
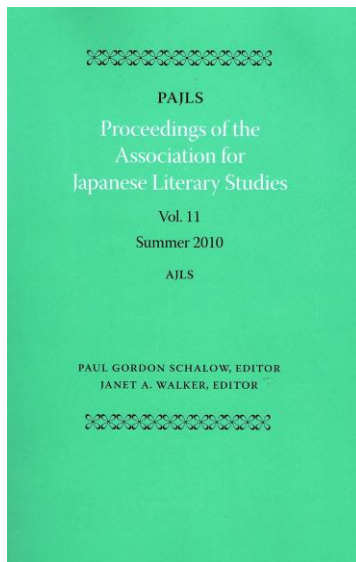


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Francesco Comotti 

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# Performative Reproductions and Myth-Making in Ōba Minako's *Funakuimushi*

FRANCESCO COMOTTI

*Ca' Foscari University, Venice*

To what extent *Funakuimushi* ふなくい虫 (Shipworms, 1970) was bound to become one of the most puzzling experiences in her narrative production must have been clear to Ōba Minako 大庭みな子 from the very moment she chose it to be the follow-up to the Akutagawa Prize-winning *Sanbiki no kani* 三匹の蟹 (Three Crabs, 1968). After a first, bewildering read, one cannot help wondering why Ōba opted for such an obscure, disquieting work to establish herself as a professional writer in the literary scene of the day. Indeed, *Funakuimushi* is the least appealing of Ōba's works, starting from the unpleasant title: shipworms are hermaphrodite clams of ugly appearance, which sailors and fishermen dread as dangerous parasites on the wood of their boats. They stand in stark contrast to the cuteness of the three little crabs on the shore of the previous work, while on the other hand they perfectly represent the mood of the text they epitomize. Up to today, it hasn't encouraged detailed analysis (with one excellent exception).<sup>1</sup> Ōba's husband Ōba Toshio 大庭利雄, in the afterword to its most recent reprint,<sup>2</sup> described it as an "unsuccessful work," still dominated by a "juvenile criticizing zeal."<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the dismissal of *Funakuimushi* in favor of later works<sup>4</sup> may lie in the difficulty in recognizing its structural and stylistic features: not only no label derived from the tradition of early twentieth-century Japanese fiction is satisfying: the work hardly seems to belong among its contemporaries, although it might be reminiscent of what Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎 and Abe Kōbō 安部公房 were

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<sup>1</sup>Egusa 2001.

<sup>2</sup>*Funakuimushi* is included in the first of the 25 volumes planned for the posthumous complete collection of Ōba Minako's works, edited by Ōba Toshio.

<sup>3</sup>Ōba 2009, p. 506.

<sup>4</sup>Noma Hiroshi 野間宏 describes *Funakuimushi* as a "small eruption" preceding the "big eruption" of *Urashimasō* 浦島草 (see Ōba and Noma 1977, pp. 59–60). This comment is reiterated by Reiko Tachibana in Tachibana 1998, p. 221.

writing at the time—the former in his use of disturbing similitudes, the latter in his display of surreal, Kafkean settings.<sup>5</sup> Even beyond the matter of its inclusion in a specific literary form or genre, the impression that it was not conceived as an independent, internally self-sufficient work with a first and a last page, which the author detached from by putting down the brush, magnifies its unrecognizability. The teleology of the action is unclear, the borders of narration blurry. Indeed, *Funakuimushi* stands as the first novel in a series of four, a tetralogy that accompanied Ōba throughout her career, starting with *Funakuimushi* (1970) through *Urashimasō* 浦島草 (Urashima Flowers, 1977) and *Ōjo no namida* 王女の涙 (Tears of the Princess, 1988), up to *Shichiriko* 七里湖 (The Seven-Mile Lake), which was left incomplete and published posthumously in 2007. None of these works is properly a sequel to the other. What binds them together is the genealogy of the Kirio family:<sup>6</sup> its members, introduced by Ōba with little explanation of their blood ties, seem to appear from nowhere at the beginning of the story, their relationship to the others briefly declared, only to disappear into thin air when the narration is over.<sup>7</sup> As if remarking the intentional weakness of the links among the four novels, the characters are mostly half-relatives, whose parentage is often hard to trace;<sup>8</sup> moreover, the stories seldom feature action that is crucial to the development of a plot. Egusa describes the tetralogy in terms of a “series” (*sōsho* 叢書),<sup>9</sup> suggesting a similarity to Honoré de Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine* and Émile Zola’s saga of the Rougon-Macquart family, both authors whose oeuvres Ōba was acquainted with, although William Faulkner’s series of works staged in Yoknapatawpha County<sup>10</sup> might have been a more familiar reference.<sup>11</sup>

