**Japan Through Western Eyes in *Stupeur et Tremblements* by Amélie Nothomb**

**Running title: Japan Through Western Eyes**

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**Abstract**

Amélie Nothomb’s 1999 novel *Stupeur et Tremblements* portrays the misadventures, misunderstandings and misgivings experienced by a Belgian professional in a large, modern Japanese workplace. This book is often read as an autobiographical account of the author’s Japanese experience, and as a satirical critique of Japanese society. I argue that while the narrator is unable to perform the duty for which she was hired as translator, she acts as an interpreter of Japanese mores. Always and indelibly perceived within the boundaries of Western culture, Japan in the novel is a stylized construct replete with references to Western concepts. My article sheds light on how this construct takes shape in the text by focusing on several narrative techniques which emphasize and foreground the narrator’s immersion in Western culture, including allusions to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, paraphrasing and injection of meaning, namedropping of Western key figures and concepts, and the eye as a recurring motif and metaphor.

Key words:

Amélie Nothomb, Stupeur et Tremblement, Fear and Trembling, Japan, Western culture, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, cultural discourse

**Introduction**

Amélie Nothomb’s 1999 novel *Stupeur et Tremblements* (*Fear and Trembling*)[[1]](#footnote-2) depicts the misadventures, misunderstandings, and misgivings experienced by a Belgian professional in a large, modern Japanese workplace. This book is most often read as a satirical critique of Japanese society in general or specifically of the world of Japanese commercial enterprises, aimed at exposing the oppressive and misogynist hierarchical system in Japan (Chira, 2001; Narjout, 2004; Sylvester, 2016). Another popular reading is of the novel as a representation of a clash of cultures, suggesting the impossibility of cultural exchange (De Jallad, 2008; Koma, 2009; Mahy, 2010). Within the satirical framework, the novel has also been read as a story of power games and the subversion of power relations (Korzeniowska, 2003; Termite, 2003),[[2]](#footnote-3) addressing specifically life and identity in Japan’s corporate world (Hărşan, 2014; Da Rocha Soares, 2012).[[3]](#footnote-4)

After finishing her studies in Europe, the protagonist-narrator Amélie returns to Japan, her country of birth as it happens, to work as a translator. Owing to her perfect knowledge of Japanese, acquired before she left Japan at the age of five, she is soon hired by the prestigious company Yumimoto on a one-year contract.[[4]](#footnote-5) However, her idealized vision of Japan turns out to be far from reality as she is immediately confronted with the company’s rigid hierarchy. While she starts out working as a translator for the company, instead of climbing the corporate ladder she progressively slides down it, until finally she is placed as a ‘dame pipi’ (restroom attendant) in the Yumimoto restroom. The novel recounts the narrator’s downfall from an already lowly position in the organizational hierarchy to an even lower one, from working as a low-ranking skilled professional to performing unskilled manual labour. The source of the satire lies, as Martine Guyot-Bender (2005) observes, in ‘the […] disjunction between the nostalgic image of Japan and the less-desirable, buzzing corporate world [which] puts Amélie’s story, before it even begins, within a broad cultural context and foregrounds her failure at (re)integration into a culture she obviously idealizes’ (p. 372).

Having spent the first five years of her life there, coming back to work in Japan is the narrator’s life-long dream. The image she holds of Japan is that of an idyllic and pastoral haven, an image that is nourished by her happy childhood memories and one which, in turn, fosters her dream of returning there as an adult (*SET*, pp. 22, 25–26; *FAT*, pp. 13, 15–16). The Japan she returns to, however, is a modern, industrial and commercial country. This contemporary Japanese experience clashes with her two sources of comparison and reference; the first being the old, original image she has of Japan and the other being the West, in the broad sense of the term, as her culture of origin. This paradoxical relationship with Japan is symbolized in the narrator’s feelings towards her superior Fubuki Mori, which consist of fascination and attraction mixed with rivalry and conflict. Fubuki in the novel is the embodiment of hierarchical Japan, however, she is also its victim (Ravet, 2006).

From the outset, the narrative presents itself as an autobiographical account, with the distance between the author, Amélie Nothomb, and the narrator, who goes by the same name, being markedly small due to references to biographical information published about the author (Delangue, 2014; Leblanc, 2012), notably the publication of the author’s first novel in Belgium in 1992, among others. In addition, the novel stresses its authenticity by specifying dates that serve as markers of accuracy and verisimilitude, or as coordinates of biographical orientation, for example the specific day Amélie joins Yumimoto and her last day there (January 7, 1991). At one point in the narrative, Amélie Nothomb – the author – evenaddresses the reader directly to explain why she had chosen to bring certain materials from her real life experience into the novel (*SET* p. 159; *FAT* p. 112). However, by the same token, we might also consider Nothombe’s novel *Ni d'Ève ni d'Adam* (2007), titled *Tokyo Fiancé* in the English translation, which recounts an alternative narrative of her escapades outside Yumimoto at the same period of time. Benjamin Hiramatsu Ireland (2012) goes as far as to argue, based on extra-literary materials garnered from Belgian archives, that Amélie’s biography as a Japanese native is a fabrication, which calls into question the events recounted and renders them misleading: ‘she leads the reader to commiserate with her and her failures by labelling everything “autobiographical”’ (p. 148).

