Abe Kobo : A Study and a Translation

Tennessee Scholars Senior Project

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The work of the Japanese author Abe Kobo[1] has achieved great success in both his homeland and especially abroad. His work is suffused both with an existential sensibility about life and a surrealist sense of humor. Abe's writings address the absurd state of humanity after the Second World War.

Abe has detectable influences not only from the rich indigenous literature of Japan, but also from foreign literatures. *Genji monogatari*[2] is well studied by Abe as are other classics of Japanese literature, perhaps especially *Hojoki*[3]. The classical dramas *kabuki* and particularly *noh*[4] are also evinced in his work. Abe is also well acquainted with the great *haiku* poet Matsuo Basho [5]. Neither is Abe a stranger to modern Japanese literature, from Kawabata[6] to Tanizaki[7] to Soseki[8]. Abe is equally adept in his knowledge of such foreign authors as Rabelais, Poe, Sartre, Beckett, Camus, and Kafka, whose influence shows most readily in his works.

Abe's themes often revolve around alienation of the individual within society. Another theme very common in his *ouevre* is the search for or loss of identity. His protagonists are often trapped, unable to live happily or fully either within or without society. In Woman in the Dunes, the main character is absurdly trapped in a nexus of fluid sand. He must live and be

responsible for himself and his actions in an existentialist view of humanity. In The Box Man, the protagonist escapes from society by living in a box and becoming a non-person in society. Even this fails to make him happy, and his doctor eventually assumes his identity as the box man. In The Face of Another, the protagonist suffers from another form of identity crisis: his face has been disfigured in an accident. He adopts a mask in an attempt to re-enter society, but he feels that the mask is taking over his personality as he attempts to seduce his wife in his new persona. This fails as his wife has known all along that it was he, claiming that she thought that love was stripping off each other's masks. In Secret Rendezvous the protagonist's wife has been abducted by an ambulance crew, and she disappears at a vast hospital. The crass bureaucracy of the medical system frustrates the protagonist and leaves him and his wife in limbo as non-persons. In the play Friends, the main character's life is disrupted by a family that moves into his apartment to bring him "comfort and joy." Eventually they lock him in a cage, steal his fiance and kill him. As they leave for their next "host," they revel that their work has succeeded. In Inter Ice Age 4 the world is facing a calamitous flood. Genetic engineering succeeds in creating an aquatic human, but people feel the sapping of their own sense of identity as people, since after the flood, only the aquatic humans will be "people." As one can see, the crisis of

alienation and the crisis of identity are great concerns of Abe Kobo.

Abe's reputation is vast in foreign countries, but in his homeland he is seen somewhat differently. The application of foreign influences in his writings make many Japanese see him as cosmopolitan, non-traditional, and outside of the norm--a concept crucial in Japanese culture. Despite the surreal qualities of his work, none in Japan can dispute his mastery of the Japanese language. His Japanese flows effortlessly across the columns, showing the poetic touch of Japanese culture. However, much of his work also is crisp and detached, sometimes almost cold, in its approach. This objectivity, which probably stems from his medical training and his entomological studies, can give a work a clarity or vacuity, depending on the reader.

Abe Kobo is a great figure in contemporary Japanese literature. His eclecticism in influence and pertinence of thematic schemes make him a vital figure in the literature of humanity.

NOTES

1. Note that the name is in Japanese style; hence surname comes first.

2. *Genji monogatari*--The Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu. This novel is considered the definitive classic in Japanese literature. It tells of Prince Genji and his life in the court of the Kamakura period of Japanese history c. 1000 A.D. Note also that this novel predates any Western attempts at the novel.

3. *Hojoki*--An Account of My Hut by Kamo no Chomei. This narrative is a brilliant work of Zen ideology and aesthetics that addresses life in a way that prefigures the absurdism expounded by Camus and Beckett.

4. *Noh* drama is highly stylized and is suffused with the Zen conceptions of existence.

5. Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) was the most illustrious of the poets of the *haiku* and *tanka* forms of Japanese poetry.

6. Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) was one of the foremost exemplars of modern Japanese fiction. Works include Snow Country (*Yukiguni*), Thousand Cranes (*Senbazaru*), and The Sound of the Mountain (*Yama no oto*). Kawabata won the 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature.

7. Tanizaki Jun'ichiro (1886-1965) was another great figure of modern Japanese literature. Works include The Key (*Kagi*) and In Praise of Shadows (*In'rei raisan*).

8. Natsume Soseki (1867-1916) was another great in modern Japanese literature. Like Basho, he was also known by his first name. Works include *Kokoro*, The Gate (*Mon*), and I Am a Cat (*Wagahai wa neko de aru*).

