

Devotees of Eternal Beauty

—Kyukin and Keats—

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The Era of Meiji (1868—1911) in Japanese literature is known as the time when western culture had great influence upon traditional Japanese literature—that is, as the period of the fusion of the old and the new—but not of indiscriminate borrowing, as some scholars say, from the western. It is, indeed, at this period that Japanese literature, under the impetus of westernization, had considerable change by slow degrees and was fairly modified in its various fields.

It is no wonder, then, that many books and articles have been written in Japan about the authors and works of this transitional age—especially about the growth and development of modern Japanese poetry.

It is however a great pity there have been very few attempts that will cover the absorbing question of the western influence upon Japanese literature—of how and to what extent western literary flowers found roots in thoughts and ideas of individual Japanese writers of those days.

As a clue to this, I have chosen the two romantic poets—one is an English poet, John Keats (1795—1821) and the other, Susukida Kyukin (1877—1945), a famous bard who led a Japanese romantic school named “Seikin-ha.”

It is said that Kyukin in his youth was such a diligent admirer of Keats that he would never quit hold of the book by the poet, often learning by heart some passages even when strolling on the pavement.⁽¹⁾

Why and how, then, the name of John Keats came to be known in Japan, you may wonder.

This is quite a simple question—early in that period, many introductory books on English and American writers had been introduced to this country and not a few Japanese youth tried to learn new methods of expressing themselves after western manner, by devouring those foreign enlightening books.

Luckily or unluckily, Kyukin had a mere chance of reading the works of Keats, together with those of Milton, Wordsworth, D. G. Rossetti and others, (perhaps through the sole guide of William Sharp's works), and was greatly moved by the fresh beauty.

In the epilogue to his book of verses in 1925, Kyukin says:

How gracious Mr. Tuchii⁽²⁾ is! He sent me the other day some pressed flowers of purple and red from Keats's grave in Rome when he visited the tomb on his way round the world. He never forgot I had long and deeply admired that English poet, and kindly mailed them to me far away from Italy. I appreciate his friendly affection and feel that I should have read Mr. Tuchii's works much more.....⁽³⁾

Thus the question of the degree of Kyukin's indebtedness to Keats is obvious enough.

Kyukin, who sang "a thing of beauty is of constancy," and Keats, who heralded "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever," though grown up in different time and place, come into a strange coincidence in their ardour and way in quest of beauty and truth.

It is true, in verse-form, Kyukin shows a distinct shift from objectivism to subjectivism—i. e. first trying sonnets, then odes, narrative poems and finally lyrics—while Keats at first practices sentimental lyrics, then odes, romances and lastly dramatic poems. But they have something akin to each other in their attitude towards poetry and their skillful use of poetic images.

As an example of this, it may suffice to refer to *Botekishu* (1899), Kyukin's first volume of poems. This, immature as it was, created a new sensation in the literary circle because it contained 19 new sonnet-type poems called in Japanese "Zekku," which I believe he learned from Keats and Rossetti. As often said, Kyukin was not a born poet but a scholar poet who could easily read western literature in original. Probably he read such sonnets of Keats as *On Visiting the Tomb of Burns*, *On the Grasshopper and Cricket*, *Bright Star* and others. There are, of course, obvious echoes of them in Kyukin's poems as follows.

The sonnet, *Shukai* (*To Autumn*) begins with the same series of autumnal images

The hill, the forest, the field, the temple
And the pastures long away, the setting sun,
The flying clouds and the returning woodman,
All seem to melt deep into the heart of evening,
Their colours and shapes mingled into one harmony
Of dusty twilight.

(1—5)

as those of Keats'

The town, the churchyard, and the setting sun,
The clouds, the trees, the rounded hills all seem,
Though beautiful, cold,—strange—as in a dream,
I dreamed long ago, now new begun.

(*On Visiting the Tomb of Burns*, 1—4)

Here Kyukin shows us a succession of evening images when he was so enraptured with the glorious, solemn sights in autumn and enrolls every natural phenomena into an oriental wall picture.

Such keen delights in nature and the loveliness of diction are, however, characteristic of Keats.

The only difference between them is that Keats sings the cold beauty in Scotland while Kyukin admires the rosy twilight of a Japanese countryside.

With all this difference, their way of expressing their emotion by means of concrete visual imageries such as “setting sun,” “the hills”, etc. are quite similar.

Another example of absorption into the sweetness of nature can be seen both in Kyukin’s *Cricket* and Keats’s *On the Grasshopper and Cricket*.

