Impact of the Bomb on the Spirit

A reading of postwar Japanese poetry

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Discussed in this article

The Poetry of Postwar Japan, edited by Kijima Hajime. University of Iowa Press, 1975.

Modern Japanese Poetry, translated by James Kirkup and edited by A.R. Davis. University of Queensland Press, 1978.

War poetry is significantly characteristic of this century. Because the poet's voice is inherently a human voice, poets throughout the world have felt a weighted responsibility to react to that which threatens to destroy humankind and to protest against the inhuman force of modern warfare—from the ruthless use of asphyxiating gas during World War I to the massive unleashing of bombs during World War II.

After the firebombings of Tokyo and numerous other Japanese cities, and after the atomic blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a devastated Japan responded with a new kind of poetry—bomb poetry. This poetry first emerges as an attempt to deal with the insurmountable trauma, but quickly becomes an enraged scream of protest. It is poetry of horrible beauty and unfailing strength that demands a restatement of the world's humanity. In the power and energy of its anger, this poetry is ultimately life-affirming.

A group of poets, the "Arechi," appeared just after the war and is clearly representative of this first postwar decade. Their name, Arechi, which means "wasteland," was chosen as an obvious allusion to T.S. Eliot's poem, but also because the word itself described so aptly the physical and emotional state of Japan after the firebombings and the atom bombs. In spite of the unspeakable suffering and monstrous atrocity that everywhere surrounded and consumed them, they consciously attempted to grasp the last threads of hope. A.R. Davis quotes from the introduction to their first anthology: "The escape from destruction, the protest against ruin are our will to rebel against our own fate and are also testimony to our existence. If there is to be a future for us and for you it depends on our not despairing of our present life." It was the obsessive concern of the Arechi poets and of subsequent groups (the "Kai"—Oars, and the "Retto"—Archipelago) along with numerous other individual poets, to express the anguish, despair, outrage, and finally the hope of the victimized people of Japan.

Because we must rely on English translations, of which there are relatively few available, it is important that we be aware of one crucial characteristic of this poetry in its original Japanese. These poets needed a new language to express the profundity of their feelings, and they broke sharply with the conventional language of traditional Japanese poetry. One who speaks and reads Japanese would be able to understand these poems in relation to the complexities of the historical linguistic conventions against which they rebel. We are of necessity left with English translations and often mere assimilations with English limitations.

Roy Andrew Miller, in an essay included in *The Poetry of Postwar Japan*, characterizes the Japanese language of this poetry as "totally nude, unadorned." The essay explains further: "To say that the language of these poems represents a departure from the traditions of Japanese poetic diction is simply to cloud the issue with indirection;

better to think of it as a violent stripping away of all protective covering, a hurried, compulsive urge to display as prominently as possible, everything that is normally kept hidden in layers of involute linguistic devices; in a word it is hadaka no gengo, 'naked language.'"

The poems that follow are some of those poems selected from the two anthologies cited above which obviously deal with the subject of the bomb; but the impact of the bomb and other instruments of modern warfare is evidenced in countless other poems—many of which are seemingly unrelated to the issue. Subtle images that twist and turn and jolt the reader's senses are present throughout the poetry of this period. The impact of war is pervasive and multi-leveled.

"The Myth of Hiroshima" by Saga Nobuyuki expresses the betrayal of the victims, not that they died, but that they died inhuman, unnatural, scientific deaths.

What are they looking for,

running to the summit of lost time?

Hundreds of people vaporized instantly

are walking in midair.

.

"We didn't die."

"We skipped over death in a flash and became spirits."

"Give us a real, human death."

.

One man's shadow among hundreds is branded on stone steps.

.

"Why am I imprisoned in stone?"

"Where did my flesh go, separated from its shadow?"

"What must I wait for?"

.

The 20th century myth is stamped with fire.

Who will free this shadow from the stone?

In "Cocoon" by Ishigaki Rin we are struck with the fragility of nature in a time defined by the reality and the threat of the bomb. The power and the diversity of the earth is negated and the poet very simply shrinks the image of our world down to a small, concrete, microcosmic detail of nature:

It isn't that the threat of the bomb is great

but that the earth is small.

.

The silkworm eats

the mulberry leaves,

someone feeds on the world.

Who is gaining weight—a country or an ism?

(Anyway, not one of us.)

.

Look

something like thread

goes up in the air

something like smoke from a volcano

solidly surrounds the earth

and by the time it becomes a perfect cocoon

the chrysalis inside is killed.

