

Tan Twan Eng, *The Garden of Evening Mists*

Tess Maginess

Entering the Garden: Some possibilities for discussion

This is a novel transformative vision; its annealment, a healing so very, very hard won. And, as a bonus, this is a novel in which the **language** is truly beautiful. There are, after all, many brilliant novels where the language is, well, unspectacular and the craft is all in the characterisation or structure. Orwell, maybe, or Gebler, or Atwood. What struck me first about this novel was its **quietly dazzling lyricism**; its measured beauty, its precise, delicate registration of both character and the worlds inhabited by the characters.

And yet, for all its extraordinary beauty and precision of language, this is a novel in which **the word 'love' is nowhere spoken**. The great, transcendent moments of the book are all to do with **touch**. There are a few such transcendent moments in the novel – the meteor shower, the burning of the lanterns, repeated with such different effect, the slap Tominga gives Yun Ling before he sets her free, the anger of Teruzen as he tries to prevent Tatsuji from flying, the few but incredibly tender moments when Aritomo and Yun Ling touch.

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

What about **theme**? This is, to my mind, a novel about **memory**. The 'heroine' and I think she is a heroine (which is another topic for us to debate), is losing her memory. Specifically, she is beginning to suffer from **aphasia**. What is aphasia? Literally, from the Greek, speechlessness. Loss of speech, loss of the power to understand written or spoken language as a result of damage to the brain (OED). Now, for a narrator, incipient, or threatened rapid onset of aphasia is a very major problem. And this constitutes a kind of drama, a sense of urgency, in which the heroine, Judge Teo Yun Ling, must tell her story before she forgets her ability to speak and write; 'to bear witness'. We will come back, maybe, to that phrase.

There is a very poignant moment, early in the novel, when Yun Ling returns to the garden; it is neglected, forgotten, overgrown. The **garden** has become, after 40 years, a **metaphor of Yun Ling's own fate**; it is losing its memory. And, it might be said, that her writing, her narrative, is a **profound act of retrieval**, of making shape and beauty of the past. She images herself as a collapsing star.

This novel has, ironically much to show about the **importance of space, of voids in the construction of works of art**. Yun Ling also images herself as a ghost, trapped, with no future, no past (p.33), but, as the novel reveals, memories are almost intolerably painful too. Is the garden a testimony to memory or an attempt to enshroud it, to obliterate it with artifice?

There are many different 'presentations' of aphasia, but one is **anomic aphasia**, where the person has difficulty naming things. One of the 'effects' is **circumlocution**. Thus, the person cannot remember the word 'table' and

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

nominates it as, let us say, 'the rectangle with legs on it'. Now, it seems to me that circumlocution is often at the very core of this novel; **many very important words are not used**. The most obvious is **the word 'love'**. Could it be that the characters and, indeed, Eng are being creatively aphasiac – deliberately not naming what is obvious, but deploying various kinds of circumlocutions (circling around utterances)?

There is another working out of this theme of memory. Quite early on in the novel, we see, in the garden Magnus has built, two statues; one Mnemosyne, the **goddess of memory** and another, unnamed (significantly), the **goddess of forgetfulness** (Ch 3, p.45). There are two forces in the novel; the first, framing force is about Yun Ling's desperate struggle to remember as she loses the power to remember. The other, dramatically countermanding force, is about how, in certain respects, she loses her memory of the hurt done to her and her sister by the Japanese. Or more accurately, in some sense, her **hurt is transformed**.

We could talk a bit maybe too, about the **contrasting handling of trauma in different writers**. Is trauma the BIG contemporary subject for the novel? Is trauma the predominating contemporary 'condition humaine', the hegemony, the dominant definition of who and what we are become in the last, what, twenty years? And, if so, how do we respond to its prevailing influence in defining who and what we are? Do we not even question this because it has become, as it were, so vernacular? Everybody is talking depression, post-traumatic stress disorder. Do we go with the flow and accept that **we are all, fundamentally, ill**? Screwed up, dysfunctional, marked for life. Are the 'normative' relationships with family, with lovers, with society now so utterly impossible that our contemporary 'protagonists' are, inevitably, depressives, manic psychotics, autists? The mad are no longer inspirational challengers of society but fugal feasters on the lost, homeless, *moi meme*? Are we all, falling

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

down, spiralling solipsistically towards a series of ever diminishing circles as the world, as 'other' recedes into our darkening vortex of the disintegrating and paradoxically imperial self?

