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n-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Yesterday Is Another World. Tanka by Yosano Akiko　きのふをば千とせの前の世とも思ひ。与謝野晶子の短歌

Roger Pulvers, Akiko Yosano

Yesterday Is Another World

Tanka by Yosano Akiko

From "Disheveled Hair"　みだれ髪

Translations and Text by Roger Pulvers

Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), poet, educator, and anti-war and social critic. "Dishevelled Hair" was her first published collection of tanka (1901).

Two stars deep into heaven

Whispering love

Behind the nighttime curtain

While down below, now, people lie

Their hair in gentle disarray…

夜の帳にささめき尽きし星の今を下界の人の鬢のほつれよ

Made to punish men for their sins

The smoothest skin

The longest black hair…

All that

Is me!

罪おほき男こらせと肌きよく黒髪ながくつくられし我れ

Her hair at twenty

Flowing long and black

Through the teeth of her comb

Oh beautiful spring

Extravagant spring!

その子二十櫛にながるる黒髪のおごりの春のうつくしきかな

Droplets fall from a young girl's hair

Congealing on grass

Giving birth to a butterfly

In the country

Of spring

わかき子が髪のしづくの草に凝りて蝶とうまれしここ春の國

The girl in a springtime window

Calls to awaken a young priest

Barely a man

His sutras toppled

By her dangling sleeve

うらわかき僧よびさます春の窓ふり袖ふれて經くづれきぬ

Akiko

Akiko wrote many poems about the restrained passions that overwhelm a young girl. After she met the man who was to become her husband, the poet Yosano Tekkan, these passions became more mature in expression, deeper, more concretely erotic. They naturally began as adolescent fantasies. But there is no question as to the power of these young fantasies: They are able to make the defenses of an acolyte crumble.

The day lengthens…

I snap off wild roses

Grasp them, put them in my hair…

I am weary of waiting in the field

For you!

野茨をりて髪にもかざし手にもとり永き日野辺に君まちわびぬ

And this poem too, about a girl waiting impatiently for her lover, exposes her restless ardor. The day is long but she snaps off wild roses. The coincidence of nobara being “wild rose” in English is a lucky one, considering the nuances of “wild.”

Her loose hair entwined

Around a young branch

By the east wind…

And in the west a rainbow

So small, yet radiant!

とき髪を若枝にからむ風の西よ二尺に足らぬうつくしき虹

Akiko and Tekkan

Another poem about a young girl, her hair now taken by the wind and entwined around a young branch (a very erotic image). This is the spring wind that blows from east to west. It is almost telling her--commanding her--to look to the west, where she sees a tiny but beautiful rainbow. (Ni-shaku is the length of the sleeve of a kimono...the sleeve that hangs through the window of a room in which a young man is sleeping, perhaps dreaming of her....)

A great deal has been written about Yosano Akiko's life and poetry. In going through the myriad details of her dramatic life that spanned the late-Meiji, Taisho and early-Showa eras, one most amazing fact stands out, to my mind, above all others: Yosano Akiko had 13 children (11 of whom survived childhood). This means that she was pregnant for about a decade of her adult life. Think alone of the amount of bleached cotton cloth (sarashi) under her kimono that she would have had to wash!

Can you imagine her having the time to produce her vast output of poems and prose and letters, give birth to and look after her children--admittedly with help from relatives and helpers--and cater to the many and complex whims of her husband, whose fame as a poet was eclipsed by hers?

I whisper to you, "Stay in bed"

As I tenderly shake you awake

My dishevelled hair now

Up in a Butterfly...

Kyoto morning!

みだれ髪を京の島田にかへし朝ふしていませの君ゆりおこす

My black hair

My thick thick black hair

My wild hair

Its thousand strands my heart

Dishevelled, torn apart

くろ髪の千すぢの髪のみだれ髪かつおもひみだれおもひみだるる

Here her hair is a metaphor of her dishevelled state. This poem, like so many others, contains a most beautiful flow of sounds. It is almost as if the last 15 hiragana letters, virtually half the poem, are also flowing.

My blood burns

To give you one night

In the shelter of heightened dreams

God, do not look down on one

Who passes through spring

血ぞもゆるかさむひと夜の夢のやど春を行く人神おとしめな

The words in the middle of this poem are among the most beautiful of any that she created. They make one feel as if one were reading Heian poetry in a more modern form. In fact, for me this is one of the greatest modern tanka ever written. And what other modern female poet, in any country, expressed her passions so openly? Not even Anna Akhmatova, her Russian contemporary, who is credited with giving a voice to women, is as frank or as bold or as starkly erotic.

Had Yosano Akiko been writing in English or French or German, for instance, her influence on 20th-century poetry around the world would have been immense.

