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MAN AND SOCIETY IN MODERN JAPANESE POETRY*

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In Japan, a country of ancient and well developed literary traditions, poetry has always been a «mirror of the people's soul», expressing their cherished thoughts and aspirations. In the *tanka* poetry of, e.g., the *Manyōshū* and *Kokinshū*, in the countless anthologies of *haikai* of the Tokugawa era one can hear a still, sad music of humanity, which has always distinguished Japanese lyrical poetry as one of the greatest achievements of world culture. The 20th century has introduced great changes in poetry. The renunciation of the canonical form has entailed the creation of a new, universal type of verse, free from any regimentation and restriction. This poetry which became to be called *gendaishi*, that is, the «modern verse», gave the author, for the first time, an opportunity to express his vision of the transformed world in full-blooded images filled with an inner force and civic sentiments.

The rich *gendaishi* poetry, and especially works created in the postwar period, are so far known very little outside Japan. Notwithstanding the publication of several anthologies, translated mainly into English, *gendaishi* still remains a gigantic iceberg for the Western reader, an iceberg whose bulk is hidden in the depths of the ocean of modern literature.

Not claiming to an all-round analysis of postwar *gendaishi* poetry, we shall try to outline some milestones on the way of its development, examine its principal trends and trace the evolution of views on the relationship of art to reality.

With the termination of the Second World War, after long and agonising years known in the history of Japanese literature as the «period of darkness», many poets have for the first time acquired an access to the print. In an atmosphere of general psychological shock and a crisis of

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moral values caused by the defeat of the Japanese Empire, the ideas of writers and poets about the role of the artist in society and about the tasks of literary creative work, have radically changed. Compared with prewar years the feeling of personal responsibility for the fate of mankind has grown immensely. It is not accidental that already in 1945 did the first powerful union of writers «Shin nihon bungaku kai» (Society of New Japanese Literature) come into being, which put forward a programme of struggle for peace and democracy.

The resurgence of poetry to which the hearts and minds of readers were drawn so much in the difficult years of economic dislocation was a convincing proof of the growing national self-consciousness which consolidated under the burden of American occupation. The voice of repentance, a confession of the sufferings experienced during that time, concern and anxiety over the country's future were expressed in the pages of numerous poetic magazines, like *Cosmos (Kosumosu)*, *The Garden of Poetry (Kindaishi-en)*, *Pure Poetry (Junsuishi)*, and many others.

Those were repercussions of the rich lyrical poetry of the 1930s which was frozen during the war, monologues of people who had lived through the world catastrophe and could not so far find themselves and their place in the chaos of reforms effected at the time. The past, projected into the present, lived its own life in their poems.

A painstaking self-analysis, the desire to perceive the essence of the forces of evil and oppose the eternal Good to them, to establish connections between man and the wise and kind Nature are characteristic of such collections by old masters as *Flowers of the Homeland (Kokyō no hana)* by Miyoshi Tatsuji, *Peasant Pipe (Saku no kusabue)* by Satō Haruo, *Human Song (Ningen no uta)* by Horiguchi Daigaku, *One Way (Hitotsu no michi)* by Kusano Shimpei. Even those poets who spent troubled times in a voluntary exile, in the seclusion of the mountains, could not but feel the apocalyptic horror of the war whose sinister shadow loomed over their solitary huts. Yet only a few of this galaxy of lyrical poets were able to fully express their hatred and revulsion for the world slaughter and create a genuine poetry of civic protest. It was only Kaneko Mitsuharu who could pass on from abstract to concrete humanism, one which should be defended with a pen and rifle in hand. In his famous collections *Parachute (Rakasan)*, *Songs of an Imp (Oni no ko no uta)*, *The Tragedy of Mankind (Ningen no higeki)* Kaneko depicts war and its consequences as an outcome of monstrous social injustice, which reigns supreme in the poet's motherland:

«Thus I got to a dismal, joyless country.
That was my Japan.
Behind dirty screens,
Alone among ruins and fires,
I awoke from slumber . . .»

