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The Orient in Me

Shiraishi Kazuko

Ikuko Atsumi

Graeme Wilson

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The Orient in Me

When I begin writing a poem I do not consciously think that I am Japanese or even that I am an Oriental; but when I finish the poem and examine what I have written, I am constantly surprised to discover in my own work those characteristics of feeling, of "heart," which are distinctively Oriental. Though neither literature in general nor poetry in particular is the product of a specific climate, it is interesting to recognize, especially in one's own work, that the weather of one's inmost soul does, as the years move on, permeate with its singular scent everything that one does.

Generally speaking, there is no word that I more deeply abominate than "nationalism." I don't even like the idea that the Japanese should, by mere superficial observation, appear to be Japanese; or that Americans should look like Americans. I once heard that, during the late war or perhaps soon after it, the highly regarded authority, Yoshida Issui, who was virtually a hermit of poetry, came to be regarded as a traitor to Japan simply because he did not wear military-style puttees. When somebody denounced Issui as an unpatriotic person by reason of his habit of wearing leather-soled sandals, he turned and answered that criticism with the sharp rejoinder "I am a cosmopolitan." That word, I still consider, is genuinely refreshing; and I continue to believe that any person who produces genuine work must be a cosmopolitan.

I myself am a somewhat outlandish Japanese, having been born in Canada. Though I have always believed it impossible that simply to have passed my childhood in a foreign country should in any way have influenced my writing, I am frequently told that my use of Japanese, my sense of the language, even my ways of thought and of expressing concepts are very different from those of the Japanese people in general. Thus both I and my poetry have long been regarded as outlandish—poems by a somewhat curious Japanese. It was on that account and not, I hope, because my mind was jaundiced that I have perhaps been able to achieve an objective viewpoint, and to write about things Japanese as though I myself were somehow dissociated from Japan. Not unnaturally, it has therefore sometimes occurred to me that I might usefully take advantage of this situation and write an account of what the Japanese really are and, in particular, to try to explain what it means to a Japanese to write a poem in the Japanese language. For it seems to me an irrelevancy when the Japanese, in considering, for instance, Irish or Jewish literature, tend first to ask fundamental questions

about the nature of Irishness or the nature of Jewishness. If Irish literature can only be understood by the Irish or Jewish literature only by Jews, there would seem little point in reading it. It would seem to follow that to believe that only the Japanese can appreciate their language and understand the sensitivities of their literature is a form of self-isolation: a narrowminded and basically unpleasant form of insularity.

It is neither mere affectation nor from any wish to appear smartly contemporary that I use colloquialisms in my poetry and seek, so far as possible, to avoid using the classical literary language. Just as, when I feel so inclined, I eat *sushi* immediately after eating grilled steak, so I seek to combine in my poetry words drawn not only from English and American slang but words originating in the vocabularies of the jazz and fashion worlds. Since I integrate into these poems all manner of words, the results are international in the sense that they have no specifically identifiable origin. The United States of America, though it contains some fifty different states, is self-evidently united; and I myself care little how many tens or hundreds of states go to make the unity of my poetry. Where there is no native place, there is my native place; whether on the Lower Nile or in northern Turkey; any place will do. And it is this feeling which lies at the heart of the hippie approach to poetry.

Though "hippie" is the word used to describe a contemporary manifestation, the condition of mind and heart which it describes is as old as humanity. Who was it that in Japan traveled hither and thither like the wind, mucked with but not weighed down by worldly things, convinced that all things earthly were mere transience? Was it not Saigyō? Though I have never read a line of his poetry, the simple truth is that I regard myself, my feeling for the writing of poetry and my way of life as contemporary manifestations of the same truths as moved that ancient master.

Some four or five years ago I found myself wanting to write a travel poem that had neither a beginning nor an end. It was to be a poem tressed with the hair of an Amazon, dressed like Raquel Welch, and with the heart of a priest though the priest himself was one in the worldly hell. At that time the world of modern jazz included a particularly brilliant tenor saxophonist, John Coltrane, and this man, why I know not, kept blowing music, as it seemed, endlessly. It was not just for five or maybe fifteen minutes. Once this man started blowing, he could not stop for half an hour or an hour or more. His music just flowed on in explanation and admonition of the world. "I cannot blow," he said, "for a mere three minutes of casual greeting. I simply cannot stop when I wish to express all that I feel in the vast internal world of my spirit." It is the novelists who fashion stories out of the reality in which they live; but a poem does not depend upon a story line or the happenings in the everyday world. For the very source-springs of poetry are existence and reality, and all other things, manifestations of those basic

truths, are subsidiary. I was so impressed by this great musician's attitude of soul, his total commitment to living in the world of his art, that I decided to "blow" my own poetry with a similar persistence; to write in a ten-year time-scale with language on soundless paper. If one writes a series of short poems, something is bound to be lost in the intervals between creating and rest, and one is moreover likely to deceive oneself that it is possible similarly to lose oneself, to escape reality. But if one continuously writes poetry as Coltrane continuously emitted music, one can pin down precisely the changing angles of time's passing and, simultaneously, find it delightful that one can neither hide from oneself nor escape reality. I consider myself lucky to have met that American jazzman and to have begun to play a long-breath'd poetry.

The world of art which I thus discovered was not, in fact, American but Oriental. It was that world of the long-sustained ascetic self-discipline of the East. I find it very interesting that, even though I make jazz in poetry, even though I mix outlandish American slang with my native Japanese, still, as the compass needle, however it may waver, inevitably settles down to point north, so my own experiments began to settle down and flow in an easterly direction. I am now deeply moved suddenly to find myself, however proud of my outlandishness, to be traveling jazz-wise in that mainstream of Oriental thinking which leads either to Zen or to the Sword. When I question myself as to the reason for this happiness, the answer seems to be that, at the bottom of it all, I simply do not care for the set of western hearts. This may simply be a question of inborn or inherited taste. Perhaps I am reacting instinctively, perhaps with the animal's instinct for self-preservation, when I testify that there is no other way, not only in respect of poetry but in respect of the whole future of mankind, but to return to the Oriental concept of nothingness; to realize that we are witnessing Mappo, the coming of doomsday, now in the closing period of human civilization.

Translated by Ikuko Atsumi and Graeme Wilson