Abe Kobo: Bibliography

1948: *Owari shi michi no shirube ni* The Signpost at the End of the Street

1950: *Akai mayu* "Red Cocoon" received Prize for Postwar Literature

1951: *Kabe* The Wall -- Includes *Kozui*, received Akutagawa Prize

1952: *Chi'nyusha* Intruders

1954: *Kigadomei* Starvation League

1958: *Bo ni natta otoko* The Man Who Turned Into a Stick

1959: *Daishikanpyoki* Inter Ice Age 4

1962: *Suna no Onna* Woman in the Dunes

1964: *Tanin no kao* The Face of Another , *Mukankei na shi* Irrelevant Death, won Tanizaki Prize

1967: *Moetsukita chizu* The Ruined Map , *Tomodachi* Friends

1973: *Hako otoko* The Box Man

1977: *Mikkai* Secret Rendezvous

1988: *Hakubune Sakura maru* The Ark Sakura

A note on the translation: Abe Kobo's writing style in *Koozui* or "Flood" is of the detached nature discussed earlier. Additionally, the poetic nature of the Japanese in describing something as cool as "Newtonian fluid mechanics" does not come through in English. Furthermore, the nature of the Japanese language itself becomes problematic with its penchant for long , convoluted sentence structures that would shame Faulkner in their structural and thematic content. Thus, certain liberties in sentence division has been taken to make "good English" while striving to maintain the integrity of the artist's work.

The original Japanese version of *Kozui* ("Flood") can be found in volume 2 of *Abe Kobo Zensakuhin*, pages 130-134.

A somewhat poor but honest philosopher searching for a cosmic law carried a telescope to the flat rooftop to search for the motion of the universe. Like always, he did not seem to discover any promise of a star's position--only any number of meaningless falling stars, and it looked like he would discern what was expected So, out of tedium, it was no wonder that he innocently turned the telescope to the ground. He saw the street below inverted in the telescope; similarly he could see a laborer walking upside down. Within his consciousness, those inverted images were returned to normal relations as he moved the lens to follow the worker's movement. Through the large lens, he could see through the worker's small head. This was because, after returning from the night shift at the factory, there was nothing but fatigue in his head.

However, the patient philosopher would not turn his lens away; furthermore, he continued to pursue the worker. Soon that patience was rewarded: suddenly a metamorphosis overcame the worker.

His body suddenly became an opaque, meaningless profile while he crouched in slime, melting from his leg, becoming a plump mass of mucus, with only his clothes, hat, and shoes left behind. Finally, the completely fluid worker spread out across the level ground.

The liquefied worker quietly began to flow toward the lower ground. He flowed into a sunken place in the road. Then he came out. The philosopher was so frightened that he almost dropped the telescope upon seeing the motion of the liquid worker going against hydrodynamic law. Flowing more and more along the roadside, he ran into a wall, which he crawled up like a living creature grasping on its film of slime. The philosopher let go of the telescope and breathed a heavy sigh. The next day, the philosopher predicted that a great flood was facing the world.

As a matter of fact, as this announcement was about to reach society, laborers and the poor were beginning to liquefy. This collective liquefaction was especially remarkable. At the large factories, the operation of machinery suddenly came to a standstill. All at once the mass of people liquefied, forming a small stream and started to flow under the space in the doors, climbing up the walls and out the windows. The system was upset, finally collapsing after the workers completely liquified, for no one in the disorder within the factory could maintain the operation of the machines. Additionally, the convicts in the prisons liquified *en masse*, plotting an escape, and all the peasants in one village liquified, causing a small flood. One story after another was reported in the newspapers.

This liquefaction of human beings was progressing fluidly: this brought

about confusion on various faces. Perfect crimes were radically increasing from the liquid criminals, disturbing the public peace and order. At the police station physicists were meeting in secret to mobilizing, inquiring into the nature of this fluid. However, the liquid flowed perfectly in defiance of scientific law, causing the physicists to think that the chaos must be some sort of trick. If one tried to touch the fluid, though it did not seem even a little different from water, it would display a mercury-like surface tension, depending on the time. Because it could maintain its very own amoeba-like outline, it could do more than just climb from the low to high places, as has been mentioned before. The liquefied people, after once completely softening as per the nature of this fluid, continued dividing regardless of the amount of any stimulus they received. Still, there were times when the fluid would display an alcohol-like weak surface tension. At that time, it displayed an abnormally strong osmotic tendency against the solids it was sliding over. That is to say that even against a homogenous film, depending on the time, it was likely to vary in its responses, having quite unreactive chemical properties.

The liquefied people could also freeze and evaporate. The freezing point and point of vaporization were diverse. Thus, sleds running on thick ice were beginning to sink one by one, or suddenly the swift lead skater in

a race would vanish. Also, in midsummer the pools rapidly evaporated, and young women swimming were occasionally completely encased in ice. The liquid people were climbing the mountains, getting mixed with the rivers, crossing the oceans, becoming clouds of steam, and becoming rainfalls, spreading out throughout a world completely unprepared for such an occurrence. Chemistry experiments fell into an almost impossible state of affairs. The boilers of steam locomotives did not withstand the aggressive mingling of the liquefied people. No matter how much one boiled, the pressure would not increase; then the boiler would expand radically and explode. The effect the fluid had upon ichthyology and marine botany was beyond words. For whatever biological reason, immeasurable changes and extinctions were beginning. Singing, writhing apples, erupting rice plants that raised a sound like fireworks, and other new botanical varieties were discovered. Particularly serious were the effects on those people still not liquified, most of whom were especially wealthy people.