Kaneko Mitsuhashi, «Autobiography» («Jiden»)

Like «the tusks of a mammoth piercing through history», from a poem by Kusano Shimpei, the war entered the hearts and minds of all who were its witness or participants. A mass movement for democratic poetry («Minshushugi-shi undō»), organized by poet-communists in the late 1940s proved a major success in the struggle for peace and national independence. The followers of the traditions of proletarian literature of the 1920s–1930s, Tsuboi Shigeji and Nakano Shigeharu, came out against the resurgence of militarism and the dominance of the reactionaries. The translator of the patriotic songs of the French Resistance, Andō Tsuguo, familiarized readers with works by L. Aragon and P. Eluard. Books by Tōge Sankichi, Hara Tamiki and Fukagawa Munehiko became the cri de cœur of Hiroshima burnt in the atomic flame.

The collective experience of the war implanted in many poets a keen feeling of the time and the desire to speak on behalf of their generation «to the city and the world». This trend can easily be traced in such poems as «History» («Rekishi») by Hirabayashi Toshihiko, or «The Postwar Years» («Sengo») by Kijima Hajime. Connected with them are poems of sharp political protest by Ayukawa Nobuo, Horikawa Masami, Yoshimoto Takaaki. However, these publicistic works in verse lacked one essential element – artistic perfection. In order to attain the peak of mastery and mature patriotic feeling *gendaishi* poetry still had to traverse a long and arduous path of comprehending the lessons of history.

The war as an epoch has given birth to a galaxy of writers whose talent matured on the battlefield, in the bitterness of defeat and hardships of captivity. With all difference in the artistic personalities of young poets, the memory of the hard trials they all had gone through endowed them with community of their attitude to life. Just as Lowell, Wilbur and Snodgrass in American poetry of those years, they introduced in literature their personal feelings, experiences and impressions as participants in the great drama that seemed to mark the downfall of world civilization. It is not accidental that the biggest poetic association that emerged in the late 1940s – early 1950s owed its name to a poem by T.S. Eliot, «The Waste Land».

«The Waste Land» («Arechi») included such now popular poets like Tamura Ryūichi, Ayukawa Nobuo, Kitamura Tarō, Kuroda Saburō.

Their lyrical poetry differing in character had some common negativist categories of «alienation», «depression», «tiredness of life», «attraction to death». In one of his articles Ayukawa justly compared his friends with the European writers of the «lost generation», with Eliot's «hollow men». The poetry of «The Waste Land» posed poignant, painful questions which could hardly be answered in a simple manner:

«Drearly
I am looking into darkness
That is looming over the world.
Clad in rags,
Stumping on crutches,
Where do we come from?
Where shall we go?»

Kitamura Tarō, «K»

In poems of those years one can hear an echo of the Buddhist ideas about the vanity and inconstancy of everything earthly («*mujōkan*») as well as traces of the influence of the philosophers of European existentialism. Incidentally, the majority of the post-war *gendaishi* poets were professional literati who had acquired a brilliant philological education and who knew well foreign languages. Nevertheless, total nihilism could not satisfy the poets of «The Waste Land» in their opposition to society, and they saw a positive ideal only in art. In a manifesto of «The Waste Land» under the title «An Appeal to X» («X e no kenji») reflecting the moral unrest and searchings of its authors, poetry is said to be the only effective means of eliminating social disharmony and reaching individual salvation. «Although we all are living in an atmosphere of inner trouble, you will probably understand that there are indissoluble bonds between us in this impersonal society. Poems absorb all our life, and depending on whether our weapon – our spirit – withstands in the struggle against the waste land surrounding us, our poems will have the right to live, or we shall suffer a defeat in the attempt to fully perceive reality».

However, as was quite often the case in the world of literature, the poetical practice of «The Waste Land» members often disagreed with their demand of realism and truth to life, with their declared popular character. In the work of Kitamura Tarō, Kuroda Saburō and their colleagues intellectualism, complex poetical technique and polysemantic images prevail. Their further work only confirmed their liking for the modernistic method.