Ultimately, the novel proves to be not a full-fledged autobiography but rather a work of autofiction, one in which, as noted by Hélène Jaccomard (2003), ‘the narrator’s position at once inside and outside the autobiographical pact allows her to remain uncommitted to truth telling’ (p. 20).

The depiction of Japan, for one, is not always faithful to realistic representation and does not necessarily even strive to maintain plausibility. Much attention has been given to the truth-value of the novel in its depiction of Japan, and to the accuracy of the events recounted. Koma (2009) concludes that the ‘Japan’ depicted in the novel is inaccurate and incredible, mostly since it reproduces predetermined clichés and stereotypes. Leblanc (2012) on the other hand, posits that Nothomb’s inclination is toward ‘literary exoticism’ rather than an attempt to produce a ‘scientific ethnographic document’ (p. 17), asking the question ‘après tout, est-ce si important que tout ce qu’elle raconte soit vrai si le lecteur est captivé?’ (‘after all, is it that important that all she recounts be true if the reader is captivated?’) (pp. 45–46).

The occasional break with realism and the fusion of the real and the unreal is a recurrent style marker throughout Nothomb’s oeuvre due to her propensity for stylized, excessive, intertextual and self-reflexive narration. Moreover, the satiric mode, which entails such narrative devices as exaggeration, caricature, irony, and hyperbole, further detracts from the novel’s realism for the sake of amplifying the comic effect. The first scene in the novel depicts Amélie’s arrival at Yumimoto. Upon arrival she is forced to wait for her superior who is in a meeting. To occupy her time, Mister Saito gives Amélie an assignment: to compose a letter accepting Mister Johnson’s invitation to play golf. After numerous attempts which all fail to satisfy Mister Saito, she is forced to admit to herself that:

Il y avait à cet exercice un côté : « Belle marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d’amour » qui ne manquait pas de sel. J’explorais des catégories grammaticales en mutation : « Et si Adam Johnson devenait le verbe, dimanche prochain le sujet, jouer au golf le complément et monsieur Saito l’adverbe ? Dimanche prochain accepte avec joie de venir Adamjohnsonner un jouer au golf monsieurSaitoment ». Et pan dans l’oiel D’Aristote!

(*SET*, p. 12)

There was something ‘Fair duchess, I am dying of love for you’ about this whole exercise that demanded a certain amount of creative wit. I explored permutations of grammatical categories. What if ‘Adam Johnson’ were the verb, ‘next Sunday’ the subject, ‘playing golf’ the object, and ‘Mister Saito’ the adverb? ‘Next Sunday accepts with pleasure the invitation to go Adamjohnsoning a playing golf MisterSaitoingly.’ Take that, Aristotle!

(*FAT*, pp. 4–5)[[5]](#footnote-6)

This paragraph encapsulates in a nutshell the various directions the novel takes. It foregrounds, already at an early stage in the narrative, a reliance on Western paradigms of perception and frames of reference, as well as Western literary models, for generating the narrative. The paragraph introduces three references to key figures and masterpieces of Western culture. Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, from which she cites, a general allusion to Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem ‘Jabberwocky’ from *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*, and the invocation of Aristotle. All three represent the frames of reference through which she grasps and distorts Japanese culture. These are preliminary markers and anticipatory clues to a tendency that will only amplify and become more prominent as the narrative progresses.

I argue that it is precisely the pronounced Western position of the narrator which eventually overrides any possibility of producing an ‘accurate’ depiction of Japan. Always and indelibly perceived within the boundaries of Western culture, Japan in the novel is a stylized construct replete with references to Western concepts. Rather than delivering a representation of the real Japan, the text presents us with a depiction built on Western paradigms of perception and literary models of representation.

Nevertheless, the Western gaze in *SET* is not to be confused with orientalism. If Orientalism is perceived as a meta system which governs and regulates that which may be imagined about the Orient, this is not the case here. Amélie is not a product of institutionalized and degraded knowledge about Japan, she does not possess an exalted self-image of her provenance, therefore, she does not assert the positional superiority of the West over the inferior East. She does, however, express herself through the Western discourse, which she cannot escape, to her detriment.

Some researchers, on the other hand, argue to the contrary. Chris Reyns-Chikuma (2003), for example, claims that *SET* is an anti-Japanese pamphlet, ‘an almost racist text’ that promotes ‘its nipponophobic ideology’ by disseminating stereotypes about Japan (p.193). He claims, therefore, that the novel should be read as part of the Orientalist tradition, following in the footsteps of such texts as Tintin in the Congo (Hergé, 1931). The two allusions he points out within *SET* are to the imperialist, colonial, novel Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe (1719) and to director Nagisa Oshima's 1983 film Merry Christmans, Mister Laurence, with its racist depiction of ‘Japs’. I maintain, however, that the narrative devices used in the novel foreground the narrator’s awareness of her inability to escape preconceived frames of mind, unlike the orientalist who is unaware of their bias.

As a satire, the novel takes on ‘la raideur nippone’ (*SET*, p. 13) or ‘Japanese stiffness’ (*FAT*, p. 6) as the main target of its criticism. The rigid hierarchy depicted therein is accentuated by deliberate acts of humiliation of inferiors by their superiors. Superiors give orders to their subordinates, putting no trust in their professionalism. Domination is the organizing principle that governs human relations between superiors and their subordinates, as well as between men and women. Individualism is unwelcome and regarded with suspicion, as are initiative, pragmatism, and practicality. By definition, foreigners are suspect; they are considered untrustworthy both intellectually and professionally. However, the foregrounding of the Western outlook, as I hope to prove, demonstrates that fixed ideas, presuppositions, and suspicion, are not exclusively Japanese traits. Borrowing from the paragraph cited above, and for the sake of this discussion, I will henceforth refer to this Western outlook in general as ‘Aristotelian logic’, a term representing Western values and ideas. The narrator constantly looks for Aristotelian logic where it clearly does not exist. Hence, her eye, enmeshed as it is in Western ideas, evidently distorts any strange phenomenon it encounters by magnifying and ridiculing it.

