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LITERATURE AND HISTORY

Japan's Recent Historical Experience (1920-1970)

Through the Sequence of Kawabata Yasunari's Narrative

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Literary narrative and fiction can be explored as an expression of the historical experience of a community. Such expression is artistic, ethical, explanatory, apologetic and prophetic.

The sequence of fictions written by the 1968 Nobel Prize Kawabata Yasunari have the suggestive appeal of following a very important period of Japan modern history. *Juurokusai no nikki* and *Izu no odoriko* were published during a very important decade of social transformation and intellectual ferment. *Yukiguni* first appeared in the mist of a political upheaval and international transformation of the country. *Meijin* is considered by many as a coded commentary on the Japanese game in the Pacific War. *Saikonsha*, *Senbazuru*, *Yama no oto*, *Maihime* and *Mizuumi* were serialized or printed during the years following the defeat of the Second World War and marking the beginning of the reconstruction of the country. *Nemureru bijo*, *Koto*, *Utsukushisa to kanashimi to* and *Kataude* run paralel to the events that preceded the emergence of Japan as an economic superpower. Kawabata Yasunari died (April 16, 1972) just in the moment in which the country was hailed to enter into a new era of admiration, prestige and growing important within the world order. The sequence of Kawabata's stories as well as many other short stories or essays, can be considered to be totally absent and detached from the events of one of the most excruciating times of Japanese historical experience.

Or they can be taken as a very special expression of a deep statement on what was going forward in the heart of the Japanese community. As a matter of fact historians do not pay any particular attention to Kawabata's narrative as a document related to Japanese nationalism or national spirit. Furthermore literary critics would praise generally Kawabata for his subtle sensitivity and aesthetic quality of his prose, but they would not go further to explain the

meaning of the work of the writer as deeply related to the events that were happening around him. Some notes and commentaries have pointed out random and passing relationships between parts of Kawabata's master pieces (*Meijin*, *Senbazuru*, *Yama no oto*, *Koto*) and the surrounding events that were happening at the time of their literary composition, but nobody has explained the entire literary endeavor of almost fifty years in terms of the historical experience of the times.

The paper of the present proposal will summarize a more extensive analytical research into Kawabata Yasunari's narrative under four or five headings covering each one a decade of writing of the artist as a decade of Japanese modern history.

The 1920's decade can be viewed through *Juurokusai no nikki* and *Izu no odoriko*. These two short stories were composed using fragments of old diaries on personal events that had happened some years before. The device can be approached as a means of reflecting on the role of memory in the reconstruction of "our closest other".

The experience of the prewar period of the 1930's can be analysed in *Yukiguni* and its multiple and yet never completely finished redactions. In this story the image of "snow country" and its people (reduced to the proportion of two geisha and their worlds) make a strong contrast with the "real country".

The meaning, however, comes by the mediation and interplay of characters; the reference to the "real country" is not made through logical antithesis or statements of the plot but by images of silence and solitude.

The story relates the impotency of joining the "closest other" despite its vicinity "at hand".

The war and postwar period narratives offer a series of rich variations on the reasons. Two of these stories (*Senbazuru*, and *Mizuumi*, might be called "explorations in guilt", and as such they might be considered to reflect the Japanese historical experience of the postwar years. Both novels represent alternative positions. In *Senbazuru*, the main character is "confused" and "bewildered" by "the others", who are competing for his intimacy. Some are depicted as "evil"; some are imagined as "pure" and "innocent"; some are "fascinatingly seductive". In *Mizuumi*, Kawabata seems to resolve the problem of guilt formulated in the dynamics of the human relations of *Senbazuru*, with the narrative of the obsessions of a man that is almost constantly saying "the guilt is me" while going back to a "distant other" in the past.

The fiction of the 1960's decade seem to approach the problem of a broken identity left by the preceding stories. The problem is seen through many variations of the same theme: the drugged beauty sleeping besides the old man in *Nemureru bijo*, the longing of the young girl of a traditional Kyoto family for her lost twin peasant sister in *Koto*, the extreme depersonalization of a body-self establishing a relationship with a part of a body of his "closest other" in *Kataude*.

Many other Japanese writers like Natsume Sooseki, Tanizaki Jun'ichiroo, Mishima Yukio, Abe Koobo, Ooe Kenzaburoo are preferred to Kawabata Yasunari, as representatives of the modern Japanese predicament since the opening of the country in the Meiji instauration.

In comparison to the complexity of those writers Kawabata's expression is appreciated for its craft, delicacy, and hidden connections with tradition, but never for his reflections on Japanese historical experience. Before non Japanese eyes, more bolder spirits like those writers are considered better candidates to provide with an imaginative as well as philosophical statement on the meaning of being Japanese in a "foreign world".

Kawabata's unique contribution lies in an appeal to universal archetypes that help to build up an imaginative landscape where questions related to the times could be formulated by any reader without the need of calling for more conceptual devices or fixed answers.

日本的アニミズムの展開

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民族は巨大な生命体であり、原初的な個性の強い文化意志、即ち原型を持つ。原型は変らない。しかし文明の発展と共にそれに適応して時代的な性格を帯びるようになる。個人に取っていえば「三つ子の魂」に相当するものが教育・社会的影響などによって洗練されてゆく過程にもたとえられるであろう。西欧にはユダヤ・キリスト教的な原型があり、その一元論的思考が近代以後思想・科学の面でニュートン力学、フロイド心理学、マルクスの唯物史観などに大きな影響を与えて来た。

日本の原型の最も大きな要因としてアニミズム的思考を指摘することが出来る。「霊的・超自然的・神秘的なものが有機物・無機物を問わずあらゆる対象に存在するといふ宗教的・呪術的な意識の基本として特に原始信仰精霊信仰の形で存在した」のをアニミズムと言えよう。

自然的に存在するものに対する精霊信仰は特出した能力のある動・植物、又人間をも信仰対象とする。特に特出した能力に対する信仰は徹底した技能に対する献身の形にもなる。特に日本のアニミズム的傾向は畏怖の形を以て表われる場合に多い。「崇り」又は梅原猛の「地獄の思想」などがそれである。

古代の日本人のアニミズム的性格を表わすものとして重要な文献を二つあげることが出来る。

(A) 「…その地、多に螢火の光く神、及び蠅聲す邪しき神あり、復た草木咸能く言語ことある」
(['日本書紀'])

(B) 「大人の敬する所を見れば、ただ手を搏ちて跪拜に当つ……下戸、大人と道路に相逢えば、逡巡に草に入る辞を伝え事を説くには、あるいは蹲りあるいは跪き、両手を地に抛りこれが恭敬を爲す……」(['魏志倭人伝'])

(A)の内容は典型的な日本の風土の特徴を示す。これから精霊信仰が形成され、今日まで綿々と引きつながれている。神奈備信仰、八百萬の神などの存在がそれであり、柳田國男は『遠野物語』で農民の素朴なアニミズム信仰が数多くの民話の形で残されていることを示している。