The members of the «left» poetic society «Archipelago» («Rettō») Kijima Hajime, Sekine Hiroshi, Hasegawa Ryūsei, advanced a more radical programme. Their activity aimed at obliterating the boundary between politics and aesthetics won the «Archipelago» the reputation of a «militant vanguard in politics and art». The poets of the «Archipelago» have indeed succeeded in going beyond the bounds of a purely literary criticism of the establishment and in overcoming the élite trends of *gendaishi*. The point is that it was not only articles calling for a stop to the war in Korea and a release of political prisoners that were published in the magazine «Archipelago». Many members of the group have come to full-fledged literature from factory shops. Their poetry permeated with impressive, true-to-life images bears a class character:

«I tell you:
Turn your machine-guns
And shoot
At counter-revolutionaries! . . .»

Kuroda Kio, «Hungarian Smile» («Hangariya no warai»)

But the qualities of this poetry lie not in primitive straightforwardness of slogans and calls. On the contrary, the majority of members of the «Archipelago» denounced tasteless propaganda pieces, regarding the organic unity of the form and content to be the highest merit of poetry. For example, the creative manner of Sekine Hiroshi who can always emphasize the original features of the ordinary. His poems «Soldier», «A Hometask in Drawing», «Fish», «White Crow» are distinguished by paradoxical turns of poetic thought and subtle irony turning into a satirical grotesque behind which can be seen the seamy side of the «affluent» consumer society. The «Archipelago» poets denounced the lack of the spiritual in bourgeois culture which is hostile to genuine art, which kills humaneness and encroaches on the incomparable beauty of Nature. Their lyricism is predominantly of an urban character, but sometimes one can come across their very exquisite and subtle poetical landscape sketches. More often than not the poets find their themes in the hubbub of everyday city life, they freely introduce in their poems the texts of advertisements and sign-boards and direct speech with a view to attaining a maximum precision and vividity of their description. Along with pictures of the day-to-day pursuits of the «man in the street» with his trifles joys and sorrows, the «Archipelago» poetry describes strikes and student demonstrations – the class battles shattering Japan.

The self-disbandment of the «Archipelago» in 1955 summed up a whole epoch of *gendaishi* development, an epoch whose main distinctive feature, undoubtedly, was civic sentiments. The disintegration of the world of poetry that followed contributed to a sharp growth of individualism which was manifested in a multitude of forms – from conformism, voluntary acceptance of reality as it was and a chase for material benefits, to escapism, an attempt to leave society for the sphere of pure art or a narcotic trance. After the closure of «Archipelago», poets have come to the fore who had been in their teens during the war and who dealt with peace-time problems in their works. At the time of the economic boom, when newspapers were harping on the theme of fast-growing incomes and the Liberal-Democratic Party was putting forward the idea about raising a new man, a model Japanese («*hitozukuri*»), the advanced, progressive-minded youth began to talk about the need to preserve humaneness that was disappearing under the outward brilliance and trumpery of industrial society. Realization of the irreparable loss of the elementary moral values, agonizing search of love, friendship and understanding form the content of the poetic works by Ibaragi Noriko, Tanigawa Gan, Anzai Hitoshi, Kōra Rumiko:

«I am unable to feel
 The greenery of grain, the weightless heaviness of ears,
 To feel their rustle in the wind.
 I am unable to touch
 The blue sky over the fields.
 Trying to bring back what was lost,
 I realized that it was hopeless . . .»

Kōra Rumiko, «Bread and Sweat» («*Mugi to ase*»)

Ever new poetic associations and circles emerged and disappeared one after another: «Oars» («*Kai*»), «Spaciousness» («*Han*»), «Today» («*Kyō*»), «Monster» («*Baku*»). Poetry made its way through layers of Philistine standards, camouflage of shop-windows and neon signs. Disunited in the labyrinths of giant cities, drawn into the whirlpools of an empty, vain life, without any political convictions (which are rejected regardless of parties and factions), poets, nevertheless, have persistently been searching for a safety-valve in their narrow world. Terrified by mechanical civilisation stamping human intellects just like spare parts for tape recorders and radio sets, Takiguchi Masako in her poems «Laughing Like a Flower» («*Hana warai*») is attracted by the plight of crippled children. Ibaragi Noriko in the poem «June» («*Rokugatsu*») dreams about a Utop-

ian «happy village» where joyful, satisfied peasants, coming home from the fields, drink turbid sake to their hearts content, clinking huge mugs. Another poet addresses himself to imaginary space dwellers:

«People living on a tiny globe
Sleep, make merry, work . . .
But sometimes they much want to find friends on the Mars!»