The bafflement caused by *Funakuimushi* becomes clearer when one attempts to summarize its story line. The narration runs on two levels—a present and a past—linked together by the character of the male protagonist, first called ‘He’ and then ‘the Florist.’ The present, where the main action takes place, is set in a strange land that looks like the end of the world: a hotel on an island immersed in the steam exhaled by its many hot springs, in the middle of a lake at the feet of a

<sup>5</sup>Ōe had published *Kojinteki na taiken* 個人的な体験 (A personal matter) in 1964, while Abe had published *Daiyonkan hyōki* 第四間氷期 (The Fourth Ice Age) in 1959 and *Suna no onna* 砂の女 (Woman in the Dunes) in 1962.

<sup>6</sup>The surname is never mentioned in *Funakuimushi*. The first time a character is associated with the Kirio family is in the following *Urashimasō*. See Ōba 1977, p. 17

<sup>7</sup>At the end of *Urashimasō*, Morito and Ryōko literally disappear along with their house. They suddenly reappear at the end of *Ōjo no namida*. See Ōba 1977, pp. 494–97 and Ōba 1988, pp. 234–35.

<sup>8</sup>See Egusa 2001, pp. 140–56. On the genealogy issue, Ōba went as far as undermining the blood tie between the Florist and Ari, despite having declared it in *Funakuimushi*. Confronted with this literary provocation, Egusa offers an interesting analysis of the characters and their symbolic identities.

<sup>9</sup>Egusa 2001, p. 140

<sup>10</sup>This is a fictional setting based on Lafayette County in Mississippi, where many of Faulkner’s works take place.

<sup>11</sup>See Ōba and Mizuta 1995, pp. 13–14.

growing glacier.<sup>12</sup> The character 'He' becomes known as 'the Florist' when he starts working in the greenhouse of tropical plants and flowers featured by the hotel. The other characters that work or sojourn in the hotel are just as unusual, and they are never called by their proper names, but only by the name of their profession or social status: the Owner of the hotel is a woman who practices ventriloquism and snake charming. The Owner's assistant, the Magician, is a black (possibly African American) man, who ran away from the military base he belonged to, because of the nuclear weapons that were being tested on an island in the base's jurisdiction, inhabited by seals treated as experimental targets; consequently, he decided to desert the army and join the Owner, performing as a juggler for the guests and playing musical instruments of Japanese traditional court music. There is the Prince, an heir to the throne that decided to free himself from his destiny by sexual abstinence, along with his Princess, an ex-ballerina who, on the Prince's request, underwent a hysterectomy in order not to run the risk of conceiving: she is devoted to satisfying his voyeuristic pleasure by sleeping with other men and subsequently telling him the details. In the background there are the other guests of the hotel, a group of farcical aristocrats loyal to the emperor, who look back in nostalgia and lament the corruption of modern times.

The Florist made his escape from a terrible past: a student of medicine, he was doing his internship in gynecology, mainly performing abortions on women when his supervisor was too drunk to do the job himself. At the same time, he had a relationship with his stepsister, Ari, whom he also performed an abortion upon when she got pregnant with his child. Their relationship was a power play between him, the son of a servant, and the stepsister, the heir to what little was left of the landowning family's fortune. At some point, breaking down under the pressure of the incestuous, all-consuming affair, he decided to leave Ari, who then got engaged to the son of a tenant farmer of theirs. She discovered only too late that her new fiancé was actually another stepbrother,<sup>13</sup> born of a secret affair between her mother and the tenant: already pregnant, she asked her gynecologist stepbrother to help her terminate the pregnancy. Faced with his refusal, Ari committed suicide. The guilt caused by Ari's death made him suddenly impotent: to escape the burden of the tragedy he felt responsible for, he decided to leave medicine and run far away. Both siblings grew up in the shadow of insane, lascivious, homicidal parents, who both died in horrible ways: the libertine father of syphilis and Ari's mother by suicide, after sending her lover, the tenant farmer, to confront the field workers in riot, well knowing that he would be killed.

A preliminary observation has to be made about the distribution of the events within the plot. The present lacks in action, and it is very still, more concerned

<sup>12</sup>This is a scenery that Ōba created as a hybrid of Alaska, where she lived, and the many places in Japan where she spent her life (especially Hiroshima, Saijō, Niigata).

