

In Search of the Absolute

Kuki Shūzō and Shinran

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Kuki Shūzō was one of the very few Japanese philosophers to have chosen to convert to Catholicism. He was baptized at the age of twenty-three, but when he died at fifty-four it was his wish that his bones be buried in Hōnen-in, the temple where Shinran's master, Hōnen, had lived. This paper seeks to establish a link between Kuki's philosophy and Shinran's ideas, and in particular to focus on the theoretical and experiential aspects of the notion of salvation through Amida Buddha. We will begin with a discussion of metaphysical loneliness and the idea of this present existence. This will lead us to consider the reasons for Kuki's conversion to Catholicism. Finally, we will take up his reflections on Shinran and his turn to Amida Buddha as the absolute of salvation.

METAPHYSICAL LONELINESS AND *UTSUSHI-MI*

From reading only Kuki's philosophical writings, where he develops his theories of contingency, human existence, or other Japanese aesthetic notions, it would be difficult to perceive his philosophical thinking about loneliness. These philosophical writings are highly structured and well-argued. However, in parallel, he wrote many poems in order to express his more private feelings and raw emotions as well as

thoughts still in development. Loneliness is a recurrent theme animating many of these poems.

We may begin with a poem entitled “Loneliness.” The philosopher is addressing small black stones used in the Japanese game of Go. The perfectly round shape of the stone is taken to represent something complete and lacking nothing:

Loneliness!
 Too precious reverberation,
 Haven't you heard
 Its tune?
 Go stones!
 You are all perfectly round.
 No names are attached to you,
 Why don't you use numbers?
 One, two, three, four
 Let's call them encountering stones.
 Click, snick, click, snick
 Let's call it a friendly chat.
 Don't you know
 Metaphysical loneliness?
 Haven't you seen
 The shape of the rigorous authentic existence?
 True loneliness
 Cannot be broken even for a moment,
 True loneliness
 Neither love nor friendship can affect it.
 Interminable loneliness.
 Gushing from inside,
 Fragility of bitter herb,
 Sweetness of honey,
 Haven't you
 Tasted them in the past?
 Go stones!
 Curse your perfect round shape.¹

1. KUKI 1926, 152–4. Translation adjusted from MARRA 2004, 59.

Kuki first uses two words to qualify loneliness: “precious” (尊き) and “metaphysical” (形而上的). Self-contained beings, symbolized by the perfect shape of the Go stones, will never know the precious, metaphysical value of loneliness. Next, he juxtaposes “metaphysical loneliness” and “rigorous authentic existence” (かの厳しき實在), the former calling to mind the latter. Here we may see a Christian overtone. *Kano* corresponds to the word *ano* in current colloquial Japanese, a demonstrative adjective used to refer to something or someone at a distance from the writer but well known to the reader. *Itsukushiki* means severe, rigorous, austere. This qualification could conceivably remind us of the crucified Jesus who was completely abandoned by mankind. Thirdly, he notes that real loneliness can never be healed by any form of human affection: “Neither love nor friendship can affect it.” Finally, he concludes that loneliness is something welling up continuously from within him. In this way, Kuki’s poem shows his appreciation of the precious, metaphysical value of loneliness as well as of the suffering it brings as a result of one’s inability to do anything about it.

In another poem we find a clear expression of how Kuki regarded his loneliness as arising from a thirst for metaphysical being. The verses in question are the conclusion to a work called “An Autumn Day” which Kuki composed in Paris on the occasion of a visit by a close friend from his high-school days in Tokyo. The verses preceding those cited below show that this meeting of two old friends was a cause of great happiness to him. They spent a day together in Paris walking together and discussing. The poem’s general tone is marked by a rhythm of joyfulness. Nevertheless, it ends:

Life emerging from chaos entering chaos,
 A flickering, short human life in the midst of eternity,
 Both you and I already on the verge of exceeding half of it,
*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...*²
 After all, I am lonesome,
 The loneliness of one who follows darkness, the grief of one
 who pursues an invisible shadow,
 A philosophy without metaphysics is sad—

2. Kuki is citing from the opening lines of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

I wish for a metaphysics that problematizes human existence and death.³

These verses suggest the brevity and fragility of human life, and a turn to metaphysics in search of an explanation to human existence and death. They also suggest that Kuki's loneliness was the result of an inability to attain an unseen, metaphysical being for which he groped in the dark. We may recall that he composed this poem in Paris, probably in 1925, at the age of thirty-seven. Clearly Christianity, and, more precisely Catholicism, into which he had been baptized at twenty-three, did not satisfy his doubts during this Parisian period.

