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JAPANESE POETRY AND WESTERN CRITICISM

Japanese Court Poetry, by Robert H. Brower and
Earl Miner (Stanford University Press. xvi+527
pp. 1961)

This is an exhaustive survey of Japanese Court poetry in its nature, development and contrast with Western poetry. The greater part of the book is devoted to a description of the development of Court poetry in chronological order, but this is primarily a critical study rather than a literary history. The authors' aim in this volume is "to present Court poetry by using a critical method adapted from modern Western literary studies" (p. vii). This is promising enough; the method the authors advocate here naturally claims our special interest, and, fortunately, we find that our expectations are fully answered, and sometimes surpassed, by the authors' admirable efforts in bringing forth the hidden beauty of our familiar poems taken up and discussed under a new light.

"Analytical" may be the best term for the authors' method which is at once efficient and fruitful. They declare that "modern Western methods of critical analysis are as applicable to all periods of Japanese Court poetry as to our own" and that "Japanese poetry possesses artistic riches comparable to our own" (p. 121). Their analytical technique is not simple but manifold. First there are analyses of images and other formal elements of the poems. For example, on the poem by Fujiwara Yoshitsune :

Naniwagata
Irihi no ashi wa
Shimogarete
Kori ni tayuru
Fune no kayoiji.

The Bay of Naniwa :
The water reeds touched with
the sunset
Are withered in the frost,
And the choking ice has blocked
The passageway of boats to
open sea.

the authors comment :

In structural terms the rhetorical technique of Yoshitsune's poem involves, as it were, beginning with the pictorial frame in the first line. Then two sets of two lines follow, the first giving a close-up view, the second implying greater distance. Within each of these parallel pairs of lines there is a line (2, 5) with two nouns joined by the possessive particle and a line (3, 4) with verbs suggesting what happens to the nouns of the other lines. The effect of the lines with verbs is quite similar, since "withered by frost" and "blocked by ice" are parallel in sense as well as form, and frost and ice are closely related natural phenomena. By means of such rhetorical techniques, what is so disjunct in grammar and syntax is given unity by means of parallelism and development in the near-distant relationship of the imagery. (p. 281)

And, in the case of ex-Empress Eifuku's poem on cherry blossoms in the evening :

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| Hana no ue ni | The evening sun |
| Shibashi utsurou | Flickers upon the cherry blossoms |
| Yuzukuhi | With a moment's light, |
| Iru to mo nashi ni | And though it does not seem to set, |
| Kage kienikeri, | Its glowing softly melts away. |

we find another aspect of the analytical work. The uniqueness of the poem consists, according to the authors, in its employing a "dialectic." We are meant to understand first the brevity of the scene ("a moment's light"), then its timelessness ("does not seem to set"), and once again its change ("melts away").

“The poem argues, although in an altogether pleasant fashion, in order to convince us that this one moment, so brief in time and yet so slowed in the consciousness of the speaker, is very special” (p. 378).

This analytical attitude is carried beyond the formal stage further into the domain of inner meaning and cultural background. Ki no Tomonori's poem :

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| Hisakata no | On this day in spring |
| Hikari nodokeki | When the lambent air suffuses |
| Haru no hi ni | Soft tranquility, |
| Shizugokoro naku | Why should the cherry petals flutter |
| Hana no chiru ran, | With unsettled heart to earth ? |

is quoted as a typical example of Japanese seasonal poetry. In this poem “there is the consciousness of the lover of nature, of the person who regrets its change, and of the person or state of mind that encompasses both. For both are true : it is sad that the flowers should fall, and it is true that man should know they must” (p. 473). We have here two contradictory concepts brought under our consideration, namely, first, the Japanese view of nature more or less characterized by some Buddhist concepts such as the unity of all natural life and the subjection of man to laws true of all nature ; and, second, the inevitably human sense of man's separate identity resulting from the idea that man is the only self-conscious being. Such discrepancies between the monism of theory and the dualism of experience are “too fine to be called conflicts and perhaps best termed ironies” (p. 472). This ironic concept of nature and man's place in it, or more exactly, the attitude of “affirmation and acceptance tinged with ironic awareness, which do not exclude the possibility of wit” (pp. 473-74) marks the basic tones of Japanese poetry.

At the basis of the authors' analytical attitude there lies a

critical criterion. Their catholic taste is admirable. We may note, however, a clear preference for complexity to simplicity in the evaluation, which works as a principle in their historical view of Court poetry. As a natural consequence of it, they seem to consider the age of the *Shinkokinshu* the peak of the development.

On the other hand, an interesting problem arises from this preference in the case of Minamoto Sanetomo's poems. As might be expected, the authors are doubtful whether the poet really deserves the praises some Japanese critics including Saito Mokichi and Masaoka Shiki have lavishly bestowed upon him. They say that "many modern Japanese place such a high value on 'sincerity' that they confuse it with poetic integrity; they confuse biography with art, the man with the speaker of the poem" (p. 333). No mention is made, however, of Kobayashi Hideo whose essay on Sanetomo has fascinated so many readers among us. The reviewer is sure that he is not alone in wishing to have the authors' comment on that clever writing. On the other hand we must pay respectful attention to their opinion that the romantic revival of interest in the *Man'yoshu* in Edo and Meiji times is, in a sense, "a revival that still blinds many Japanese scholars and readers to the merits of much of their own best poetry" (p. 329).

The comparison drawn by the authors between Japanese and Western poetry in this volume is of much importance, too. Comparison is one of the best means when one has to describe products of one culture for those brought up in another. For example, here is a poem by Ki no Tsurayuki :

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| Kasugano no | Do those girls set out |
| Wakana tsumi ni ya | On some excursion for young |
| Shirotae no | shoots, |
| Sode furihaete | That they so gaily beckon, |

“Both passages have qualities of the epic and of beauty, but where Milton’s is the beauty of the epic, we may turn the words about for the *Heike* : it is an epic of the beautiful” (p. 443) .

Yet after all, it must be admitted, any great work of art has something in it that transcends cultural boundaries. The two co-authors have proved themselves to have a thorough knowledge of the two traditions, and therefore, we may safely say that they are well-qualified to suggest a way of uniting the two currents into one, that is, one culture of a higher order common to all human beings, East and West. Offering Fujiwara Teika’s magnificent poem :

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| Haru no yo no | The bridge of dreams |
| Yume no ukihashi | Floating on the brief spring night |
| Todae shite | Soon breaks off : |
| Mine ni wakaruru | Now from the mountaintop a cloud |
| Yokogumo no sora, | Takes leave into the open sky. |

as a typical example embodying the ideal of beauty in the period, the authors say “such beauty was elusive, ephemeral, the stuff that dreams are made on” (p. 262) . This comes to us as a kind of revelation, and we feel that we are led up to an eminence which commands a higher view of literature. And we will remain thankful forever to the two American scholars for having enriched our poetic experience through the analyses and comparisons they have so successfully worked out in this high monument of scholarship.

(Haruhiko Fujii)

N. B. The translations of the poems quoted are those by the authors.