<sup>13</sup>This is the character called Morito in *Urashimasō*.

with the description of the strange surroundings and quirky characters on the island at the end of the world; for the most part, it looks like a mosaic of scenes only vaguely held together by the sexual tension oozing over the whole stage. The past, on the contrary, develops almost rabidly along a sequence of dark, intricate happenings, the narration of which depends on the memory of the Florist in the present. Every person or image in his present sight corresponds by analogy to someone or something in the past: reality is doubled, and it repeatedly switches back and forth between the two temporal dimensions of his experience. As the present triggers memories of violence, death and guilt in the Florist's mind, the past in turn impacts the present, stalling him into a fruitless circle of inaction.

The same condition reflects on the reader: the overabundance of horrifying images and evil, homicidal deeds seem to evoke vertiginous depths of meaning, as much as they are meant to block any reader's attempt at deciphering and understanding. Reading *Funakuimushi*, in a certain way, is to be exposed to a shower of aesthetic objects, analogically charged with meaning, yet also to be denied the means necessary to interpretation. Given this hermeneutical dead end, it is not surprising that the following novel in the series, *Urashimasō*, has been given far more attention. Considered one of her masterpieces, the second installment in the tetralogy appears as a more accomplished work, still unconventional in terms of plot but explicit and open to the reader in addressing a wide range of themes, such as national identity, motherhood, man–woman relationships, and war. Still, one crucial aspect in *Urashimasō* has been overlooked: namely, how it is complementary to its predecessor, and therefore how it implies the need to go back and retrospectively approach *Funakuimushi*'s nightmare.

It is important to remember that intertextuality is a typical feature of Ōba's writing, which develops in a specific fashion: the area occupied by the intertext does not emerge into view, but spreads under the ground, like a rhizome, making the works within its range look scattered and unrelated when they actually are all appendices of the same, undivided organism. This horizontally-oriented intertext is consistent with Ōba's entire oeuvre, especially with her essays, in which she often articulates specific images that are traceable back to her narrative and poetic production. The Kirio tetralogy features a more elaborated intertextual structure: the preceding text does not function as a mere companion to the one following, nor as the source set of references for a derivative, consequential text built upon it. Ōba's intertextual technique moves backwards, pointing the arrow of interpretation toward the hypotext: like bifocal glasses, one narrative clears the focus on its own unfolding surface, at the same time rendering neater the outline of the preceding narrative lying underneath. This is exactly what *Urashimasō* does: it partially unveils what *Funakuimushi*'s significance is—most importantly, it helps in establishing a connection between *Funakuimushi* and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. At the same time, *Urashimasō* implies that, deeper below the narration, the story and the characters in *Funakuimushi* are anything but mesmerizing recipients for the ultimate hypotext, possibly Ōba's integral thought.

This radical intermingling is the main reason why *Funakuimushi* is difficult to study as a single object. If we were forced to visualize *Funakuimushi* as an object, it would take the form of the driftwood to which hundreds of shipworms cling and in which each one bores a hole, deeper and deeper, without crossing each other's paths, stretching forward their bodies yet never reaching a stop or an exit, until they die eventually, their long, dried up, gossamer remains the only trace left of their existence. One can try to pull out the threads that are shipworms' corpses from the wood: in the end, there will only be a bundle of loose threads, but what lies at the bottom of those holes will still be unknown.

This analysis will therefore start from the outside, taking into account the sea where Ōba set the ominous driftwood-narration of *Funakuimushi* afloat, and then move toward the multitude of holes on its surface, trying to catch glimpses of meaning over their rims, into the darkness.