In the former, Kyukin depicts the serene, fugitive beauty of crickets when they shrill in their solitude at a Japanese household one winter evening:

On a long winter evening when the maid
Are in drowsiness lost after her work in the kitchen,
And a little mouse crouches alone in their nest,
Without a comrade, a cricket shrills out
In the stove in which coldness is increasing ever.

(*Cricket*, 1—5)

Evidently the minute reading of the above shows us that in these lines Kyukin bore in mind the following lines of Keats’.

On a long winter evening, when the frost
Has wrote a silence, from the stove there shrills
The crickets’ song, in warmth increasing ever,
And seem to one in drowsiness half lost,
The grasshopper’s among some grassy hills.

(*On the Grasshopper and Cricket*, 10—15)

Considering the use of the same symbol, “that revered denizen of the hearth”⁽⁴⁾ (cricket), Kyukin was undoubtedly stimulated to his composition by the sonnet of Keats’. But we must not forget one thing that he was, being a man of deep affection and quiet temper, warmly attached to the happy, blissful atmosphere which crickets alone would give us by the rural fireside in Japan.

In *Ochiba* (*Fallen Leaves*), a collection of his literary jottings, he says under the name of *cricket*:

Ah, what soft tone the cricket has! It is not the feeble tone

of a love-sick cricket, but that of profound quietude of nature. Autumn gives a moment of emancipation to the very soul of the insect indulged in a dream of lust.....⁽⁵⁾

His warm affection toward the smallest creature and the deep sympathy with it reveal that Kyukin has reached the same recognition on the immortality of the life of a cricket.

You can see this is plainly illustrated in the famous line of Kyukin's—"Shizen no kokoro no Kiyoki kana ya" (The mind of nature is serenely told in the eternal song of a cricket.), which bears the note of Keats's line, "The poetry of earth is never dead."

There is also another sonnet entitled *Yube* (*Evening*) which gives us a definite echo of Keats' *Bright Star*.

In fact, the poem has much resemblance, in feeling and phraseology, to the whole of the second half of Keats' sonnet.

To feel the cool soft breeze around me blowing
Over a thousand flowers and boughs so young.
Then—like the dreamy pastures sleeping in the mist
Pillow'd upon my fair love's slender figure
So wish I to have that never-awaken dream,
And so live ever—or let me die.

(*Yube*, 9—14)

No, —yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

(*Bright Star*, 9—14)

If you carefully compare these two sonnets, you will easily find Kyukin's lines have the same romantic note as Keats'—the poems are both marked with yearning passion for that unattainable sen-

suous beauty on earth—Keats' for Fanny Brawne and Kyukin's for some unknown fair lady.

Kyukin knew, of course, his predecessor's secret love for Fanny Brawne, together with the pathetic episode that the last sonnet was written on the moonlit deck of *the Maria Crowther* when Keats set out for his death voyage to Italy. It is, therefore, not by mere accident that Kyukin borrowed the first line of *Bright Star* again to fuse it into a line of his sonnet, *Star* :

Bright Star, standst thou so steadfast shinning high,
When blows the wind over the peak so steep,
Driving away all the clouds in heaven above.....

(*Hoshi (Star)*, 1—3)

One of the most important factors Kyukin learned from Keats is the ingenious use of various sensuous imageries—i.e.—visual, auditory and tactual ones, which have been very common in English poems but not in Japanese.

Through the aid of these effective imageries, Kyukin was successful in expressing his deep emotion and fresh thinking, thus finding that sonnet is the most suitable form of verse to render his young thought : its simplicity, its brevity, and its vigorous beauty took strong hold of Kyukin in his age of *Botekishu* (1899).

By the "gradual ripening of the intellectual power," however, Kyukin came, by slow degrees, to be aware of its defects—of its crucial inconvenience caused from its restricted fourteen lines.

Now Kyukin appears to have got an unparalleled suggestion on this. He found an ideal type of expression in the form of an "ode" which would enable him to sing out a new and more complex thought of life. In addition, it was still more convenient that he would give a "theme"—theme which he was going to communicate to his readers. It was no wonder, then, that Kyukin was willing to take up this revelational ode, which was fit for his high intellect, in the poems of *Yukuharu (Late Spring)* (1901) in place of the former sonnet. And after the meaningful experiences in odes, he attempted

to fuse western epic-style poems into his long narrative poems such as *Amahasezukai no Uta* (*The Song of a Sky-faring Messenger*), *Raijin no Uta* (*The Song of a Thunderer*) and others in *Nijugo-Gen* (*Lyre with 25 Strings*) (1905). Kyukin returned, however, to the composition of beautiful and serene lyrics in his final book of verse: *Hakuyo-Gyu* (*Aries*) (1906). The fact that he finally adhered to lyrics shows that he was by nature a subjective poet. In general, he is reasonably said to have been an ideological scholar-poet and also a man of self-consciousness.