Or are there contemporary, Bookerised novels which suggest that the **individual can fight back**, can enact resilience, can take risks, can be aware of others as others, rather than as a Lacanian projection of the childish self, can consider the possibility of the self in a history that is complex rather than one-dimensionally wounding and incapacitating, can even re-enact the humiliation at the heart of trauma in the service of some revelation that is unexpected, mysterious and empowering? And what might act as the medium for so shocking and radical a re-assignment and transformation of trauma? The making of art, at best, the making of memorial to others who have suffered, the making of atonement too, the recognition of individual responsibility, of collusion, of the necessity of sleeping with the enemy. Maybe.

This brings me to another theme which is relevant to this novel, and that is the **representation of art** itself. What role does art itself play in concepts of resilience, of understanding 'other', of embracing 'other' as a way out and in, of transforming trauma, of rescuing the 'fallen' self?

Aritomo's art is in the adaptation of practices recommended by the great *authorities* of Japanese garden design. His art as a tattooist is, of course, much more complex in terms of its 'meaning' but we may recall that what he burns and incises onto the body of Yun Ling is not, overtly, an expression of himself, but rather his picture of her picture.

And what do we make of the late revelation that the garden itself maybe a map of the Prisoner of War camp; the blank space left on the *horimono* on

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

her body? Levy's novel is all about spaces, too, 'holes', a very post-modernist sort of idea. But how different is Tan Twen Eng's handling of that trope.

Another topic we could have a go at is '**vision**'. What is the outlook of this novel? What does it lead us to feel and think about humanity, about the individual and society, about the individual and history? Is it a **moral vision**? Should the novel offer us a moral/ethical vision? Or is the novel just about telling a story? But not one of us can tell a story without a **point of view**, a 'take' on the characters and events, a vision of what the **meaning** of the story is. Is meaning possible in a post-modern age, when the very definition of post-modernism is loss of meaning? In the vision of this novel, is it important, crucial even, that we accept **polarity, contradiction, opposition**. Aritomo is an artist of tremendous skill but he is also, maybe, a member of Golden Lily. Yun Ling is a victim, a prisoner, but also a revengeful judge and a collaborator with the Japanese. And is Yun Ling's deep connection with Aritomo the worst form of betrayal to the memory of her sister?

And this could bring us into a discussion about **character** – in every sense. How do we judge the judge, the gardener? What about other characters? **Honour, 'face'** is crucial is it not? Think of the story of Professor Tatsuji Yoshikawa and his lover, Colonel Teruzen. Or the connection between Aritomo and Tominaga Noburu, or the friendship between Yun Ling and Frederick Pretorious. And there is the deep friendship also between Manus Pretorious and Aritomo. You will recall that it is after Magnus is killed that Aritomo goes missing, creating a kind of space, hole behind him and you will recall that he depicts himself, in Yun Ling's *horimono*, shooting down the Transvaal flag. All of these 'pairings' are about a certain kind of love are they not? But not love in a modern sense; something more fragile and yet immemorial, enduring.

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

What do you make of the **plot** of the novel? I do not know a lot about Buddhism, but I wonder if this novel presents us with its own very **powerful yin and yang** that openly acknowledges opposition, polarities, enmities (in the self as well as in 'other'), but think of how yin and yang are actually represented visually; curves, oppositions touching at a certain, swelling, expansive point and then diminishing back into how they begin and how they end, geometrically, in small separateness. Think of this, in terms of the **plot** of this novel. And, for all that this is a very contemplative novel, in which the meanings are themselves, mists, a number of significant events remind us that Yuguri is precariously beyond history and politics. Teo's rescue of the surrendering communist, the revenge attack unleashed upon her as a consequence, the murder of the High Commissioner, the murder of Magnus, so balefully ironic in its pretence to show the Communists the hidden gold of the Japanese Golden Lily conspirators, drawing off harm from others, and thus repeating the many acts of heroism in the novel, very often fathers or father figures, atoning in some way for their 'children'.