Let us look more closely at another term Kuki frequently uses in his poems to qualify his existential state: *utsushi-mi*.⁴ The first of the Chinese characters that make up this compound word is pronounced *utsu* 現 (the Sino-Japanese reading being *gen*, as in the word *genzai* 現在, the present). It is used as a qualifier to that which appears in front of one's eyes, to what is actual and real. The second character, *mi* 身, signifies the body. Thus *utsushi-mi* 現し身 expresses the "body at the present moment." According to the standard dictionary of Japanese, the term refers to human body in this present life (NKD 2: 346). When read with its Sino-Japanese reading, *genshin*, it is associated with Buddhist vocabulary and means "the current existence in the present life" (IBD 289). The "present life" translates the word *gensei* 現世, which means that the word points to transition of the soul from former lives into future lives.⁵

The following poem, entitled 「わが³こころ」, "My Heart," was published in 1925 when Kuki was thirty-seven years of age. I will use Marra's translation except that I chose to render *hakanai* as "short-lived" rather than as "helpless" (MARRA 2004, 64).

3. KUKI 1926, 128. Translation adjusted from MARRA 2004, 50.

4. In his philosophical works, Kuki used the term 實存, authentic existence, to explain the idea of the human being. Briefly, the *jitsuzon* means the way of living of a human being who himself consciously determines his own essence. This word does not in any way imply sadness in these texts. See SAITŌ 2008, 63–72.

5. Kuki's short poem makes mention of a previous life : さびしさを味ふことを前の世のさだめかなどとあきらめもする。[The taste of loneliness, is that the fate of my former life? I am resigned to it.] KSZ supplement, 114.

When spring comes, although the flowers are fragrant,
 Though the foliage swings in the green,
 My heart constantly bemoans things,
 My thoughts are short-lived.
 Although I dance with a young girl,
 Though I kiss her crimson lips,
 My heart constantly bemoans things,
 My thoughts are short-lived.

.....

As long as I live in this changing world,
 As long as this present existence breathes,
 My heart constantly bemoans things,
 My thoughts will be short lived. (KUKI 1926, 168–9)

The sentiment of the emptiness or fragility of things (*bakanai*) is ever-present to the philosopher, even when he is with a close friend. The phrase “my present existence” appears after the line “As long as I live in this changing world” to indicate that the world—and with it, human existence—is constantly changing and that nothing is stable. The notion of one’s present existence is thus inseparable from the impermanent nature of the universe.

Next, I would like to cite a short poem written in Kyoto and published in 1938 when Kuki was fifty years old.

Cold is the water sound
 Of the Kamo River -
 Standing in the classroom,
 This present body
 Goes extinct. (KZS I: 194; MARRA 2004, 98.)

Marra translates *utsushi-mi* as “this present body,” which is in fact an accurate way to convey the sense of the word. Kuki was then teaching at the University of Kyoto where he could hear the sound of water coming from the *Kamo River*. The constant sound of running water provides a background that evokes the impermanence of everything in the universe. The philosopher is aware of the fragility of an existence doomed one day to disappear. In fact, Kuki died three years later, but there is no need to

read any foreboding into the poem. In fact, other short poems published at the same time do not share the perspective we find here.

To recapitulate, I have taken up three poems to elucidate Kuki's notions of "metaphysical loneliness" and "this present existence." Metaphysical loneliness, we have seen, is the sentiment of absolute aloneness that no love or human friendship can alter, and yet it is something precious. This present existence, in contrast, leads into the idea of the transmigration of the soul in a transitory world. Taken together, they make it perfectly reasonable to assume that Kuki was suffering from a metaphysical loneliness that could only be lifted by a higher metaphysical being. This may help account for his conversion to Catholicism in his youth.