A poet of self-consciousness often concentrates himself to excess and is apt to abhor this prosaic, realistic present world, thus emancipating to the absolute world of beauty and conflicting himself in a subjective domain.

Kyukin, in opposition to the contemporary trend of naturalism movement in Japan and the easy-going pragmatism popular in those days, flew away from this abominable bitter world into an ideal region of beauty and longed for such lovely culture as those of the Heian and the Nara Eras in ancient Japan.

Such aesthetic poetical abstraction was, in a sense, Kyukin's main creed of his poetic conception. On the other hand, Keats seems to have been a poet of reality—a poet of 'no self' as often shown in his letters, of "Flora and Old Pan" in his mind.

Such dualistic nature of Keats' can find another analogy in Kyukin's poetic mind. Kyukin was likewise a poet who brooded deeply over the bitter world of mortality and was troubled with the importance of the life of reality just as Keats took this world "A Vale of Soul-Making":

When we cast a glance over the real world, it is truly a citadel full of life's agony—everything in it spins round like a top and cuts into our hearts. Thus the dream of that dear memory becomes shadowy and sinks rotten into the marsh of 'oblivion.' It is a sad sight to see, but we cannot turn our eyes from such

reality of life!⁽⁶⁾

In this passage no one can fail to find out a note of Kyukin's sentimentalism or grief at the loss of a beautiful vision. A poet should not, however, be absorbed or degraded in a mere sentimentalism, or sensuous illusion so that he may reach beauty of which he makes an ideal—that is, he should, passing through many experiences of his own, drink the bitter cup of life and art.

Such harsh human experiences always carry a poet to the very sphere where he must be faced with the fatal controversy between life and death. And the controversy becomes more vehement in the exact ratio with the intensity of the conflict of a poet's mind and art.

Kyukin's *Ganto-Chingin* (*At the Head of a Rock*) exemplifies such mental bent of the poet—especially a yearning for 'death.'

Ah, sad to say, death to us
Is like our dear old Home.
And, hopeless to say, death to us
Is like our dear old nurse!⁽⁷⁾

Likewise in Keats's sonnet, "Why did I Laugh Tonight" is found the same longing for death—death as "a life's high meed." Thus the both poets seek after death, though there is a little difference between their interpretation of it.

Kyukin hoped for death for the emancipation from the agonies of real life into the eternal artistic beauty, while Keats aspired for death—death not as a contrary of life, but as a continuum of life, in order to lead a fuller and more valuable life of art, amidst "the giant agony of the world".

Although there existed such a distinction between their theories on death, yet they had a common question to solve—an antinomy of ideal against reality, of art against ego, and of life against death.

How and in what extent, then, did they reconcile this antinomy? As far as my conjecture goes, Kyukin did so by the help of *Prajna* (Transcendental wisdom or intuition) and *Karuna* (Love or Compass-

sion), and Keats by the aid of 'negative capability' which he had acquired through his close relationship with "the agonies, the strife of human hearts."

Kyukin, for the first time in his book of verses: *Nijugo-Gen (Lyre with 25 Strings)*, showed his keen interest in one of the essences of Buddhism: Buddha's Love or Karuna, thus coming to form his unique style of poetry.

And further in the most famous book of his poems: *Hakuyo-Gyu (Aries)* or *Ochiba (Fallen Leaves)* he was more often disposed to refer to the spirit of Buddhism. The following quotation from an essay on the solitude of Buddha's Image is merely a case in point:—

It is a quiet evening when a footstep of an angel could be heard. I wonder what Buddha is pondering on, shutting himself in the darkest recess of a temple on such a lonely eve. This image, I hear, had been long left unprotected from the weather since the former temple was burnt to ashes in the ancient age of Eiroku.

In those weather-beaten days, the image must have been sitting with ecstasy in the floody beams of the moon. On that lovely evening, with the scent of roses streaming down from somewhere, drenched with dewy light of the moon falling through the grove of Kasugano, how beautiful and grand He must have looked when He viewed the cycle of the world, meditating on the eternal life of Buddhism!

Tonight this Buddha, with the memory of the past, seems to be drinking a cup of great solitude. As a forest tree is said to feel a deep solitude for its tallness, so this unparalleled God's image must cherish deeper solitude in the inner core of mind that no one could possibly sympathize with.