The term ‘West’ is employed here as denoting a single entity in a clearly generalizing manner since this is the way it is introduced and dealt with in the novel. The narrator constantly shows the Japanese characters in the novel making blunt and bewildered comparisons between the ‘occidental’ and ‘oriental’ brain, with regards to competence, performance and behaviour, such as when Mister Omochi roars: ‘taizes-vous. Ce pragmatisme odieux est digne d’un Occidental’, (*SET*, p. 48) (‘Be quiet. That disgusting sort of pragmatism is worthy of a Westerner’, (*FAT*, p. 32)). *SET* incessantly draws attention to the narrator’s Westernized outlook on Japanese culture, an outlook which, apparently, the narrator cannot escape. Let us now go over some of the techniques of foregrounding the Western imagination that are employed in the novel.

**A parallel *Wonderland***

While the novel draws on several literary models of representation, the primary reference along the lines of which the narration seems to unfold has to be Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s* *Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (Caroll, 1982). Rather than presenting the reader with a realistic satire that attempts to depict the real Japan, as much as that is possible, what we are faced with is a literary Japan based on the model of nonsense literature.[[6]](#footnote-8)

Le 8 Janvier 1990, l’ascenseur me cracha au dernier étage de l’immeuble Yumimoto. La fenêtre, au bout du hall, m’aspira comme l’eût fait le hublot brisé d’un avion. Loin, très loin, il y avait la ville – si loin que je doutais d’y avoir jamais mis les pieds.

(*SET,* p. 7)

On the 8th of January in 1990 an elevator spat me out on the top floor of a towering Tokyo office building. An enormous bay window at the far end of the landing sucked me over with the irresistible force of a shattered porthole on an airplane. Far, very far below, I could see the city; it seemed so distant and unreal that suddenly I wasn’t sure I had ever even set foot there.

(*FAT*, p. 1)

While Alice falls down the rabbit-hole into a place where everything is strange and unfamiliar, Amélie takes the elevator up to experience much the same sensations on the 44th floor of Yumimoto. Japan in the novel, or the premises of Yumimoto enterprise at least, is presented as a microcosm, detached from reality and constituting a lab for examining Japanese mores.

Just like Alice, Amélie faces a world whose rules she does not grasp, even though she understands the language and speaks it fluently. And just like the *Alice* books, Nothomb’s novel is crammed with what seem to be logical absurdities, things that clash with common sense, that make no sense, or even border on non-sense. In this world, everything is bizarre, nothing is expected. Yumimoto is a business turned upside down: she does not do what she was hired to do, she gets paid for doing nothing, she does not get fired, and she does not resign despite repeated humiliation.

Critics grapple with the question of why Amélie does not resign from Yumimoto. Obviously dissatisfied and undeniably humiliated, she nevertheless continues to hold on to her job. The explanation provided within the narrative is that she does not want to lose face, meaning she does not wish to bring shame on herself for not being able to keep a job. Jennings (2010) proposes this is Amélie’s way of holding on to her Japanese identity, as this is an example of perfectly Japanese reasoning (pp. 31–32). An alternative interpretational hypothesis is that remaining there serves her as an aspiring author. On several occasions Amélie relates her childhood fantasy of becoming God (*FAT,* p. 56). Assuming that ‘God’ can be interpreted as a metaphor for the author, able to generate worlds on paper, this makes Yumimoto an arena where she can practice her omnipotence as an author by pushing events ad absurdum for the sake of the fiction she is about to compose.

Similarly to *Wonderland*, where fantasy penetrates reality, the characters in *SET* tend toward the outlandish and grotesque. Many of them are qualified by an exaggerated trait, and some even inflate and deflate periodically, according to their position as those who shout or those who are shouted at. Fubuki is in one instance ‘at least five feet ten, a height few Japanese men achieved […] ravishingly svelte and graceful’ (*FAT*, p. 6) (‘Mori mesurait au moins un métre quatre-vingts, taille que peu d’hommes japonais atteignent. Elle était svelte et gracieuse à ravir’ (*SET*, p. 13)). However, after being publically reprimanded, ‘I saw Fubuki’s body yield. She had always held herself erect, a monument of pride [now] her legs gave out. She slumped into her chair […]hunched over’ (*FAT,* pp. 85–86) (‘Je vis ployer le corps de ma supérieure […] ses jambs l’abandonnèrent comme celles d’une amante éreintée : elle tomba assise sur sa chaise […] à présent, Fubuki était pliée en deux’ (*SET*, pp. 119–120)).

