life, and death.

In the play, the theme of freedom and confinement is related to that of forgiveness and charity. Gentleness of Pia, who forgave Sir Laurent, the sun shining that surrounds the heroine, remind the reader of the lines from Hymn to the Sun by St. Francis of Assise, whose image is invisibly present in the text:

Praise be to Thee, my Lord, though our sister death of the body, from Whom no living human can escape. Woe to those Who die in mortal sin Blessed are those who find themselves in my most holy will, for second Death cannot harm them [1: 30].

The personality of Francis of Assise, one of the favorite Christian saints, always attracted Marguerite Yourcenar. In her book Les yeux ouverts where the name of the saint of Assisi is often mentioned, she calls him “a teacher in everything.” [5: 258].

Thus, the story of Pia dei Tolomei as told by Marguerite Yourcenar’s predecessors and existing as a fact of European history and European literary tradition, appears to be included in the context of the Christian tradition.

Besides the Christian symbolism, there is a symbolic layer related to another, more ancient type of mentality, mythology in particular. The character’s trip to the castle captive reminds us of Orpheus’ trip to the Underworld, of getting and losing Eurydice. M. Yourcenar will return to this myth in several years, in her book New Eurydice (1931).

Re-reading the play after a 35-year break and experiencing the effect of aesthetic estrangement, Marguerite Yourcenar emphasized that its poetics had the features close not only to European authors (Maeterlinck, d’Annunzio) but also to the classical Japanese Noo drama [6: 9].

The author pointed to the similarity of her play characters to the traditional personages of the Japanese lyrical drama. The main character of a Noo play, shite, is a mythological or legendary figure (including a beautiful woman) appearing as a ghost in the play. The character’s name must “raise literary emotional associations,” refresh “literary emotional memory that creates a historic background, develops the image, completes the unsaid. The character’s story evolves based on deepening and developing associations.” [7: 70]. Another personage of the drama – waki – is often a wandering monk or warrior. Each of these characters has a companion or companions, tsure.

Pia, Marguerite Yourcenar writes, is a shite, a phantom; Sir Laurent is a waki, a wanderer. The young Minorite Candide corresponds to a tsure, a Buddhist monk accompanying a wandering character [6: 9]. Then the old servants are the shite’s companions.

The composition of Le Dialogue dans le marécage is similar to the structure of the classical Japanese drama. In the introduction to the play the waki actor informs us of where and for what purpose he goes and makes a passage along the stage, which symbolizes a trip ending in arrival. This part corresponds to the first scene of the play by Marguerite Yourcenar, where Sir Laurent speaks about the goal of his trip. The second part shows us the shite. At first this character appears as a real person (old man or woman) and then, in the third part, s/he turns into a supernatural creature (sea dragon, or magic beauty). These parts have analogues in the play, with the servants’ appearance considered as the first entry of the shite and the appearance of Pia, preceded by the servants’ exclamation, “Voici Notre-Dame!” (This is our Mistress!) being a transformation of the shite.

Though Marguerite Yourcenar does not mention
the titles of the Japanese plays she read in 1929, we can suppose that there was a lyrical drama by Kannami Kietsugu among them, titled _Komachi’s Tomb_ (1333-1384) [9: 33-46].

The heroine of this play is Ono-no Komachi, who lived in the mid-9th century and who was famous for her exclusive poetic talent and extraordinary beauty. The image of Ono-no Komachi is surrounded by legends. One of them tells us about a young military leader Fukagawa who was in love with her. By her order he was to have spent one hundred nights at her house but he passed away before the promised rendezvous [10: 364]. The poetess’s name became “a common name for a beauty,” [11: 448-449] and her fate, like that of Pia, drew attention of many authors, including that of creator of the Noo theater Kannami Kietsugu.

The personages of one of the early Noo plays resemble the characters of the play created in the 20th century. The wondering monk (waki) and his companion (wakitsure), an old woman and Ono-no Komachi (shite) in _Komachi’s Tomb_ are parallel to Sir Laurent and Friar Candide, servants and Pia in _Le Dialogue dans le marécage_. Space details are also somewhat similar. The action of the Japanese play takes place at the tomb of the poetess and on the road in the outskirts of the capital city where the two wanderers meet the ghost of Komachi. The meeting of Sir Laurent and Pia occurs at the gate of a half-ruined castle that became “a tomb” of the Italian beauty.

Pointing to the reminiscences of the Japanese theater, Marguerite Yourcenar noted that “it was not an intentional simulation of the Noo theater.” [6: 9]. Indeed, there are as many external differences between her play and the classical Japanese drama as there are similarities. Resemblance of the play by Marguerite Yourcenar and the drama by Kannami Kietsugu is not found only in form. Mythological and “universal” features inherent in the text by Marguerite Yourcenar are also some of the main characteristics of the medieval Japanese drama plot. And the conflict in the Noo drama, as well as in the play about Sir Laurent ‘s captive lies in the internal sphere rather than in the external one. It is a conflict that happened long ago and is “recollected” [7: 82] by the spirit of the dead character. The time of the action gives the feeling of the present moment and beyond-temporariness and the place emphasizes the unity of the past and the present. The past of the character lives in his present, opening him the way to eternity.

Like a lyrical Noo drama, which is a certain “literary encyclopedia” that includes text fragments borrowed from earlier texts, inherent in the new text, and not spoiling its artistic integrity [8: 129-130], _Le Dialogue dans le marécage_ is penetrated by a number of literary allusions. This combination of the Christian symbolism, motifs of the antique myth and the poetics of the Oriental theater brings in sacral sense to a real story. Historic, religious, and mythological layers of the text co-exist in harmonious unity, for the play itself and its symbolic images constitute a single multi-dimensional image of the soul striving for truth and self-cognition.

The Oriental theme, emerging in the play about Pia dei Tolemei, will be continued in the story _Conte Bleu_ (1929), in the collection of works _Nouvelles orientales_ (1938), in the novel _Mémoires d’Hadrien_ (1951), and the book about the Japanese author Mishima Yukio _Mishima, ou La vision du vide_ (1980). Besides, in her last book _La voix des Choses_ (1987), dedicated to Jerry Wilson, a photographer and an artist, Marguerite Yourcenar places her translations close to the pictures of various parts of the world, and she combines _Auguries of Innocence_ by Blake, poems of the medieval Chinese poet Tao Yuan Ming, _The Hymn to the Sun_ by Francis of Assise and Veda hymns in one book. This forms a specific aesthetic space of creative works by Marguerite Yourcenar, where traditions of the West and the East, though remaining fundamentally different, reveal their similarity as various facets of the single world.

Works Cited

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