One morning a factory foreman tried to take a sip from his cup of coffee and in the next instant drowned in it. Drowning in one glass of whiskey is a harsh example, but even an example of drowning in one drop of eye drops turned up. It is almost unbelievable, but it did indeed happen.

When this information was revealed, many of the wealthy people

developed the symptoms of hydrophobia to the letter. High government officials were acknowledging this. "When I drink water, I don't think that it is water if I look in the cup. In short, the substance in its liquid state is quite indigestible and harmful, and I am sure that ingesting it would result in illness and suffering at once, I'm afraid."

In illustration, even if one did not get sick and convulse upon swallowing, this was clearly hydrophobia. For example, old women fainting at the sight of water were seen as the end. However, any effect of rabies vaccinations was not reported.

Meanwhile from one end of the world to the other, the advent of a great flood was announced by an unseen voice. However, at first the newspapers for some reason printed these reports and repeatedly denied them:

This year the world-wide distribution and total annual average for rainfall is lower.

An increase in the volume of water in all the rivers was reported to fall simply within the limits of annual seasonal variation.

No change in the land from the standpoints of the climate and geology was noted.

This was a fact. However, that the flood was on the verge of

beginning was also a fact. This contradiction stirred up general social unrest. Finally, even the newspapers came around to reporting the facts about the flood. Nevertheless, as usual they were optimistic in tone: this was like other natural disasters everywhere, no more than temporary, soon to end naturally, they repeated. But the flood was expanding day by day: any number of villages and towns were sinking to the sea bottom. Any number of open fields and hills were covered by the liquefied people while property owners and wealthy people were beginning to evacuate from the plateaus to the mountainous areas, despairing the future. Against these liquefied people who clearly climb walls, while they knew that this evacuation was futile, neither was there outside salvation.

At last the leaders acknowledged the urgency of the situation. They issued a proclamation that, in order to save humanity from destruction by the flood, spirit and body must be mobilized in hastening to build a great levee. In order to get the millions of workers needed, forced labor was rounded up. Thereupon even the newspapers joined together in extolling the righteousness of and duty towards the proclamation. Nevertheless, still almost everyone, even the kings and rulers themselves, knew that the proclamation was superfluous. Going against quantum mechanics and exceeding Newtonian fluid mechanics, the liquid people against the dike had almost no effect whatsoever on its construction because the workers

on the other side were steadily liquefying. Four pages of the newspapers were filled with descriptions and information about missing citizens. However, true to form, the newspapers conducted that this was merely a consequence of the flood, not its root cause. They kept silent about the contradictory nature of the flood and its cause: as it was it was never touched upon.

At this time, one scientist spoke out about vaporizing the liquid that permeated the world with atomic energy. The government immediately gave its approval, promising generous, full-scale support. But when they actually tried to start, it was understood that this was almost impossible amid myriad difficulties. Due to the liquefied people spreading out in a geometric progression, the reinforcements for the laborers were not in time, and scientists already on the verge of liquefying turned into fluid. Then manufacturing factories were destroyed one after another, buried in the bottom of the sea. Reorganization was driven away, and the naked truth was that the fundamental atomic energy plant, which was estimated as able to commence production, was abruptly flooded.

Unrest and distress overshadowed the world. Due to the dehydration, everyone was turning into mummies, occasionally gasping and uttering a dry sound whenever they took a breath.

In all of that, there was only one calm person enjoying himself. This

was the optimistically cunning Noah. Because of his experiences before the great flood, Noah was working hard in steadily building an ark without losing his presence of mind. Thinking that the future of humanity was entrusted in his hands and his family, he could better steep himself in religious ecstasy.

Presently, when the flood neared his home, Noah boarded the ark, bringing along his family and domestic animals. Then, immediately the liquefied people tried to crawl up the edge of the ship. Noah scolded in a loud voice:

"Hey, whose boat do you think this is? I am Noah! This is my ark. There is no mistaking it. So, get off!"

However, thinking that the inhuman fluid could comprehend his words was a hasty miscalculation. To the fluid, the only problem was hydrodynamics. So, in the next moment, the ark was filled with liquid and all the living creatures drowned. The uninhabited ark was adrift, floating at the mercy of the wind.

Thus, in this second flood humanity was eradicated. Nevertheless, if one could have tried to look into the bowers and street corners of the villages and towns on the previously calm sea bottom, some shining substance began to crystallize. Maybe this is the unseen heart within the supersaturated liquefied people.

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