Throughout the text, characters are continually referred to by their designated qualifiers. Mister Omochi, for example, is referred to throughout the novel as ‘l’obèse’ (‘the Obese One’) and is even compared to an ogre (*SET,* p. 181), though not in the English translation. He is also ‘le Diable’ (*SET,* p. 92) (‘the Devil’, (*FAT*, p. 64)), as opposed to ‘Dieu’ (*SET,* p. 181) (‘God’, (*FAT*, p. 128)), Mister Haneda. Their actions likewise are exaggerated and almost magical. For example, when Mister Omochi grabs Amélie by the hand and drags her into the corridor, she describes feeling ‘like a doll in his hands’ (*FAT*, p. 107) (‘j’était un jouet entre ses bras’ (*SET*, p. 151)). Jennings (2010) maintains that a text with characters that are referred to as an ogre, an angel (Mister Tenshi) and God cannot be deemed realistic by any stretch (p. 35).

Much like Alice, Amélie’s disposition is one of constant bewilderment. However, whereas Alice experiences her new surroundings as ‘a very curious thing’ (Caroll, p. 104), Amélie’s wonderland, albeit likewise astounding, is far from wonderful: ‘j’entrai dans une dimension autre de l’existence: l’univers de la dérision pure et simple’ (*SET*, p. 135) (‘That moment that I accepted Fubuki’s assignment, I entered into another dimension – a universe of pure derision’ (*FAT*, p. 96)). And the inhabitants of this strange land are likewise astonished by her. Alice’s strangeness is directly mentioned by the Gryphon: ‘you *are* a simpleton’ [emphasis in the original] (Caroll, p. 127), and by the Dutchess: ‘you don’t know much […] and that’s a fact’ (Caroll, p. 83). Likewise, Amélie’s Japanese colleagues call her out in similar terms: ‘either you are a traitor or you’re a half-wit. There’s not a third option’ (*FAT*, p. 47) (‘vous-êtes soit une traîtresse, soit une demeurée : il n’y a pas de troisième possibilité’ (*SET*, p. 68)). It is no wonder, however, that Amélie is befuddled, for she is forced to deal with rules that are constantly changing. For instance, after serving tea and conversing with delegates from another company, she is reprimanded for addressing them in Japanese. She is also ordered to forget the language, and the overall scene is nothing short of a mad tea-party.

As a representation of modern Japan, Yumimoto is a hierarchical enterprise in which one is constantly at risk of being metaphorically beheaded by one’s superior, an atmosphere reminiscent of the Queen’s domain in *Alice* and her go-to threat: ‘the Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. “Off with his head!” she said, without even looking round’ (Caroll, pp. 113–114). It is a place of chaos and frustration where any sense of stability or normality has been tossed out the window. Or, as the narrator concludes: ‘no one knows what ‘eccentric’ means until they’ve met a Japanese eccentric. I slept under the trash in the offices of a major corporation. So what. Japan is a country that knows the meaning of “losing it”’ (*FAT,* pp. 62–63) (‘On ne sait ce qu’est excentrique si l’on n’a pas rencontré un excenrique nippon. J’avais dormi sous les ordures? On en avait vu d’autres. Le Japon est un pays qui sait ce que “craquer” veut dire’ (*SET*, p. 89)).

**Western paradigms of perception**

*SET*’s storytelling is either enmeshed in dogmas of Western discourse or overlaid with imagery borrowed from Carroll’s *Alice* novels. Throughout the text, several devices are employed to foreground the Western frame of reference. The first among these is the namedropping of key Western figures and concepts. The novel is full of these evocations, and hardly a page goes by without a name or a direct citation making an appearance. They serve the narrator as explanatory tools, concepts through which she gauges things or makes sense of them via comparison, identification or irony.

Even the title of the novel itself is a direct reference to Kierkegaard’s 1843 tract *Fear and Trembling*, and other examples abound.[[7]](#footnote-9) What follows is a narrow selection from among them (the emphases in the following quotations are mine, except where noted otherwise; for every entry, the quotation from *SET* is followed by its equivalent in *FAT*):

1. ‘Le catalogue Import-Export Yumimoto était la version *titanesque* de celui de *Prévert*’ (p. 15).

‘Yumimoto’s import-export catalog was truly *titanic*’ (p. 8).

1. ‘Elle avait le plus beau nez du monde […] si *Cléopatre* avait eu ce nez, la géographie de la planète en eût pris un sacré coup’ (p. 14).

‘She [Fubuki] had the most beautiful nose in the world […] had *Cleopatra* had this nose, the history and geography of the world would have undergone a major shift’ (p. 6).

1. ‘Il n’y avait pas tant de différence entre le métier de *moine copiste, au Moyen Age*, et le mien’ (p. 59).

‘There was very little difference between what I was doing and *a monk transcribing illuminated manuscripts in the Middle Ages*’ (p. 40).

1. ‘Les chiffres, dont j’avais toujours admiré la beauté *pythagoricienne*, devinrent mes ennemis’ (p. 74).

‘Figures, whose calm *Pythagorean* beauty I had always admired, became my enemies’ (p. 50).

1. ‘J’ai commençai par regarder chaque nouveau nombre avec autant d’étonnement que *Robinson rencontrant un indigène* de ce territoire unconnu’ (p. 74).

‘I started looking at each new number with as much astonishment as *Robison Crusoe* spying a footprint in the sand’ (p. 51).

1. ‘Mon tonneau des *Danaïdes* ne cessait de se remplir de chiffres que mon cerveau percé laissait fuir. J’étais le *Sisyphe* de la comptabilité’ (p. 78).

‘My *Danaide’s jar* was constantly filling with figures that my feeble brain managed to empty out again. I was the *Sisyphus* of accounting’ (p. 54).