KUKI AND CATHOLICISM

Kuki's conversion to Catholicism both affirms his quest for a higher, metaphysical being and prepares the way for his encounter with salvation through Amida Buddha. Here we may consider three periods in Kuki's life: the time he spent studying philosophy at the Imperial University of Tokyo, the years he spent in Paris in his late thirties, and a final period in Kyoto around the age of fifty.

Two persons were enormously influential in Kuki's conversion to Catholicism: Raphael Koeber and Iwashita Sōichi. Kuki began studying philosophy when he was twenty-one and became Catholic two years later. At the time, he was studying under Raphael Koeber (1848–1923), a German philosopher who had graduated from the University of Heidelberg and became a Catholic by choice.⁶ Two years after Kuki's conversion, he wrote a research paper in German under Koeber entitled "Die geschichtliche Entwicklung des Problems von Glauben und Wissen im Mittelalter."⁷ In it he set out to clarify a number of theological and philo-

6. As a teacher at the Imperial University of Tokyo from 1893 to 1914, Koeber exerted significant influence over many future Japanese philosophers who affectionately called him "Kēberu sensei." Prior to coming to Japan, he left the Orthodox Church and entered Catholicism. See KOEBER 1991, 206.

7. "Glauben und Wissen," KSZ 1: 345–98. This text is considered to be a draft of his research paper.

sophical positions on the relationship between belief and knowledge. He used sources such as the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistles of Paul, Latin texts from Migne's *Patrology*, Maurice de Wulf's *Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Philosophie* (1923), Kuno Fischer's *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie* (1912), and Theodor Grandérath's *Geschichte des Vatikanischen Konzils* (1903). Among the many church fathers and theologians he cited are Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Augustine, Scotus Eriugena, Anselm, Abélard, and Aquinas.

Kuki demonstrated an encyclopaedic knowledge in his attempt to highlight the various ways reason, faith, and mystery had been interrelated, particularly among medieval schools of thought. He concluded with an analysis of three tendencies: belief obedient to knowledge, knowledge obedient to belief, and the harmonious union of belief and knowledge.

During this academic period, Kuki became close friends with a Japanese Catholic, Iwashita Sōichi (1889–1940), with whom he had studied in high school and later at the Imperial University of Tokyo. In a piece called “Recollections of Iwashita Sōichi,” we see the depth of their friendship.⁸ Kuki writes that they lived in the same district of Tokyo and they often walked home together after class. Both were attending Koeber's lectures, which covered not only the history of Western philosophy but also medieval philosophy, Kant, Hegel, and nineteenth-century French philosophy.⁹ Iwashita gave Kuki a copy of the Japanese translation of *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, which he was delighted to read. Iwashita went on to study at the Catholic University of Louvain and in Rome. After ordination to the priesthood, he would later become director of a hospital for lepers. Kuki says of him:

firm belief, great culture, noble morality, and wide knowledge were of infinitely deep value, but these attributes were perfectly balanced in his character. (KSZ 5: 148)¹⁰

Obviously Kuki was touched by Iwashita's Catholic faith and let it be

8. KSZ 5: 142–50. This text was published in 1941 upon Iwashita's death.

9. Iwashita and Kuki were the only two scholars to follow Greek classes taught by a junior Japanese professor (KSZ 5: 144).

10. KSZ 5: 148.

known that he considered marrying Iwashita's sister. As it turned out, she chose the life of a Catholic nun.¹¹

During his time in Paris, between the ages of thirty-six and forty, Kuki explained his views regarding Christianity in Japan in an essay entitled “Le sujet et le greffon.” Here he reveals that he was attracted by the morality of Jesus and that Christian dogma was only of secondary importance to him:

Jesus who died to defend his beliefs deserves our sincere admiration.... Here we are faced with a man who calls on us to follow a path which is hardly different from our own *bushidō*, the way of the warrior. And when we read in “The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi” that he gave the Holy Bible, the only thing he had left, to a beggar, this story strikes us because it shows us the absolute purity of the soul. We are in the presence of something that is true and valiant. For many of our compatriots Christianity appears as fascinatingly attractive. (KSZ I: 244)

This text allows us to establish beyond doubt the reason for Kuki's conversion. He was genuinely moved by St Francis of Assisi's spirit of detachment in giving to a mere beggar what was most precious to him. He saw in it a meeting point with the path to unselfish behavior held up as an ideal in the samurai code of morality.