How beautiful they are

The people brushing past me

As I stroll through Gion

To the Temple of Kiyomizu

On this cherry blossom moonlit night!

清水へ祇園をよぎる桜月夜こよひ逢ふ人みなうつくしき

We leaned against the railing

That runs along the bright bank

Of the wide Oi River at night

Dressed in light blue

In our very own summer!

明くる夜の河はばひろき嵯峨の欄きぬ水色の二人の夏よ

Having lived myself in Kyoto for 15 years, I have a particular fondness for her poems that are located there. Akiko, of course, was born in Sakai. She is a Kansai poet with a Kansai sensibility. What does this mean? A sensitivity and sentimentality that are very focused, pointed, clearly defined...not like Kafu's, that is often wet, vaguely whining and reeking of trumped-up nostalgia...or Kawabata's sensibility that is often artificially heightened. (Kawabata, of course, was not a Kyoto native. And his novel set in Kyoto, Koto (古都), is touristic; a kind of modern fairytale. Its portrait of both the Kitayama district and of Gion may just as well have been written by a foreigner.) By contrast, Akiko's sentimentality is photographic. It captures a reality that we can recognize even today, especially in the few parts of Kyoto that have remained largely unchanged in the last 100 years.

Tomorrow this time tomorrow

You will not be with me...

I lean against the inn door, faint

As the plum blossoms darken

Before my eyes

明日を思ひ明日の今おもひ宿の戸に倚る子やよわき梅暮れそめぬ

Let me wind my slender arm

Around your neck

Let me suck the fever

From your parched lips

Let me....

病みませるうなじに繊きかひな捲きて熱にかはける御口を吸はむ

You lured me to you, then

Brushing my hand aside

Left...

Your holy robe's scent

Caught in a gentle good night

さそひ入れてさらばと我手はらひます御衣のにほひ闇やはらかき

You spout your words of wisdom

While the current of my blood runs

Hot beneath my soft skin…

Don't you miss

Touching it!?

やは肌のあつき血汐にふれも見でさびしからずや道を説く君

I press my breasts

Gently parting

The shroud of mystery

Revealing the flower

Redder than red

乳ぶさおさへ神秘のとばりそとけりぬここなる花の紅ぞ濃き

"I press my breasts" is one of her most famous, and most erotic tanka. With Akiko's poetry the associations are complex and varied: Heian poetry; haiku (particularly Buson and other classical haiku poets); tanka written by Tekkan and other contemporaries; the elements, such as the wind, the sun; and parts of the clothing or body. It is astounding how so many of these elements are integrated in so few words. I know of no other poet in Japanese who does this so naturally.

My skin is so soft

Fresh from my bath

It pains me to see it touched

Covered by the fabric

Of an everyday world

ゆあみして泉を出でしやははだにふるるはつらき人の世のきぬ

Akiko loved European painting, especially the work of Titian. In "My skin is so soft" is she picturing herself, just out of her bath, in a Renaissance painting?

A firefly slips off

The dangling sleeve

Of my light summer kimono

Taken by the wind, drifting away

Into this blue night

うすものの二尺のたもとすべりおちて蛍ながるる夜風の青き

Your love for me

My love for you

Love indistinguishable

Whether you are the white bush clover…

Whether I am the white lily….

おもひおもふ今のこころに分ち分かず君やしら萩われやしら百合

"Your love for me" was actually written to her best friend, the poet Yamakawa Tomiko, who, like Akiko, was in love with Tekkan and had hoped to marry him. Their love for the same man and their poetic aspirations created a unique bond between them, intensely erotic without being sexual.

"Spring doesn't last," I said to him…

"You don't believe in permanence, do you?"

And I took his hands in mine

Leading them

To my young full breasts

春みじかし何に不滅の命ぞとちからある乳を手にさぐらせぬ

Yesterday is another world

A thousand years away…

Yet it rushes to me

This minute!

With your hand on my shoulder…

きのふをば千とせの前の世とも思ひ御手なほ肩に有りとも思ふ

Finally, a poem in answer to one by Tekkan, who wanted her to apply his blood to her lips as lipstick.

What will come into my burning lips?

You answer…

“The blood from my little finger.”

But that blood is too dry now

For my mouth

もゆる口になにを含まむぬれといひし人のをゆびの血は涸れはてぬ

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Roger Pulvers, author, playwright and director, is a Japan Focus associate. In February 2009, he was awarded the Crystal Simorgh Prize for Best Script for "Ashita e no Yuigon (Best Wishes for Tomorrow)" at the Teheran International Film Festival. He is the author and translator of Miyazawa Kenji, Strong in the Rain: selected poems *among many other books. He wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.*

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