### Nature the Measure and the Crime of Prometheus

In the collection of essays *Ikimono no hanashi* 生きものはなし (Discourse on the living creatures, 1988), Ōba's observations on Nature touch a long list of animals, plants and phenomena: she describes the oleander and the loofa, the butterbur scape and the string bean, the tiger lily and the shallot; she discusses behaviors and habits of deer and reindeer, of hornets and carpenter bees, of mantises, swallows, cuckoos, and salmon. The attitude that emerges from these acute descriptions is revealing of Ōba's thought on the living. At one point, she declares her admiration for two men of science, the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre and the ornithologist William Henry Hudson, as well as the painter Uemura Shōkō, who specialized in the depiction of birds.<sup>14</sup> She recognizes a literary quality to what Fabre and Hudson write, as well as to what Uemura paints: in Ōba's vision, it isn't a matter of choice between *bungaku* 文学 (literature) or *bijutsu* 美術 (fine arts), nor where one's scientific allegiances lie. The purpose of grasping the shape of what comes into Being, together with the intuition to let the magnificence behind it emerge: these are the two sufficient qualities to tear down the barriers and reunite in the same group these authors, whose "works of expression in colors, lines or words tell the story (*monogatari* 物語る) of the maker's fantasy, a vast, shapeless thing that stretches, hard to catch, at the bottom of whatever shape was caught in sight. This way they struggle to get nearer to cosmic life."<sup>15</sup> That said, Ōba is not to be mistaken for a romantic writer who aspires to some sort of utopia of a primitive lifestyle in the wilderness of nature. Nature is not an array of phenomena at the disposal of human beings, there just to amplify or soothe their

<sup>14</sup>She states: "After I found myself writing novels, my reading preferences started spreading more and more outside my field. The inner world of people in my own field has got many aspects that are more or less familiar to me; on the contrary, there are fresh discoveries to be made in the things that specialists from other disciplines say." See Ōba 1987a, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup>Ōba 1986, p. 112.

inner feelings. Nature is not an inert object, prone to being subdued by human knowledge, and it is never a separate, primeval dimension opposed to society intended as the space of culture: “Maybe it is because I was born and brought up in Japan, where men are not thought of as being special, as in Western humanism, that I look at human beings as any other living creature dwelling amid Nature.”<sup>16</sup> Human beings do not stand above but among all the other creatures, which as a whole (man included) constitute the prototype (*genkei* 原型) of existence. Ōba presents herself as a naturalist, a novelist disciple of Fabre, whose work is always influential on her narration.<sup>17</sup> By associating naturalism directly with literature, Ōba implies that Nature is Culture, the very measure of existence, the only possible *Lebensform* beyond which there is only meaningless non-existence. Nature is coherent with the totality of elements and creatures, which are all related and circle in the same flow. Ōba finds perplexing that men are the only creatures considering themselves separate beings from animals: they look at any part of Nature exclusively as an inconsequential form of life only meant for human enjoyment or consumption, until it runs the risk of extinction.<sup>18</sup> The intrinsic risk in human beings reifying Nature, however, is that the same reification might be applied to human beings themselves. By embracing and participating in Nature, Ōba struggles to cast some light on how human beings exist in it, for Nature itself is the disquieting mirror of the human desire to possess life and consume it to death. After all, she observes, lemmings too reproduce and multiply until they can’t bear living together, and their instinctive drive toward mass suicide prevails: they end up running toward the cliffs, all in the same direction, until they throw themselves into the ocean.<sup>19</sup>

### Hiroshima versus Storytelling: Listening to the Murmur of Nature to Survive the Law of Desire

Ōba was forced to witness the annihilating violence unleashed on Hiroshima shortly after the atomic bomb was dropped on the city. She was sent, only fourteen years old, to assist survivors destined to die a while later under her powerless care. The destruction of Hiroshima informed the very core of Ōba’s vision on human life. “Since I saw Hiroshima after the atomic bomb, men, nature, life itself . . . my world view on all these things changed forever.”<sup>20</sup> This vision is summarized in the famous line from *Urashimasō*: “Human beings live by passion and are killed by it” (*ningen wa yokubō ni iki, yokubō ni korosareru* 人間は欲望に生き、欲望に殺される).<sup>21</sup> The atomic bomb is interpreted as the most destructive manifestation of the law

<sup>16</sup> Ōba 1988, p. 239.

<sup>17</sup> Ōba 1985, p. 181–82.

<sup>18</sup> Ōba 1987b, p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> Ōba 1970a, pp. 62–63.

<sup>20</sup> Ōba and Yoshimoto 1974, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ōba 2000, p. 539.

of desire that informs human life on earth, a final example of what human desire is capable of:

“If by chance a bomb didn’t fall on your head, you would live. If it fell on your head, then end of the game. This was an almost daily situation and it lasted until the end of the war. Such a nihilism became final in Hiroshima. This being said, once we have driven ourselves into a corner like this, we must rethink one more time the human being itself. I believe that we are already past the stage where we used to allow ourselves to think of men emotionally.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet it’s not the atrocity per se that calls for a better understanding. Clearly, in Ōba’s opinion, there has been a change after the atomic bomb appeared in all its horror in the world. Even before the atomic bomb there was extreme violence; she goes further, noting that extinction is found in Nature, either of catastrophic proportion, as it was for the dinosaurs, or in cyclical forms as in the case of the tall goldenrod and the Japanese pampas grass, which take turns proliferating and disappearing in favor of each other.<sup>23</sup> Ōba implies that with the atomic bomb something different is at stake: human beings did not just play with fire, but with *horror vacui*. This very idea reduces the Enlightenment’s trust in science and development to a delusional faith. She illustrates in mythological terms what she means: she declares that the myth of Prometheus is useless—that “by making the atomic bomb, men cannot sing any song of praise to Prometheus anymore.”<sup>24</sup> She points out that the very possibility of the atomic bomb forces every single person to live in the fear that someone could one day, for whatever foolish reason, destroy a consistent part of, if not all of the world. Without allowing the despair she felt among the dying citizens of Hiroshima to take control of her discourse, she stays focused on how such a catastrophe was bestowed on human beings by other human beings, as well as on the need for a change in human thought in order to overcome the danger of a deadly unbalance in existence:

“Hiroshima was not struck by a catastrophe. Hiroshima was clearly chosen by human will, with the purpose of demonstrating a power of destruction that men produced with their human minds. [. . .] If we think of it, it’s not just the atomic bomb. The technology of men goes on and on killing other men. [. . .] When Prometheus stole fire, men gave birth to a new crime: arson. Hiroshima city was set on fire. For sure, the perverse psychology of someone intoxicated by the beauty of blazing flames lay behind the criminals who decided to drop the atomic bomb.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ōba and Yoshimoto 1974, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ōba 1977, p. 323.

<sup>24</sup> Ōba 1973, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Ōba 1973, pp. 25–26.



Science and technology must not be the result of human exhilaration with their inherent possibilities, just as fire must not be spread on a city out of the fascination exerted by its flames. After making clear what Hiroshima stands for, Ōba starts pondering an alternative way to the one that brought about the atomic bomb, and she finds it in storytelling. As society is left without the myth of Prometheus, those who eyewitnessed a vision of the end of the world must tell and tell again, transmitting the (hi)story to the next generation, in order to create a new mythology of humankind: "I am nothing more than an eyewitness of Hiroshima near its doom. Still, I think that every kind of Hiroshima witnesses ought to hand down their memories. I am convinced that if these countless stories were put together to become a new myth of the humankind, there could be a unique form of salvation."<sup>26</sup>

The urgency to reinstate an epistemic discourse at the roots of human existence was intuitively felt by Hiroshima authors Hara Tamiki 原民喜 and Ōta Yōko 大田洋子 when they faced the aporia of translating into narrative or poetic form what they felt to be utterly impossible to reproduce or evoke unless it was repeated in the flesh. Hara wrote a poem entitled "Kore ga ningen na no desu" コレガ人間ナノデス (This is a human being), where he describes a body disfigured by the atomic bomb: he asks the reader to watch it and hear the cry for help whispered by the voice of the victim, and, finally, to recognize those features as the face of a human being.<sup>27</sup> In the poem there is a clear progression from the body, which has been nearly turned into a corpse, to the voice: Hara implies that the passive act of observing the atrocity embodied in the victim must not collapse onto the evidence of a dying object, but shift to the active listening of a speaking subject, although this subject is endangered. Thus, soon after the atomic bomb of Hiroshima we already find a straightforward indication pointing to the human voice, equating the human being to an act of speech.

Ōta Yōko, on the other hand, showed a similar concern throughout her oeuvre, especially in her four novels dealing with the bomb and its aftermath. The first, *Shikabane no machi* 屍の街 (City of Corpses, 1948) exposes the paradox, engendered by the bomb, of a city inhabited by corpses, a life in the necropolis: she describes retrospectively, while she waits for the so-called A-bomb disease to manifest its symptoms, her escape from the center of Hiroshima to Yokogawa station and then into the mountains north of the burning city. In the second novel, *Ningen ranru* 人間檻樓 (Ruins of Humanity, 1951), Ōta experiments with omniscient narration and recounts the vicissitudes of different characters confronted with the atomic bomb, trying to give an all-encompassing image of the destruction. Finally, the last two works use the I-novel frame to discuss, in *Hanningen* 半人間 (Half Human, 1954), the painful process of overcoming trauma and psychological exhaustion experienced by Ōta herself, while in *Yūnagi no machi to hito to* 夕風の街と人と

<sup>26</sup>Ōba 1973, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup>Hara 1950, p. 233.