During his final years in Kyoto, Kuki, now nearly fifty years of age, penned a deeply personal reminiscence of Christianity in Tokyo at the time of his conversion¹²:

My time at the Number One High School lies in the distant past for me now. At the time, students practised Christianity the way later generations would turn to Marxism. ... Iwashita Sōichi practised his Catholic faith resolutely. I also went through a period when I would read the *Imitation of Christ* every morning on the way to school, and was even considering joining the Trappist congregation in Hokkaidō.¹³ All

11. “Today I Wonder,/after so many years,/How my lover/who became a Catholic nun/is doing. (KSZ I,192; MARRA 2004, 96).

12. 「一高時代の舊友」. The text was published in 1937.

13. The Cistercian congregation of Trappists in Hokkaidō was founded in 1897.

of that belongs to the past now, like a dream, but I would not say that the past is without consequence for the present. (KSZ 5: III)

Two things should be noted here: his attraction to the Cistercian way of life and the general influence these years had on the rest of his life.

In conclusion, it should be said that there is no way of knowing how long and how deeply Kuki thought of himself as Catholic. In Paris, people who reminded him of Catholicism would often prompt him to write a poem, but one has the sense that he is writing as an outside observer. None of the texts from the Parisian years suggests that he was himself a practicing Catholic. Given the deep loneliness from which he suffered in those years, it would seem that, at least on an emotional level, he could no longer see the light of Christianity.¹⁴

SHINRAN AND THE QUEST OF SALVATION

Before looking into Kuki's own writings for influence from Shinran, it is helpful to remember the popularity Shinran's ideas were at the time. At the end of the nineteenth century, Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) had applauded the teachings of Shinran in the *Tannmishō* (歎異抄). Shinran's image was further enhanced by Kurata Hyakuzō's 1917 play "The Priest and his Disciples" (出家とその弟子). Chikazumi Jōkan 近角常観 (1870–1941) gave lectures on Shinran's thought in the Gudō Kaikan (求道会館) founded in 1915 near the Imperial University of Tokyo. In 1935, Yoshikawa Eiji, a popular writer, published his *Shinran*. Throughout this development, the Shinran of the *Tannmishō* was a major source of inspiration, in particular the idea that salvation though Amida Buddha was promised to all people, the good and the bad alike, but first of all to the bad. Despite his popularity at that time, in his own age Shinran's approach to the renewal of practical methods and his rejection of a

14. On a philosophical level, Kuki never ceased to think about an absolute being. In *The Problem of Contingency*, he develops his ideas on this point (SAITŌ 2008, 58–72). In this same regard, we may note one of Kuki's poems dedicated to Nishida Kitarō: 「場所」として神を観ぜし巴里びとマールブランシュ忘れ難かり [Parisian, (Nicolas de) Malebranche, he saw God as a "place," something I cannot forget.], in KSZ supplement, 139.

hierarchy that ranked people according to their lineage or social standing had led to his condemnation and exile at the hands of the religious authorities.

Kuki was one of those philosophers whose interests included not only European philosophical texts but also Chinese and Japanese sources.¹⁵ Writings that reveal the influence of Shinran's ideas center on three points: the encounter with the absolute, detachment from personal relationships, and salvation through Amida Buddha

In a recent essay on Kuki Shūzō (SAITŌ 2008), I analyzed his notion of the absolute as worked out in *The Problem of Contingency*, concluding that the absolute is defined by Kuki as “the whole containing all its constituent parts, so that it is both concrete and full.” It is in this sense that we need to read his allusions to the “metaphysical absolute” of the western philosophical tradition, the “supreme ultimate” (太極) of the *Book of Changes* (from the Chinese tradition), and Amida Buddha from the Pure Land Buddhist tradition.