...
«The force of gravity
Is a force of intolerable loneliness.
The space contracts,
And people are drawn to one another.
The space expands,
And people are alarmed again.»

Tanikawa Shuntarō, «Two Billion Light Years of Loneliness»
«Nijū-oku kōnen no kodoku»

Tanikawa is one of the best modern poets, who has published quite a few collections, among them 62 Sonnets (*Rokujūni no sonetto*), *Album* (*Arubamu*), *Journey* (*Tabi*). His path is a typical one of many. A talented artist, a great master of poetic technique, a man with a good musical ear, Tanikawa enjoys immense popularity. The reader is attracted by the boldness and complicated character of his imagery, virtuosity of rhythm, and great fantasy combined with a simple, understandable language. The youth liked in him, first of all, his natural protest against the dullness of everyday life, negation of hateful routine:

«I am fed up with my flesh.
I am fed up with teacups, bottles, pedestrian lanes.
...
I am fed up with the rotation of the stars and the sun,
I am fed up with my love . . .»

Tanikawa Shuntarō, «Without Title» («Mudai»)

However, as literature became more and more closely connected with the sphere of capitalist commerce, a rebellious poet increasingly often found himself beside a poet-industrialist. In his essay «To the World» («Sekai e») Tanikawa addressed himself to his fellow-poets: «Yes, we have to sell our poems . . . They can be used in film hits of the season, on TV and in strip shows». Poetry in «mass society» simply was not able to isolate itself from commercial art. A whole crowd of authors of cheap hit songs, soap operas and other such trash got to Parnassus from the back entrance. In turn, respected poets threw their arms wide open to «masuko-

mi» and sometimes sold works of a not too high quality. Of course, it is hard to overestimate all advantages which «*masukomi*» provided for popularizing poetry and enhancing the interest in it.

The modern *gendaishi* poets interpret the problem of the folk character differently. Creative experiments in their striving to win the audience varied from the variety genre to lofty classical works to which «old masters» who still lived in the 1960s and 1970s were invariably drawn. They saw the road to the readers' hearts, above all, in mastering the 1000-year-old cultural heritage, in fostering in the reader the ability to understand the beautiful. It is not the pandering to the base tastes of the mob that attracts them, but the educational work with a view to elevating the reader to their level. A poem by one of the *gendaishi* patriarchs, Ono Tōzaburō, «Along the Paths of the North» («*Oku no hosomichi*»), in which the image of the famous bard Bashō merges, as it were, with the lyrical «ego» of the author can serve as an illustration to this thesis. But the poetically-minded youth was not satisfied with such a peaceful way of serving the people.

In the conditions of an upsurge of the movement of the «new left», mass student riots, on the one hand, and the creation of an «apolitical» counter-culture of the youth and pop-culture, on the other, a new poetry emerged of those who were going «against the stream». A crisis of faith, the shattering of illusions in a consumer society led to forgetting of ideals and destruction of holy things. Artists began to doubt the natural character of what was going on, the logic of history, the force of art and the significance of the poetic word. The essence of the avant-garde poetry that took shape in that period was determined by total nihilism which turned into total alienation:

«Raging passions and fear,
Shattered hopes,
Where have they disappeared?
May be they did not exist at all?»

Yoshimasu Gōzō, «Going against the Stream»
(«*Gyakuryū suru*»)

The poet avant-garde did not have any consistent social programme, or clearcut aesthetic concepts. Some, like Yamamoto Tarō in his «Night song of a Traveller» («*Ryokōsha no yoru no uta*»), or in «A Song of the Monkey Fallen from a Tree» («*Ki kara ochita saru no gin*»), enjoyed themselves with deliberate primitivism, others turned to eroticism and mannerisms of all sorts.