(The People and the City of the Evening Calm, 1955) her alter-ego goes back to the city and starts interviewing the people who survived the disaster in search of answers to the questions that constantly taint her after the experience. We can draw from the titles a suggestion of the trajectory implicitly followed by Ōta: starting from the corpses, she depicts what she sees as images of ruined human beings and then human beings left with only half of their former humanity, until she is able to resume speaking of human beings in terms of people inhabiting a space once again viable to human life. Hara and Ōta were the first to understand, although having no time or favorable circumstances to theorize, that telling about humankind confronted with extreme violence is a practice that originates from the (experienced) observation of human life and death, aimed at finally injecting the presence of the human voice.

Ōba herself practices storytelling as a whole process of building a new foundation to human life:

“To the east of the Eurasian continent, there, long and thin, stretches the Japanese archipelago. The murmur of the sand, the murmur of the waves and the wind across the woods gave birth to Japanese songs. When the wind starts to blow, a song is born. Human beings grew up listening to those songs: when they run across each other, they try to look into their own sadness and the happiness of others through the songs they used to hear. This is how we have looked into the way human beings lived up to now, and this is also how we will be doing it in the future. There is no other way to keep on living.

Lying on the seashore, I press my hear to the sand. The murmur of the water soaking into the ground, the sound of the waves drifting far away, the murmur of the birds flying over the waves, the murmur of the fish in the waves, my voice, the murmur of human beings.”<sup>28</sup>

It is by listening to the poetry born in the wind that human beings are able to comprehend each other's feelings and emotions, because everything they feel has its source in the whisper of Nature. By listening to it, human beings always tuned their own whispers accordingly, which resulted, in turn, in their own poetry and songs. Making an interesting parallel to *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語, she explains that, as long as there is something at the core that stirs the water, the waves of narration keep rippling farther and wider, until they encircle a surface that is as broad as human experience can be.<sup>29</sup> Ōba lets the intermingling of narration mirror the same process happening in the world of existence. Creating narratives that spontaneously weave together into an undivided net is the inward process that parallels the interwoven state of all the things that come into existence. Therefore, the storyteller embodies the blueprint for describing and interpreting the relationships that bind all the elements of Nature together: he or she is a ‘role

<sup>28</sup> Ōba 2000, pp. 539–40.

<sup>29</sup> Mizuta and Ōba 1995, p. 14.

model' that can be traced back to ancient times, when the ancestors of modern man chose to tell stories in the form of mythology and songs that ruled the community both by evoking the forces of creation that shaped the human into being, and by preventing its members from transgressing the crucial limit of existence: the limit between Death and Life, Being and non-Being. Yet, this realization is declared only at the end of the second part of the tetralogy, *Urashimasō*—a work that represents, as a whole, a hymn to the power of storytelling about everything that is. Overshadowed by the legend of Urashima Tarō 浦島太郎, the work is concerned with the time of life and survival, taking for granted the existence of a place for it to be. *Funakuimushi* is the fundamental premise to everything that follows because it's the place where the re-creation of the myth of existence is set into motion. Moreover, it will become clear how this process is run by a gender-related discourse throughout—an aspect that differentiates Ōba's works on the atomic bomb from Hara's and Ōta's.

### Approaching the Driftwood: Self-Impregnating Clams and Self-Swallowing Snakes

Ōba's mythopoiesis is introduced by two startling images at the very beginning of *Funakuimushi*: the shipworms of the title, and the snake swallowing its own tail, in the first paragraph. These are both pivotal elements in letting the symbolic ritual underlying the narrative come into clearer light: they appear at certain points of the story, like sudden glints from behind the surface of the complex imagery, marking the development of the work's secret project.

The uncanny creatures dominating the entire work, from the standpoint of the title, are described in great detail by Ōba through the words of the Owner.<sup>30</sup> Shipworms have bodies similar to worms, but they are clams equipped with two valves at the top and sexual organs at the end. They spend their lives boring holes into wooden structures immersed in seawater, like piers or boats. Each shipworm attacks the wood and starts burrowing with its two, hard valves: the hole becomes a deep tunnel, through which the shipworm's body stretches as it goes further in. A shipworm never crosses another shipworm's path: if they get too close, they purposely change direction, to avoid each other. Once a shipworm dips its valves into the wood, there is no way back to the surface nor the seawater: its life is spent chewing cellulose and making its worm-like body longer, until, eventually, it dies. Shipworms are hermaphrodite clams: their masculine genitals ejaculate the sperm from the tails hanging out from the holes into the sea, impregnating other shipworms equipped with feminine genitals on their tails floating nearby on the water. After being released directly into the sea, the larvae must find a piece of wood to attach to, otherwise they can't survive. Ōba presents the shipworm's existence as a transfiguration of that of the human being: stuck in a lonely race

<sup>30</sup>Ōba 1970a, pp. 38–40.

with no goal in sight, copulating with no intimacy, and begetting blindly a vulnerable offspring unknown to them. It reflects the form of solitude that human beings incarnate,<sup>31</sup> as well as the ambiguity, the radical uncertainty of gender roleplaying in the nuclear age.