1. ‘Le lendemain, Fubuki m’accueillit avec, cette fois, un visage d’une sérénité *olympienne*’ (p. 128).

‘The following day Fubuki greeted me with an expression of magisterial serenity’ (p. 91).

1. ‘Il m’attrapa comme *King Kong* s’empare de la blondinette et m’entraîna à l’extérieur’ (p. 151).

‘He grabbed me the way *King Kong did Fay Wray* and dragged me out into the corridor’ (p. 107).

1. ‘Il est typique des êtres qui exercent un métier lamentable de se composer ce que *Nietzsche* appelle un arrière-monde […] leur *éden* mental est d’autant plus beau que leur tâche est vile’ (p. 160).

‘People with menial jobs conjure up what *Nietzsche* calls a background world […] their mental *Eden* is as seductive as their job is repugnant’ (p. 113–114).

1. ‘Ce constat me rappela le mot *d’André Maurois*: « ne dites pas trop de mal de vous-même: on vous croirait »’ (p. 180).

‘I remembered a line from *André Maurois*: “don’t speak too ill of yourself. People will believe you”’ (p. 128).

1. ‘Son infarctus paraissait imminent. *J’allai à Canossa*’ (p. 178).

‘His coronary now seemed imminent. So was my arrest’ (p. 126).

1. ‘Quand j’eus dégluti la cause du *casus belli*, j’entamai la suite de mon numéro’ (p. 179)

‘Once I had swallowed the *casus belli*, I started into the next part of my recitation’ [emphasis in the original] (p. 127).

1. ‘L’espace d’un instant, je haïs ma supérieure au point de souhaiter sa mort. Songeant soudain à la coïncidence entre son patronyme et un mot latin qui tombait à pointe, je faillis lui crier : « *Memento Mori!* »’ (p. 153).

‘In the mirror I could see her […] watching me weep. Her eyes were jubilant. Just for a moment, I wished her dead. *Memento Mori*’ [emphasis in the original] (p. 108).

1. ‘Je le regardai comme on regarde le *Messie*’ (p. 36).

‘I gazed at him as one might *the Messiah*’ (p. 23).

1. ‘Entre vous [Fubuki] et moi [Amélie], il y a la même différence qu’entre*Ryuichi Sakamoto et David Bowie*’ (p. 156).

‘There’s the same difference between you and me as there is between*Ryuichi Sakamoto and David Bowie*’ (p. 110).

These, and the profusion of similar references, attest to the systems of thought through which Amélie comprehends her Japanese experience, and the paradigms of meaning that serve her as she observes her human environment and attempts to make sense of it.

**Stupeur as experience**

Another device utilised abundantly throughout the novel is the narrator’s use of qualifiers to describe her experience, words that shape out assessment of scenes and dialogues. These qualifiers constantly emphasize how, on the one hand, Amélie’s experiences boggle the logic of her Western mind and, on the other hand, her conduct makes no sense to her Japanese colleagues. The predominant qualifiers used here are the word *stupeur*, its synonym *stupefaction*, and their semantic counterparts which recur profusely, both as verbs and as nouns: éberluer (*SET*, p. 42) perplexité (*SET*, p. 156) étonner (*SET*, p. 163, 176) surprise (*SET*, p. 175) ahurir (*SET*, p. 190). In the English translation we find similar expressions conveying bewilderment, astonishment, and incredulity (the emphases in the following quotations are mine, except where noted otherwise; for every entry the quotation from *SET* is followed by its equivalent in *FAT*):

1. ‘Ce qui me valait à chaque fois un regard *stupéfait*’ (p. 28).

‘This always earned me a *disbelieving* eye’ (p.17).

1. ‘Il me regarda avec *stupéfaction*’ (p. 49).

‘He stared at me’ (p. 33).

1. ‘Les quarante membres du bureau géant le regardèrent avec *stupéfaction*’ (p. 62).

‘The forty members of the office watched him in *stupefied* silence’ (p. 42).

1. ‘Nous nous regardâmes l’un l’autre avec *stupéfaction*’ (p. 90).

‘We looked at each other in *amazement*. My *dumbfoundedness* was understandable’ (p. 63).

1. ‘J’étais toujours figée de *stupeur* quand me fut apportée la réponse’ (p. 91)

‘I was still frozen in *stupor* when the answer to my question was delivered on to me’ (p. 64).

1. ‘Elle me regarda avec *stupéfaction*’ (p.109).

‘She looked at me in *astonishment*’ (p. 78).

1. ‘La *stupéfaction* passée, la première chose que je ressenti fut un soulagement étrange’ (p. 132).

‘Once my *disbelief* had subsided, I felt a strange sense of relief’ (p. 94).

1. ‘Je ne pus m’empêcher de relever la tête pour la regarder avec *stupéfaction*’ (p. 167).

‘This took me by *surprise*’ (p. 118).

*Stupeur*, then, becomes a leitmotif in the novel, reasserting Amélie’s position as suspicious of Japanese culture from the outset, an outsider observing this strange world where, to her amazement, all laws seem to be inverted. The denotation of *stupeur* as bewilderment thus trumps the meaning of the collocation *Stupeur et Tremblements*, which gives the book its title and is presented in the narrative as the required bearing one must adopt when facing the Japanese emperor.[[8]](#footnote-10)

Assert as she may her desire to reintegrate into her beloved Japan, these qualifiers serve to maintain a distance between Amélie’s object of observation and herself. Her interlocutors, in turn, are likewise perplexed by her conduct and attitude. There is suspicion on both sides: the Japanese regard her as a stranger, one inferior to them, and both parties make a myriad comparisons between East and West, making sure that never the twain shall meet.