On the very last page of *The Problem of Contingency*, Kuki stresses the importance of a conscious encountering with an absolute being. Far from leaving one indifferent to the absolute, the experience and its effects need to be appropriated and internalized. He also emphasizes the existential transformation brought about by the encounter, which can guide one to a different future. Here he uses the term “salvation” (救済) in this regard, and concludes with a quotation from Vasubandhu's *Treatise of the Pure Land* that is included in Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*.¹⁶

“Once the power of the original vows of the Buddha has been contemplated, once you have met with them, [it is obvious that] no one can pass in vain”.... “No one can pass in vain” must surely mean, that once I have engaged you and internalized you, I have new possibilities for my future. An infinite possibility, next to impossible, now becomes

15. The catalogue of Kuki's library, now housed at Kōnan University in Kōbe, lists 4,229 European books and 3,116 in classical Japanese and Chinese. Among them are more than 200 volumes of 『国訳一切経』 [Collected sutras in Japanese translation] published between 1929 and 1936.

16. SZ I, 39; “When I observe the Buddha's Primal Vow-Power, / I find that those who meet with it do not pass in vain. / They are enabled to gain quickly / The great treasure-sea of merit” (SHINRAN 2003, 23).

real within contingency; once I have firmly grasped this possibility as contingency, this contingency opens up new possibilities, which in turn develops into new necessities. This is precisely the reason for the original vows of the Buddha and the salvation of human beings. (KSZ 2: 259–60)

In the Pure Land sect, the Amida, the Buddha of eternal life and infinite light (*Amitāyus* and *Amitābha* in Sanskrit), made forty-eight original vows when he was a bodhisattva to save without distinction all human beings. From “no one can pass in vain” onwards, Kuki expresses the meaning of a spiritual conversion, the meaning of a new direction to life after encountering a transcendent being. His insistence on a power outside of oneself parallels Shinran’s notion of the centrality of other-power (*tariki* 他力 in Japanese). Both stress the opening of one’s spirit to the absolute.¹⁷

Regarding detachment from personal relationships, a short poem that Kuki composed in Kyoto shows his clear agreement with Shinran:

I will have no disciple, said Shinran; as for me [Kuki],
I long to have his soul. (KSZ supplement, 146)

This poem confirms that Kuki had read the *Tannishō*, where it is written: “I, Shinran, do not have a single disciple of my own” (SZ supplement, 10; YUIEN 1996, 6). Shinran explains that it is not because of him that those around him pray to the Buddha (*nenbutsu* 念佛). It is rather because of the Buddha that they know how to pray, which makes it absurd for him to claim anyone as his disciple. Kuki’s poem attests that he wishes to share this attitude.

As for salvation through Amida Buddha, we may single out three poems written in Kyoto during the winter of 1937 to 1938 (KSZ supplement, 147), when Kuki was forty-nine years old. They were written one after the other but were not published during his lifetime. Taken together, they represent a surprising element to Kuki’s search for the absolute.

17. A major difference is that Kuki gives more importance to deciding upon an act oneself. Freedom is defined by Kuki as choosing how to act. The free person is fully conscious of making decisions. Kuki uses the term *jitsuzon* (authentic existence) to qualify this mode of being. See KSZ 3: 99–102.

Light like a dream more inexplicable than a dream,
 (It) came to strike me, while I was awake.
 If I force myself to seek the reason why,
 I will not deny a neat relationship of cause and effect
 An invisible stick hit me on the head,
 I remain upright, incapable of uttering a single word.

It is evident that Kuki was visualizing something inexplicable. The term he uses, 不思議, echoes Shinran, who often used it to describe the inexplicable power of Amida Buddha that transcends all human understanding.¹⁸ He is the Buddha of infinite light, who extends his light to all the universes while remaining in his Pure Land, believed to be located somewhere far in the west. (Pure Land Buddhism is a foreign school, originally from western India.) My hypothesis is that Kuki, caught up in something he could not explain, thought back to the village of Kuki (九鬼村) on the Pacific Ocean, not far from the Kumano district. He had travelled to this village in the autumn of 1937 (KSZ 5: 65–71) and the three poems cited above were written in the following winter.

The third poem of the series leaves no doubt that Kuki's dream of inexplicable light was a great shock to him. Just what did he see? Was it a form of Amida Buddha bathed in light? Or was it light falling on the Pacific Ocean? Since the time that Pure Land Buddhist had spread in the twelfth century, the Pacific Ocean by Kumano had symbolized a passage into the Pure Land. Kuki's texts do not make the connection explicitly, but another of his poems informs us that shortly thereafter he visited Hōnen-in, a temple built in the location where Shinran's master, Hōnen, had lived. Kuki himself lived near this temple.¹⁹

What is more, the following autumn, he would visit Hōkai-ji (法界寺) in Kyoto (SKZ supplement, 150), famous for its statue of Amida Buddha, a treasured representative of Heian art. That autumn he would also visit Byōdō-in (平等院) in Uji, the location of a magnificent statue of Amida Buddha (SKZ supplement, 153). Kuki's notebooks include other short

18. sz supplement, 5. "Since through the Wonder of his original Vow Amida realized the Name, which is easy to hold in mind and to call" (YUIEN 1996, 9).