What's left is an inch of silk.

"Hand of Death" by Hasegawa Ryusei seems to focus on a future bombing with similarly devastating conclusions. The specific time and circumstances become irrelevant details. The bitterly ironic tone exposes the uselessness, the tenuousness of modern society.

So there's a boy.

But his dream is rejected.

On the great overhead railway

a large bridge is a rainbow.

Broken in two places

its ends emerge touching skyscrapers.

Skyscrapers of many cylinders.

Smooth rings of light flow out of them.

The helicopters which take off at night,

canals linked together,

steamships which glide over the land,

a plan for an underground factory—

all these are beaten flat

quite easily.

The boy closes the thin Japanese science magazine of 1998.

What place is this?

The mirror reversing in the boy's small brain

throws light on reality at a 180 degree angle.

Everything is too damp;

even pus seeps from the dried skin of his father's corpse.

The limping boy folds his father's body in thirds,

puts it in a box,

takes it down the dark stairs,

ties it on the back of his rattling bicycle

and carries it off at night

to the place of burning.

"Revelations" by Kihara Koichi creates the vision of a world nullified by chemical poisons which has become a truer picture of our present environment.

A woman died with thousands of

others in the atomic bombing of

Hiroshima in 1945 leaving behind her

on this earth only a rag of skin but on

which the victim's face clearly appeared.

.

I no longer possess the face of a human being

I am fixed to a fragment of gauze

But that does not stop me from screaming!

.

Between my teeth uranium lies hidden

In the depths of my nostrils plutonium worms its way

At the back of my sightless eyes helium glares

The world now is no more than a small rock soaked with the downpours of raging poisons!

.

I am a tatter of a burnt human creature

Tranced on this fragment of gauze

From beyond the horizon I hear my lost remains calling to me

Look! Clouds of uranium drive down upon dark seas and shores

Listen! Rains of helium are drumming on dumb windows and roofs

But sons of men! Do not let those hands of yours destroy mankind

All living creatures are now nothing but plagues of locusts

Moving on unchecked into the waste lands

The poet Toge Sankichi was in Hiroshima at the time the atom bomb was dropped. He was a victim of radiation sickness and died in 1953 at the age of thirty-six. His poems are a dire testament to the horrors he witnessed and experienced. One may note a certain poetic distance in some of the previous poems; there is no such distance here. "At a First Aid Post" is directed to the women victims of Hiroshima.

You

Who have no channels for tears when you weep

No lips through which words can issue when you howl

No skin for your fingers to grip with when you writhe in torment

You

.

Your squirming limbs all smeared with blood and slimy sweat and lymph

Between your closed lids the glaring eyeballs show only a thread of white

On your pale swollen bellies only the perished elastic that held up your drawers

You who can no longer feel shame at exposing your sheltered sex

O who could believe that

Only minutes ago

You were all schoolgirls fresh and appealing

.

In scorched and raw Hiroshima

Out of dark shuddering flames

You no longer the human creatures you had been

Scrambled and crawled one after the other

Dragged yourselves along as far as this open ground

To bury in the dusts of agony

Your frizzled hair on skulls almost bare as heads of Buddhist saints

.

Why should you have to suffer like this

Why suffer like this

What is the reason

What reason

And you

Do not know

How you look nor

What your humanity has been turned into

.

You are remembering

Simply remembering

Those who until this morning were

Your fathers mothers brothers sisters

(Would any of them recognize you now if they met you)

Remembering your homes where you used to sleep wake eat

(In a single flash all the flowers on their hedges were blasted

And no one knows where their ashes lie)

Remembering remembering

Here with your fellow-creatures who one by one gradually moving

Remembering

Those days when

You were daughters

Daughters of humankind.

In “The Night,” Toge Sankichi portrays the city of Hiroshima as emblematic of a civilization spent, wasted, abandoned to parasites, a civilization which has insanely betrayed itself.

Eyes aching

Brimming

In the swarming lights of Hiroshima

Everywhere the swollen scars

On shiny keloid skin

Wet streaks writhing

Muddy mazes stinking of decay

Blasted trunks dotted with flabby buds

And sunk in the drizzling rain

Women’s eyes redder than the fires of their cigarettes

Their branded thighs laid open to the view.

.