**Meaning in the eye of the beholder**

The Western vantage point is also foregrounded through the use of the eye as a discourse marker and as a narrative strategy in depicting Japan. Occurring prolifically throughout the text, the eye encompasses several layers of meaning. Some are literal, such as when Amélie lowers her eyes in conversation as a cultural gesture signifying humility and performed in compliance with Japanese customs, for example: ‘j’entrai chez monsieur Omochi […] baissant les yeux et m’inclinant’ (*SET*. p. 19) (‘I entered Mister Omochi’s office […] lowering my eyes and bowing’ (*FAT*, p. 10)). Some are figurative or metaphorical, such as in the following examples (the emphases in the following quotations are mine, except where noted otherwise; for every entry the quotation from *SET* is followed by its equivalent in *FAT*):

1. ‘Et pan dans l’*oiel* D’Aristote!’ (p. 12).

‘Take that, Aristotle!’ (p. 5).

1. ‘Je le regardai avec des *yeux ronds*’ (p.20)

‘I was dumbfounded’ (p. 11).

1. ‘*aux yeux d’un occidental*, ça n’eût rien eu d’infamant ; *aux yeux d’un Japonais*, c’eût été perdre la face’ (p. 22).

‘To *Western eyes*, there would have been nothing ignominious in this, to Japanese eyes, it meant losing face’ (p. 12).

1. ‘Ces lieux mythologique me mettait les *larmes aux yeux*’ (p. 26).

‘Invoking these mythological places brought *tears to my eyes*’ (p. 16).

1. ‘Je *jetai un oeil* sur le contenu de ce que je photocopiais’ (p. 34).

‘I glanced at the contents of what I was copying’ (p. 22).

1. ‘Elle marcha vers moi, avec Hiroshima *dans l’oeil droit* et Nagasaki *dans l’oeil gauche*’ (p. 125).

‘She walked toward me with Hiroshima *in her right eye* and Nagasaki in her left’ (p. 89).

The recurrent image of the eye in various linguistic contexts reminds us that we are seeing this world through the eye of the beholder who is relating her fresh-eyed observations to the reader. Hence, the eye here represents the subjectivity of the act of assigning meaning; the eye is a synecdoche for the idiosyncratic vantage point of the protagonist-narrator. Guyot-Bender (2005) notes that Amélie is never described physically, the only part of her anatomy that the reader is familiar with is her eye (p. 374). More than merely an organ of vision, the eye represents the faculty of observation and perception, of appreciation and judgment, of perspective and opinion. It emphasizes the protagonist’s constant gaze at Japanese culture through the eyes of a Westerner, a gaze that leaves her frequently dumbfounded. It is also, however, the eye of a (future) author, able to create a world and control it. This reading gives prominence to the narrative of the protagonist’s initiation as a writer, which coincides with the double ending of the novel. As expounded by Marinella Termite (2003), the first ending brings to a close the narrative of Amélie’s Yumimoto trial, while the second one, following immediately thereafter, narrates the publication of her first book (p.158).

**Paraphrasing and injection of meaning**

Despite the claim to truthfulness, the accuracy of the dialogues that are related in the text is undermined by an unreliable narrator, who, as we have already seen, is prone to distortion. Their artifice is further accentuated by the fact that, even though the majority of them are spoken by Japanese people, they too correspond to Western paradigms through which Japan is (pre)conceived. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to treat these dialogues as paraphrases and rewordings rather than veritable quotations or otherwise verbatim transmissions.

Concerning the Nothombian dialogue, Shirley Ann Jordan (2003) maintains that dialogues play a central role in Nothomb’s oeuvre and that they are principally designed to ‘generate entertaining and intellectually impressive confrontations’ (p. 95). With this aim in mind, Jordan explains, the ‘truth’ of the Nothombian dialogue is often interrupted by borrowings form literary sources or interlocutors who are portrayed as being ‘larger than life, with fantastic or almost mythical dimensions’ (p. 96).

The dialogues in *SET* therefore constitute a locus for the narrator to inject meaning that manifestly does not originate with the interlocutors. This process is evident in the scene where Fubuki is reproached by her superior Mister Omochi. The narrator provides a foreword to the transmission of the dialogue: ‘si j’avais dû être l’interprête simultanée du discours de monsieur Omochi, voici ce que j’aurais traduit’ (*SET*, p.120).[[9]](#footnote-12) What follows is Amélie’s transmission of Mister Omochi telling Fubuki off, not for anything that actually happened, but for what could have happened. The whole scene is related by the narrator as a sexual assault (Gascoigne, 2003; Sylvester, 2016). She specifically employs, in the French original, the form of the *conditionnel passé*, which is a putative form, not an affirmative one. It is markedly an interpretation of the reality of things, one that is clearly based on Western sensibilities, hence its gender-consciousness and critical attitude towards the phallocentric order with its ensuing power imbalance. The introductory sentence, as well as the grammatical structure, undermine the accuracy of the dialogue while reinforcing its status as a paraphrase.