Ōba's equation is clear: all her characters move under the sign of the shipworm. Each one embodies each one a version, or perversion, of passion: the way they act in their sexual relationships is the only trait used to characterize them. The story in the present shows all these characters practicing sex as outsiders of passion: they defy any established form of intercourse. With the sole exception of the Owner, they all have their reproductive potentials impaired: the Magician is sterile because of the radiations from the nuclear experiments; the Prince abstains from sex in order not to procreate; the Princess had her womb removed; the Florist is impotent. All the descriptions of sexual acts in the present are overshadowed by death: bodies are compared to corpses, or transformed through fantasies of dismemberment into ritual objects that become simulacra of desire. The Owner feels the cold body of the Florist in her bed as a man dying of cancer who got frozen, invading her bed.<sup>32</sup> In another scene, the Princess illustrates to the Prince how she is going to use the bones from his dead body to create jewels and funerary masks for both of them.<sup>33</sup> The present is permeated by this sort of description, which all point to a grim, infertile, deadly sexuality. Reproduction is impaired or refused, favouring forms of escapist, ecstatic pleasure. The characters take the form of Daoist saints (*sennin* 仙人 and *senjo* 仙女), who devote their sexual practice to transcendence; otherwise they reenact the parts of legendary figures, as the Owner does, together with the Magician, when they interpret Salomé and John the Baptist on the stage of the hotel's theater.<sup>34</sup> The hotel at the end of the world, then, becomes a secret, secluded space where to experiment with new forms of expression of sexuality and relationship.

Therefore, shipworms are not only a metaphoric representation of the "hell of loneliness"<sup>35</sup> human beings live into. They function as transitory moulds, as omni-gendered catalysts to the regeneration of a basic gendered unit that could grant survival. After the final de-gendering power of the atomic bomb, which neutralized gender into an indistinguishable lump of sterile flesh, neither female nor male,<sup>36</sup> neither alive nor dead,<sup>37</sup> shipworms become an unprecedented model to experiment with. This is also true for many other elements of Nature: the characters watch their own bodies reflect and transform, through imagination, into animals and flowers, mutually mixing and melting shapes. This ceaseless turning

<sup>31</sup>Ōba 1970b, p. 119.

<sup>32</sup>Ōba 1970a, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup>Ōba 1970a, pp. 164–165.

<sup>34</sup>Ōba 1970a, pp. 89–90.

<sup>35</sup>Hiraoka 1974, p. 215.

<sup>36</sup>Hara 1950, p. 233.

<sup>37</sup>Ōba 1973b, p. 13.

of something into something else through naturalistic metaphors and similitudes is possibly the most typical among Ōba's representational strategies: a 'phyto-morphosis' of reality where Ōba's conception of Nature as a net of infinite links connecting everything with everything else finds its most extreme representation. Shipworms are the disturbing wild card allowing the observer to multiply the views on reality. They widen the horizon of the scene, they allow foresight: they offer the perfect standpoint from which to look at the hot-spring island, a land with no children that Ōba explicitly calls a "waste land" (*arechi* 荒地).<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, shipworms are reminiscent of Tiresias in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: if the blind eyes of the seer, "old man with wrinkled female breasts," visualized the abjection in terms of "young man[']s carbuncular" "exploring hands" and "lovely woman[']s" "automatic hand," shipworms expose both the incestuous relationship of the Florist with his step-sister Ari, and the struggle to free sexuality from its deadly premises through abstinence, defiance, promiscuity and self-mutilation. Ōba's violent paroxysm of sexual representation is a necessary step toward the description of human survival in terms of non-homicidal forms of intercourse.