What of the **structure** - the way in which this novel ever so gradually reveals its meaning, and yet, ultimately, holds its **share of mysteries**. Why does Aritomo leave when he leaves? Does he die, or does he live and love in another 'elsewhere'. What do you think of how Aritomo's departure affects the **meaning** of the novel? The novel reveals, if anything widening oppositions, increasing gaps – Aritomo's role in the war being the most obvious. And yet, there is also a sense of gaps being closed, a sense of completeness, of fusing even – think of the *horimono*. Aritomo incises their shared history into her body. What is the relationship between mind and body in this book, and between art and reality? The garden is a work of art and like all works of art is, as Frederick says, manipulative, but is the garden also the object which creates serenity? Is it also merely an escape from reality? This is a quest novel. What happens to Yun Ling's quest to find the camp?

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

This **gradual, subtle unveiling of horrors** that, when they come to be described, are all the more shocking because of the **long withholding of their revelation**. But, because some of the most traumatic narrative is placed towards the end of the novel, as readers, we must, like Yun Ling herself, reel back over all that has happened since; the making of the garden, her love for Aritomo. Her own memory, of the horrors of the camp, is no less sharp, no less shocking and unjust; time has not diminished her bitterness. But, yet, as she tells Aritomo her story, just after they have journeyed to the Taoist temple to pray for Tominaga Nobaru, we cannot but be aware of her altered perspective. Tominaga, you recall, is the link between the two of them and he is both enemy and friend for both of them. He is the Japanese officer who rescues Yun Ling, who gives her freedom, he is also the fellow artist and gardener with whom Aritomo has quarrelled, setting in motion an extraordinary chain of events. But the Japanese want Aritomo to return; he has been forgiven. However, they go to the temple because Aritomo has learned that Tominaga has committed ritual suicide; a kind of atonement, an expiation for his part in the war.

But, of course, we do not yet know the full story there. It is only later that we hear from Tatsuji that Tominaga was likely involved in the Golden Lily. There are strange, half-told connections here too; both Tominaga and Colonel Teruzen, Tatsuji's great hero, are gay. And, Teruzen also commits ritual suicide, just as his own father has done and as Tominaga have done. Does this lead us, inexorably, to foretell the fate of Aritomo? That he too, must do the honourable thing after Magnus, his friend, has been killed? Or does Aritomo know, that even without this dreadful murder, his time in the garden is coming to an end, that, as the old Taoist nun asks near the end of the novel, that his work is done. That work is in itself, what is the meaning of it? The making of the garden, the love affair with Yun Ling?

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

Is it an expiation for his artistic pride in wanting to create something original as a gardener (unlike Tominaga)? Is he paying for his defiance against tradition and even against patriotism? Did he become involved in Golden Lily, and if so, had he no choice? And if so, did that lack of choice transform itself into something of immemorial beauty – the garden, the *horimono*? But Yun Ling transgresses too, she sleeps with the enemy, she even loses her purpose to create a memorial garden for her sister. And yet, of course, between them, the garden they make is a memorial. Aritomo's inspiration, in some sense, is the borrowed scenery of Yun Ling's pain. Is that another kind of expiation? Is the garden a map of her memories? And how tragically ironic that is, given her aphasia. The garden, as it nears completion, fills her both with contentment and sorrow. But she must close her eyes, withdraw from the reality of the garden, in order to see it. That is, we may note, almost at the midpoint of the novel.

And, when you think about it, many of the **characters transgress – defy, disrupt, problematise fixed concepts of public and private identity**. When Yun Li first meets Tatsuji, she does not trust him one little bit, for all his apparent repudiation and condemnation of the role of his country in the war. But his departure from 'official history' from, as it were, the party line is a 'transgression' which overlays a deeper departure from the official, from, if you will, the hegemony. It transpires, well into the novel is that revelation sprung, that the Japanese academic is also homosexual. His narrative of his forbidden love is all the more heart wrenching for its understatedness. His lover deliberately undertakes a kamikaze mission to ensure that he will be spared. **The ultimate act of love; not for one's country, but for another individual.**

But what actually happens between Aritomo and Teo? Their love is forbidden from Teo's point of view because Aritomo is the representative, *non pareil*, of the Japanese imperial ruling class. As gardener to the emperor, he is

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

in a highly privileged position, perhaps akin to a bard in Gaelic society. She and her sister have been degraded, tortured, and held captive by this regime. He is the last person on earth, symbolically, that she would fall in love with. And yet she does, and it is she who initiates that transformation; she kisses him. The victim kisses her oppressor.