**The grave** **crime of individualism and other Western practices**

If we were to narrow down the causes of Amélie’s downfall to their point of origin, according to the argument set forth in this article, it is her inability to escape her Western mindset. This idea is epitomized in the following scene, which shows a dialogue between Amélie and her superior, Miss Fubuki Mori. The context is, very briefly, as follows: Amélie seizes the chance to perform a task given to her by a manager who is not her direct superior. She performs the task superbly, but in order to avoid retribution for the major offense of taking initiative, they both agree to conceal the fact that Amélie is the one who performed the job. Nevertheless, Mister Omochi, a higher-level superior, summons her, tells her off, and warns her never to do such a thing again. Once Amélie finds out that it was Miss Mori who had denounced her, she decides to confront Fubuki:

Je commençai d’une voix douce et posée:

* + - Je pensais que nous étions amies. Je ne comprends pas.
    - Que ne comprenez-vous pas?
    - Allez-vous nier que vous m’avez dénoncée?
    - Je n’ai rien à nier. J’ai appliqué le règlement.
    - Le règlement est-il plus important pour vous que l’amitié?
    - Amitié est un grand mot. Je dirais plutôt ‘bonnes relations entre collègues’.

Elle proférait ces phrases horribles avec une calme ingénue et affable.

* + - Je vois. Pensez-vous que nos relations vont continuer à être bonnes, suites à votre attitude?
    - Si vous vous excusez, je n’aurai pas de rancune.
    - Vous ne manquez pas d’humour, Fubuki.
    - C’est extraordinaire. Vous vous conduisez comme si vous étiez l’offensée alors que vous avez commis une faute grave.

(*SET*, pp. 53–54)

I started quietly and soberly.

‘I thought we were friends. I don’t understand.’

‘What don’t you understand?’

‘Are you going to deny that you denounced me.’

‘I haven’t denied anything. I followed the rules.’

‘Are the rules more important to you than friendship?’

‘“Friendship” is a strong word. I’d prefer “good relationship between colleagues”.’

She proffered this expression with ingenuous, affable calm.

‘I see. Do you think our relationship will continue to be good, after what you’ve done?’

‘If you apologize, I won’t bear you a grudge.’

‘You’ve got a good sense of humour, Fubuki.’

‘You’re behaving as if you’re the injured party, when you’ve actually done something very wrong.’

(*FAT*, pp. 35–36)

There is no doubt that this is a clear instance of a culture clash wherein incompatible, culturally inculcated values find themselves facing off against each other; but more importantly, it is the infrastructure of Western practices underlying Amélie’s behavior which wreaks havoc in her professional life. In this particular instance, it is the practice of open conversation and emotional frankness.

Western culture advocates affective discourse, giving priority to interpersonal interactions, encouraging people to voice their feelings and to converse openly and sincerely with the aim of ‘talking things out’. The West champions the idea that self-knowledge leads to self-improvement. Talking things out and speaking one’s heart are therefore common practices, tools for repairing relationships, clearing the air and avoiding lingering grudges or hard feelings. Sociologist Eva Illouz (2008) stresses that:

‘Communication’ has become an essential part of the ethical substance of men and women inside the corporation […]. The model of ‘communication’ aims at providing linguistic and emotional techniques to reconcile diverging imperatives: namely to assert and express the self, yet cooperate with others; to understand others’ motives, yet manipulate oneself and others to reach desired goals; and to be self-controlled, yet personable and accessible. Communication is thus an ‘ethical substance’ in which it is impossible to separate self-interest from attention to others, language being essentially the main technique through which the two are to be presumably reconciled.

(p. 89)

It is because of this Western mindset that Amélie feels the urge to speak with her superior: ‘il faut que je parle à Fubuki. Sinon, j’en aurai une rage de dents’ (*SET*, p. 53) (‘I must speak to Fubuki. Otherwise I’ll never forgive myself’ (*FAT*, p. 35)). And this is not the first time that Amélie summons Fubuki for the very same reason; a similar occurrence happens at the beginning of the novel: ‘je vidai mon coeur’ (*SET*, p. 24) (‘I poured my heart out’ (*FAT*, p. 14)). However, this is definitely not how the Japanese go about things, especially when the summoned person is superior to the summoner – a fact demonstrated in several scenes witnessed by the narrator.

For Fubuki and, ostensibly, for the rest of the Japanese working world, one’s proficiency and competence count less than one’s rank in the organization. Fubuki respects those who climb up the clearly established, ladder of hierarchy up-front; whereas Amélie tries to clandestinely sneak in through the back stairs, thus inverting the proper order. This is unacceptable in terms of the Japanese formula of power relations. While Amélie thinks in terms of efficacy and practicality, Fubuki’s point of view is that she has no right to exploit a back door, as practical and efficient as the result may be.

The Western discourse that Amélie speaks is that of individualism, and by that I mean individualism as ideology, in the sense of according superior value to independence, self-reliance, self-fulfilment, and the idea that the individual and her needs will always triumph over societal ideals and values and supersede them (Lukes, 2006). Yuminoto’s Japan, perceived through the narrator’s Western eyes, views individualism pejoratively, either as egotism or as recklessness. At Yumimoto, the individual is of lesser importance; it is the group or the organization that counts above all. As Fubuki puts it: ‘vous vous conduisez aussi bassement comme les autres Occidentaux: vous placez votre vanité personnelle plus haut que les intérêts de la compagnie’ (*SET*, pp. 66–67) (‘Your despicable behavior is typical of Westerners. You put your personal vanity ahead of the interests of the company’ (*FAT*, p. 46)). Mister Omochi’s rebuke demonstrates this concept perfectly: ‘le fond était incroyablement insultant. Mon compagnon d’infortune et moi nous fîmes traiter de tous les noms: nous étions des traîtres, des nullités, des serpents, des fourbes et – sommet de l’injure – des individualistes’ (*SET*, p. 44) (‘The content was incredibly insulting. My companion in misfortune and I were called traitors, incompetents, snakes, deceitful, and – the height of injury – individualists’ (*FAT*, p. 29)).