19. A poem confirms that this visit took place: When I arrive / At Hōnen-in, / In the desolation of winter / A monk sounds / The eventide bell. KSZ supplement, 149.

poems indicating visits to seventeen temples listed in the “Pilgrimage in the western land” (西国三十三所巡礼) in the region of Kumano. This pilgrimage is linked to a belief in the Pure Land and rebirth there at the end of life.

Three years later, in 1941, Kuki contracted an illness and. In accordance with his wishes, his remains are buried in Hōnen-in.

CONCLUSION

We may now summarize in chronological order the spiritual path Kuki followed. He decided to become a Catholic at the age of twenty-three, while studying western philosophy in Tokyo. An attraction to Christian morality, more than to Christian doctrines, lay behind his conversion. Nonetheless, while at university he studied the medieval western philosophical debates on the relationship between reason and faith. Between the ages of thirty-six and forty, while living in Paris, he began to speak of “metaphysical loneliness.” While living in Kyoto, from the age of forty-one until his death at age fifty-four, Kuki’s perception of the transient nature of things and the fragility of existence often played a pivotal role in his poetry. He familiarized himself with the ideas of Shinran. When he was about fifty years old, he had a mystical experience involving inexplicable light that shook him to the core. He then visited a number of temples more or less closely connected to Pure Land Buddhism. Three years later he died and his bones were buried at Hōnen-in as he had expressly requested.

We may also recapitulate the three principal philosophical ideas we have selected as relevant to this chain of events. First is “metaphysical loneliness,” a sentiment that no human thought or affection can heal. It is a suffering caused by the fundamental absence of a transcendent absolute, and one to which a self-satisfied person would not be sensitive.

Second is the idea of “present existence,” which was not Kuki’s own invention but belongs to the notion of “the human body in the present” as expressed in Japanese literary tradition and as referred to the transmigration of the soul from one life to another. For Kuki, it signals the temporary, fragile modality of present human existence.

Finally, “salvation” is defined by Kuki as a new direction taken after one’s encountering with the absolute. He stresses the importance of committing oneself to internalizing the strength of the absolute as “other.” His conversion to Catholicism during his youth is surely linked to an awareness of such a commitment.

All things considered, these three philosophical ideas seem to be bound together in a fundamental sense. Human existence is transitory and brittle; it is impossible to find a place to anchor oneself within it. No friendship, no love can escape this existential fragility. As a result of this way of seeing the world, one is pushed to seek a being that is truly other, an absolute other that is not part of this transitory world. Thus salvation signifies an encounter with an absolute other. For this salvation to be meaningful, a person must be committed to appropriating such an encounter internally.

It seems clear that Kuki’s and Shinran’s reasons echo each other profoundly. Their common cultural basis lies in a view of the things of the world as transitory and impermanent. This point of view, in turn, represents a common existential element in their search for the absolute. Shinran and Kuki agree on the value of an absolute other and on the importance of an existential encounter with that absolute. Nonetheless, the two diverge on an important point: Shinran believed firmly that he had already found the absolute in the form of Amida Buddha. Things are not so clear for Kuki. Did he share the conviction of having found the absolute? The question remains open. At least, it seems to me, we may affirm his burning thirst for an absolute other and a desire to meet that other at death. His desire to be interred in Hōnen-in corroborates that conclusion.

If we press further to look for differences between Kuki and philosophers inspired by Zen Buddhism such as Nishitani Keiji, we should note that Kuki, like Shinran, required an encounter with the absolute capable of being represented in a personified form. All in all, neither Shinran nor Kuki shows much interest in an absolute located within the depths of human consciousness alone.

* The author wishes to express her gratitude to Helen Shall for preparing this English translation from the French original.

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