O Hiroshima

Sterile erection shattered by an atomic bomb

Women are barren

Men shoot listless sperm

While in that resplendent area of leasehold land

The bowers of Hijiyama Park

The tail-light of a gliding limousine is being born

From the arc lamps of the A-Bomb Casualty Survey Centre

In the air of night

That throbs with New Mexican jazz.

.

(In window-frames across the river

Feral women are langorously stretching

Removing their petals

Discarding their pistils

As they make ready for nightwork.)

.

On the roof of the station cradling blinded trains

Mindless characters are spilling from the electric newsflash

Telling of second, third, hundredth A-bomb tests

To the bleeding apparition of a drunkard

Shambling away out of nowhere

The lank shadow of a soldier rising—

In a boat scraping the rocks of the black river

When the tide of evening floods the banks

Effacing the footprints left by scrap- metal pickers.

.

Listen

Dark-blue flutterings disturb the heavens

Across the night towards the dawn

Or from the dawn towards the night

Over Hiroshima's leprous map of lights

Some hanging in the distance

Some suspended suspended half-way

Some trying fearfully to forget

Some desperately seething

Some trembling

Some dying

Crawling on their own blood

Retreading from the doomed memory

The sad nebulae of Hiroshima

Mute and sunken in

The darkness of history.

One last poem by Toge Sankichi, "The Vision," contains an incredible sense of foreboding. It is essentially a terrifying and urgent warning to the future—to all of us.

Always we have this burning vision:

A city on the delta of some volcanic island, where

The windows of buildings are blazing with colorless flames of fire

Traffic signals trapping fire-robed refugees and then

Releasing them again

The big station clock obliterated buried in fires from chimneys

Fire-cargoed ships sailing in and sailing out from the piers

And with sudden soundless hoots of fire

Desperate expresses dragging forth primroses of fire

Women nestling the fire of pus in their crotches

And when a foreigner walks by striking his lighter

Many beggars in black scuttle after him for alms of fire

Behold that man scavenging a fire-tipped cigarette end over there.

.

Always we live with this glaring vision of a fire that

Never dies

Never is extinguished

And is there any one of us who could deny

That all of us are already all on fire?

.

At night, above the floods of radiant lights

the sheet upon sheet of dazzling neon

I sense a sea of flames heaving up into The

dark tunnels of the midnight skies

Thronged with our disfigured brothers

Feet upon feet hands upon hands

All blood and licked by the cruel tongues of fire

Splintered brains

Galaxies burning at the stake

.

Collapsing

In roses of fire in blue bowers of sparks

Whirling gales of firestorms

Out of darkness screaming

Indignation regret resentment grief

Curses hatred pleadings wailings

Until all these moaning voices stream from the earth into the sky.

No longer are we what we used to be, ourselves, but other beings

With our own bodies still, but with a burning stink,

With peeled skins bald heads we go

Branded with all the marks of the Atomic Tribe

Humans bereft of the right to live as humans.

Now even a test on some lagoon in the farthest reaches of the oceans

Makes us jump

For we know each bomb is hanging on its parachute of blackness

Over our melting-pot.

.

Watch the way the tongueless flames are dancing

The lungless tongues are writhing

Teeth piercing lips

Lips spouting liquid fire

And how these voiceless fires storm through all the earth to bring

A blazing Hiroshima to London

A blasting Hiroshima to New York

An incandescent Hiroshima to Moscow

.

Watch how the voiceless fires go dancing round the world

With gestures of pain and indignation.

Yes, we are all fires blazing with the vision that we fuel

Like forests of furnace fire

Like seas of liquid fire

Lapping the earth in flame and fever.

.

Yes, we are nothing but a mad mass of fire

Blazing passionately against the next scheme

Of the devils of nuclear holocaust.

These poems evidence the remarkable strength of the human spirit. By confronting the reality of genocide, by looking at the physical mutations of the victims, by writing these poems, the poet fights back and lives. But there is an important contradiction here—a tenuous link between two opposing truths; these poets at once reflect the strength and the fragility of the earth and of the human bodies they seek to protect. It is miraculous that some of these people survived to fight back. The compulsive militarism of the present age, the threat of hundreds and thousands of Hiroshimas and Nagasakis, erodes the life forces within us. If the threat continues, if the world experiences even a fraction more of that horror, if—as our foolish military experts assure us—there can be survivors of a nuclear confrontation, if all our poetry becomes a dirge, a morbid lamentation, then the spirit of the survivors will become like the bodies of the victims, and we will be caught in an unreversible cycle of despair.

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