It is due to the discourse of individualism that Amélie is relentlessly and irresistibly destructive to the social order at Yumimoto, to the extent that she ends up pushing societal boundaries to absurd extremes and provoking egregious reactions. Some readings of the novel attribute the provocations in which the narrator-protagonist engages to her unique subversive traits. Claire Nodot (2006) claims that Amélie demonstrates incomprehension of borders, both personal and institutional, and that because she refuses to accept the rules she finds herself exiled from the main body of the corporation to its margins. Martine Guyot-Bender (2005), on the other hand, claims that the same phenomena are due to the narrator’s memory and self-derision (p. 374). I would argue that it is because the people around her do not speak the same discourse that she never manages to make sense of things and what she experiences is a continual collapse of meaning.

**Translation vs. interpretation**

As an employee of Yumimoto, although hired in the capacity of a translator, Amélie never actually engages in the act of translation. This is also true of her function as a narrator, not because she cannot easily transfer text from one language to the other but because she immediately assumes the role of interpreter instead. To translate is to take meaning encoded in one symbolic system and to transfer it into a different symbolic system, be it lexical or otherwise. To interpret, on the other hand, is to transform that meaning, specifically ‘to conceive *in the light of individual belief, judgement or circumstance*’ [my emphasis] (Merriam-Webster).

Moreover, when it comes to interpretation, one must always ask the question of which interpretive community the interpreter belongs to, since this community sets the interpreter’s initial predilections. Stanley Fish’s elucidation clarifies the term,

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, *these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read* rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around [my emphasis].[[10]](#footnote-13)

(Fish, 1995, p. 171)

This is *SET*’s main narrative principle. On its surface, the text satirizes the Japanese suspicion of strangers, while mocking their biased, superficial and rigid attitude. However, when we look deeper, we find that it is the narrator-protagonist’s Western thought habits that cause her to filter all her observations and experiences through a Western prism and to convey them to the reader not as they are, but as she interprets them. In effect, *SET*’s satire is shown to be fragile, a ‘limited-liability’ satire if you will. As Sarah de Jallad (2008) notes, to understand Japan properly and profoundly, it is hardly sufficient to be born there and be fluent in the language (p. 16). And, from the point of view of translation studies, Peter Cowley (2011) contends that Amélie the protagonist is incompetent as a translator not because of her language skills but because of her cultural ineptitude (p. 276). Japan seems to be a nonsense world to Amélie only because Aristotelean logic, as a term representative of Western thought, does not exist there. Greet Hofstede defines cultural discourse as ‘a collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one group or one category of persons from another’ (cited in de Jallad, 2008, p. 8 [my translation]). Nothomb’s text demands that we recognize how dependent we are upon our respective cultural discourses for our sense of self and our interpretations of external reality.

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1. Hereafter *SET*. For the English translation, see Amélie Nothomb (2002), hereafter *FAT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. According to Termite (2003), all of Nothomb’s novels share an attitude of counterculture and sabotage (p. 154). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Other minor readings are that of Hélène Jaccomard (2003) who sees SET as recounting the birth of an author, and Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2003) who views the focal point as being Amélie’s unrequited love for Fubuki. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The company’s name is a fictional one; its etymological selection is explained by the narrator (*SET,*  p. 13; *FAT,*  p. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Note that the English translation is not identical to the original. Many of the textual phenomena are either omitted or otherwise ignored and translated differently. The translator, Adriana Hunter (2003), explained her choices as resulting from an editorial request to ‘Americanize’ the text to suit its North American readership as well as unnecessary editing. In her words: ‘one of the frustrations of this particular commission was that my work was quite heavily edited and Americanized and I was offered no power of veto’ (p.174). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For more on the rich intertextual infrastructure of Nothomb’s novels, see Susan Bainbrigge (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
7. Especially abundant is the semantic field of Christianity. The lexemes appear not only in the context of Amélie’s childhood wishes to become God but also as comparisons on occasion, as well as reference words and adjectives. The terms include Christ, devil, martyr, Eden, the Tower of Babel, Carmelite, Pontius Pilate, Easter, Gehenna and the sacrificial lamb, among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
8. ‘Stupeur et tremblements’ is a synchronic triple polysemy on top of its explanation in the narrative. First, this conduct is a marker of Japanese culture, and part of the prevalent ethos of hierarchy and authority. Second, the collocation is affiliated with the Western Judeo-Christian as it is mentioned in the Bible (see Philipians 2:12), and thirdly, it is also verbatim the title of Kierkegaard’s tract. These three meanings collide in a perpetual internal conflict in the novel. And, finally, ‘stupeur’ is the narrator’s position toward her overall experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
9. This sentence, along with the entire passage containing it, was omitted from the English translation. It reads (my translation): ‘if I had to be the simultaneous interpreter for Mister Omochi’s speech, this is what I would have translated’. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
10. I have expanded the scope of the term for the purpose of my discussion, extending it form its application to literary interpretation in particular to cultural interpretation in general. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)