And yet, as readers, we can see how it happens; so gradually, so subtly. She goes to Aritomo in the first instance, because of her wish to create a memorial for her dead sister, who, significantly, has served her sentence as a prostitute, servicing Japanese soldiers. Teo, has survived, the only one from the camp, and she has made it her business to prosecute as many collaborators in the Japanese oppression as possible. She has gone to the Cameron highlands to find a Japanese gardener much admired by her sister. She is 28 and bristling with anger at the fate of her sister and herself, but still she goes, symbolically, to the enemy, to ask him to design a memorial garden for her sister. He refuses, and indeed, imposes terms upon her which represent a horrifying repetition of her servitude. He will not make a garden. She must become his apprentice and learn for herself how to make a garden for her sister. But, still she does it. At the beginning, we interpret this as a noble, selfless act, but, as the novel, slowly reveals, Teo is also atoning for her guilt in being a survivor. She colludes with her captors to get an easier time, and to help her sister, but her sister warns her against collusion. She works her way to a privileged position in which she is afforded the chance of escape. To her credit, she repudiates the escape and returns to the camp, only to find that the Japanese have mined it, immuring the inmates, including her sister. No trace of it is left.

So, in agreeing to become Aritomo's apprentice, Teo engages in an act of **atonement** as well as an act of **memorialisation**. She must again be subject. Though we do not know all this when first she agrees to be an apprentice.

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

Aritomo works her mercilessly. He has no regard, it seems, for what she has endured. He insists that she take her gloves off that she might feel and understand the plants. He forces her to expose her chopped off fingers, her physical mutation, he makes no allowances for her as a woman. There is the extraordinary scene where she passes the test of physical endurance, hefting the heavy log and gaining the respect of the workers, as, gradually, she gains the respect of Aritomo.

He will not allow her books to consult; she must remember everything in her head. When, eventually, he shows her the ancient manuscripts about Japanese garden design, what she learns is the centrality of the concept of 'borrowed scenery'.

What light, then, does this story throw on the love of Aritomo and Teo? Their love is also forbidden, transgressive. But, in a different way. Frederick espouses the '**conventional**' **ex-pat view** in sneering at Teo for living with the 'Jap'. Part of this is political – the Japs are the enemy, and part of it is moral; she is living in sin – a pretty shocking matter in 1951. He is also, of course, personally hurt, for he has fallen in love with her, a love that he remains faithful to all his life. And what a poignant portrait that is.

The world of this novel is elusive, ever changing. What Aritomo and his apprentice embark upon is a fiction, a **saving fiction**. Aritomo will not go into judge Teo's world and create a memorial garden for her dead sister. The project is, rather, to engage her in his endless Work in Progress. Aritomo proceeds from the principle of borrowed scenery. So, the making of the garden is itself to do with borrowed scenery in a very fundamental way. There is never an original garden that can be created in memory of her sister. It must be, significantly, built upon the model she admired – Japanese gardens. The irony

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

is mordant, for both sisters are to become prisoners of the Japanese, and yet, Yun Ling is intent on causing to be built a Japanese garden.

Aritomo is the designer, Yun Ling has no say in how the garden is designed. She simply carries out his instructions, fulfils his vision of what the garden should be. In that sense, she is repeating her subjection. And the **garden** is a place of **borrowed scenery** for her. The magic in the novel is how that comes to **change**, how the garden becomes a space in which she has control.

But, Aritomo is also subject; he has no inclination to develop a new, radical model of what a garden should look like. Indeed, not only does he draw upon ancient authorities, and bow before the Emperor of Japan, he specifically endorses the principle of borrowed scenery. In one sense, this intensifies the idea that he refuses to act independently, that he must draw, literally, upon tradition, authority, faithfulness to tradition. He must not invent, think for himself, innovate, break from tradition.