### The Fisher King in the Atomic Waste Land

The impotence of the Florist is another crucial element in *Funakuimushi*. Ōba gives him the traits of the Fisher King, wounded into impotence and awaiting regeneration in the middle of the waste land. Clearly *la terre gaste* from the Grail legend comes to Ōba through the reading of Eliot's poem. Why is the Florist wounded? He suddenly became impotent when Ari committed suicide. The horrifying past comes back to him in dreams and hallucination. The most terrifying of all these visions is the gigantic black cactus that towers in the middle of a desert-shore;<sup>39</sup> among its spikes are flowers and creatures like the owl and the swallowtail butterfly, the snail and the Chinese trumpet creeper, the bat and the gardenia—all reminders of the abortions the Florist was forced to perform. Under a pouring rain of blood, he can see a tapeworm that is a symbol of an aborted foetus. The cactus' description reminds of the totems traditionally found in Native American communities in Alaska. It is also a multilayered symbol: it is a phallus, but at the same time it stands for the abortive nature of the passion that bound the Florist and Ari together. We will know only later, from a similitude used in *Urashimasō*, that the cactus stands also for the atomic bomb itself.<sup>40</sup>

The symbol of the atomic bomb is strictly associated, through its tangle of naturalistic elements, with the character of the stepsister, Ari. She is the only one in the entire work to be given a name—a name that turns out to be another key to interpreting the work: she was named Ari (which literally means 'being') because

<sup>38</sup>The term *arechi* has been used to translate Eliot's *The Waste Land* in Japan.

<sup>39</sup>Ōba 1970a, pp. 49–50.

<sup>40</sup>Ōba 1977, pp. 161–62.

in her region, the main resource for agriculture was the pear tree. 'Pear' in Japanese is '*nashi*' 梨, a word that has the same sound as 'non-being,' *nashi* 無し. That is why, in her region, 'pears' were called '*ari no mi*' and not '*nashi no mi*.' Therefore, in the play of words that underlies her name, Ari is the character in which being and non-being struggle against each other. She is the ultimate symbol of the risk that Being might turn into non-Being—a risk that manifested its reality in the atomic bomb.

To further stress the mythical significance of Ari's character, Ōba depicts her in the middle of a self-swallowing snake, which represents the *ouroboros*, an ancient symbol, shared by many Mediterranean cultures, for the eternal cycle of life and death, the fundamental unity of the opposites in perfect balance. At the same time, the cosmogonic trait of the *ouroboros* associated with the mythical figure of Ari sitting in it points to the conflation of the self-swallowing snake with the hinduist Ananta-Shesha, the endless *nāgā* snake, holder of the Universe, on which Vishnu rests.

### Performative Reproductions: Renewing the Myth of Existence

With these elements in mind, it gradually becomes clear how Ōba built the foundations of *Funakuimushi*: a past dominated by frightful ancestors and a sterilized, abortive sexuality that resulted in suicide and impotence (war and the atomic bomb). Then, a present inhabited by 'recovering human beings' who struggle to set their lives, their bodies and passions apart from the world they left behind.

The past, on the plot level, reminds of mythological narratives like the Theban cycle in Ancient Greek culture, and suggests the mythopoetic quality advocated by Ōba for her work. By pointing her eyes at the dark depths of the abyss, she reinstates the borders between being and non-being, between destruction and survival; indeed, her new mythology of the incestuous, abortive, homicidal family retains a strong premodern quality in themes and function. The present, on the other hand, is the space of a re-gendering experimentation, where the search for the lost fertility of humankind takes place. The story of this search is produced by metabolizing literary models that already attempted a confrontation with the shortcomings of modernity (specifically, *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*), which Ōba updates and manipulates to take into account a crisis of civilization that was impossible to foresee, in its full spectrum, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Ōba seems to suggest that before going back to sexual reproduction, which could only increase population and, with it, the chances of self-destruction, humankind should devote its energies to another kind of reproduction: the performing of the voices of poets and storytellers from the past, who unveiled human nature by listening to the murmur (*tsubuyaki* 呟き) of the wind, the very source of poetic expression as well as mutual understanding among human beings (the two things are actually synonymous for Ōba). It is a proposition that Ōba herself will follow, culminating in *Mukashi onna ga ita* むかし女がいた (Once Upon a Time, There Was a Woman, 1994), her re-writing of *Ise monogatari* 伊勢物語, where

she describes, in the forms of tales and songs, the eternal game of male and female human beings in a world that, by its own nature, keeps circling in a dance of life and death. Her oeuvre, starting from the black hole of *Funakuimushi*, is an invitation to produce and reproduce the poetry of nature and existence as the only possible way of living and surviving the most destructive drives of desire.

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