«Mad Run» («Bōsō»), «The King's Ears» («Ōsama no mimi») and other modernist circles grouped around poetic journals could apportion only the anarchy of a spontaneous rebellion to the hated establishment. The growing wave of alienation carried poets to the misty shores of non-existence, into the unknown sphere of sub-consciousness. «The unconscious sweeps everything. Overfilling the depths it rushes forwards, to the surface. But the surface, too, has already turned into most complicated layers, imperceptible to the eye», wrote the poet Ōoka Makoto. From lauding «inner life» and the independent «ego» of the creator, in poems and essays by Horikawa Masami, from the «ghost-verse» («gensō-shi») by Shimaoka Shin, to the unrestricted individualism of Amazawa Taijirō, Gōhara Hiroshi and Ataka Natsuo – such was the path of neo-avant-garde poetry which was out to destroy the stereotype of the Philistine way of thinking.

The now mature Yoshimasu Gōzō, a Japanese heir to the American «destroyers of the foundations» – Ginsberg, Kerouac, Ferlinghetti and Kors, became the apostle of new avant-garde poetry in the mid-1960s. The stormy debut of Yoshimasu who first published his collection *Start* (*Shuppatsu*) in 1964, was a kind of the summing up of the development of the non-conformist trend in *gendaishi*. Creating in his poems the untied, free «visionist» structure, striking the reader with surrealist metaphors and unprecedented expressionism, Yoshimasu is trying to model an antiworld with the pulsating rhythms of the epoch. The searchings for the purport of life and creation in such poems as «The Green Force» («Seiryoku»), or «Mozart's Fiery Hands» («Moeru Mōtsuaruto no te o») acquire a character of an unhealthy hysterical protest against well-to-do complacency and gluttony, against consumer psychology that is eroding human society:

«Raging chaos everywhere.
Words are destroying thoughts,
And also
Metaphysics, time and history.
Fantastic flowers
Adorn my altar.
May children never be born,
Who are destined to become as merciless,
And cruel as this world of ours! . . .»

Yoshimasu Gōzō, «The Ghost-ship of Asia
in the Right Hand» («Migite ni Ajia no yūreisen o»)

Yoshimasu's collection *The Tower of Brain* (*Zunō no tō*) and the poem «Golden Verse» («Ōgon no shihen») struck even Japanese connoisseurs of poetry who are used to sensations. The poet's talent flying high up in the realm of dissociative imaginative thinking, gives birth to lyrical poetry of a great, though not quite pronounced force of seething, though confused passions. Often, we see and feel but a flow of consciousness expressed by jerky, unbalanced, «jazz-like» lines and sparkles of tropes. His style always boils down to displaced causal and time connections, to heaps of hyperboles, sometimes very apt, but out of place in the text, yet sparkling with unexpected bright finds. Such poetry is not so much a «slap in the face of the public», as a reflection of a passionate nihilistic rebellion against the existing order with its social and ethical standards. The poet passes a stern sentence not only on the laws of commercial society, but also on its off-spring, the quasi-culture of cheap books, erotic films and base entertainments.

It is noteworthy that Yoshimasu names neither Herbert Marcuse nor Erich Fromm as his teachers, but Kitamura Tōkoku, the ideological leader of Japanese romanticism at the end of the last century. It was Tōkoku, a student and translator of Emerson, who was the first to formulate the theory of «inner life» as opposed to reality, and to laud the lone hero in his dramatic poem «Song of the Magic Mountain» («Hōrai-kyoku»), that drew the attention of the most outstanding poet-modernist of present-day Japan.

And so the circle has closed. From the complete negation of authorities, avant-garde poetry again comes to an immortal tradition, just like the petals of the *sakura* that return in the late spring to the roots of their mother-tree. It has always been the case with art, and in this lies the earnest success of young *gendaishi* poets.