In another sense, 'borrowed scenery' becomes a metaphor for **embodying feeling that cannot be expressed in word, or directly**. The novel may be about the **necessity of the objective correlative as the saving fiction**.

The *horimono* itself is a kind of symbol of transgression, but also it is a work of art. And, it is also a narrative based upon borrowed scenery. Aritomo draws her history on her own body; not his own. He reflects her 'otherness', pays tribute to it, converts her 'other' into a work of art. His own self-depiction is partly her view of him as an enemy; shooting down the 'sun' of the Transvaal flag.

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

But then that too is turned on its head by the mapping by tattoo of Yun Ling's body; the borrowed scenery of the tea plantation, features of the garden, which are not borrowed but real, empirically, there, observable. And how the tattoo, at a different, geometric, artistic level, this, becomes a map of the camp.

By the time this is discovered it is irrelevant, for Yun Ling, through her experiences with Aritomo has given up the quest to find the camp, to find justice, to prove the veracity of her own witness. Ironically, **another kind of 'sight' or 'insight'** has intervened, **another kind of quest** has been embarked upon. But, this is no sentimental softening of hurt and trauma.

It is not just the **passage of time where bitter memories fade** – though Yun Ling's memories are fading because of her aphasia, it is clear that, at 63, she is as sharply, bitterly anti-Japanese as ever, as her initially tart reception of Tatsuji demonstrates.

There is something else mysterious about the structure – none of the main characters have surviving children. Aritomo's wife and child have died in childbirth, the daughter of Magnus and Emily also dies as an infant. The gay men have no children and Yun Ling has no children. Generation, the making of children is what forms society, and nation and tradition. But, here, **there is no legacy** of that kind. The legacy is the garden, the *horimono*, the woodblocks – works of art. The main characters in some sense or other, stand apart from society, nation, tradition. That is why they can cross borders, resolve in some sense, enmities, but it is the works of art which are the memorial, the immemorial 'children' in this novel. It is **art which transcends time itself**. And the **foundation of that art is love for 'other'**.

And this perhaps might be related to the presence of Yeats in the novel.

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

Nationality, political allegiance is nobly abandoned for **personal love**. No wonder the academic refers to Yeats's 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death'. For in that poem, also, public, national allegiances are rejected in favour of some allegiance to the local; the Kiltartan poor. Some Irish readers may well cast a cool eye on so uncritical a reading of the poem. And, there is also in that poem, an impulse that is not actually evident in the major's flight. In the poem itself, the airman articulates something very near to a death wish (he is a kamikaze pilot, divesting himself, so to speak of a cause); what propels him is simply, 'the lonely impulse of delight'. This is, I suspect, Yeats, fashioning Gregory into an artist analogue; this is Yeats at his most aesthetic, the airborness of the airman is, the poet, manqué, asserting his right to be free to fashion his imaginative world, by jettisoning the troublesome and messy business of contemporary politics. A curse upon both their houses, Irish and English. But, in Eng's story, the Major flies to death, not in pursuit of his own imaginative freedom, but to save his lover from death. **Yeats is much studied and admired in Japan** (his Noh plays, with their stylised, unrealistic form, his proclivity for mask and antimask perhaps providing the initial attraction), so it is not unlikely that Eng would have been aware of this. The major's act ironises the Yeatsian poem.

What does this tell us about Tan Twan Eng's vision of art? And of the artist? We have, in the end, **withholding**, matters that are never explained, mysteries without edges. Why does Aritomo leave when he leaves, where does he go? Does he commit ritual suicide? Does he do so because his work is, indeed, finished, or because he is overcome with guilt, or because he cannot bear to leave the garden and answer the public summons to return to Japan, to his once official position?

Setting is another important dimension of the novel. How does the garden function in this novel? Is the garden an '**elsewhere**'; an **escapist space** where both Aritomo and Yun Ling hide from the messy realities of their history

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

and politics, or is it a **necessary 'space'** where the characters can re-configure their relationship to history and politics? And is that re-configuration, that transformative shift only achievable through some arduous practice which is about the making of art? And **is the making of art itself, a speechless act of love?**