I assume that Kyukin's sympathy with Buddha's loneliness is no more than his understanding Karuna.

Dr. Daisetz Suzuki expounds the soul of Buddhism in his book: *Zen Buddhism and Japanese Culture* as follows:

What is the true essence of this Zen Buddhism? That is Prajna and Karuna. You might translate the former as "Transcendental Wisdom" and the latter as "Love" or "Compassion." By means of this Prajna we can at once reach the very existence of the universe, transcending the mere phenomenal expression of it. So if we can master this prajna-intuition, we can not only fully grasp the essential meaning of our life and world, but also be free from the mere individual interests and sufferings. It is at this time that Karuna takes its full effect. It means that Karuna or Love can expand its influence over everything in nature, without being fettered by its own egoism.

By means of Prajna, Kyukin, transcending the antithesis between life and death, all the artistic strifes and agonies, could come to penetrate into the very reality in the mutability of life. This prajna, as already explained by Daisetz Suzuki, is termed "Ku" (Vanity) in Buddhistic philosophy and "Ku" means "life and death without life and death," "Unconsciousness," "Non-ego," or "Fearless state of soul" leading to understanding.

Such state of mind is the one which no egoistic soul could be allowed to obtain, but only serene mind is free to be. And it also leads to the idea of literary "Sabi" or "Yugen" which such poets as Saigyō and Bashō ingeniously cultivated. Sabi or Yugen is a traditional aesthetic conception in Japanese literature and akin to the awakening consciousness of Prajna, generally defined to be an "insight into the secrecy of reality or the eternal in this transitional world."

Yugen has a deep connection with the soul of Buddhism not only historically but also substantially. Today it is an acknowledged fact that in middle ages Japanese poets were much influenced by Buddhistic philosophy in their Weltanschauung or view of life, thus

gaining the spiritual basis for their literary idea, "Yugen." In later years,—in the age of Genroku or Muromachi this relationship of Buddhism and Yugen was studied in that of Zen and Sabi. The fact that an insight into the secrecy of Reality can be made possible by the aid of the intuitive power of Prajna, means that there is a possibility of reconciliation of ego with non-ego, of subjectivity with objectivity, of life with death.

One of the greatest reasons why Kyukin entered the world of Buddhism and designed to fuse Buddhistic idea into literature is that Kyukin knew poetic beauty or truth could only be attained by the appreciation of Buddhism which would exclude all the antagonism in literature.

And I must add that there is something very fitting for this Buddhistic idea, Prajna or Karuna in western poetry—especially in Keats! What Keats termed "Negative Capability" or "Wise Passiveness" in terms of Wordsworth, must be the same metaphysical understanding that can be reached by the awakening of a Prajna-intuition, and Keats's "Love" or "Sympathy," a humanistic compassion, exactly corresponds to Karuna or "Oomijihi" in Kyukin's phraseology.

Such non-egoistic capability as explained by Keats in his famous letter to George and Georgiana Keats, on Dec. 21, 1817, is absolutely necessary for the making of a great poet. So, Keats, endowed with this impersonal capacity, could be or endowed to be at ease even in mysteries, doubts, or uncertainties "without irritable reaching after fact and reason."

You might possibly presume that such mental state of Keats' is the same one that Japanese Zen Buddhistic monks have in their intuitive assimilation with the object of their observation when they are confronted with nature in deep meditation.

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats puts stress on the importance of this non-egoistic Love again as the only clue to reach 'Reality' or 'Truth'.

None can usurp this height

Are misery, and will not let them rest.⁽⁸⁾

But those to whom the miseries of the world

What seems a genuinely oriental Buddhistic idea, Karuna (Love), turns out, therefore, to be the all-embracing spiritual understanding that could only be attained by such impersonal love as Keats found out in the above poem.

So the love in *Endymion* that the hero could make his identity with Cynthia, his ideal beauty, through his humanistic compassion upon the sorrows of the Indian maid or old Glaucus is a strange coincidence with the true essence of Buddhistic Love that we human beings must positively undergo the gratuitous pain of others and feel deep sympathy for the suffering and miseries of the world.

Thus Kyukin and Keats, gaining the all-embracing conception of Love, tried to reach the secrecy of reality, after solving the various contradictions lying in front of their quest of beauty and truth. It is, therefore, not too hard to understand that Kyukin made an endeavour to realize a principle of Beauty, "Yugen" in traditional Japanese term, through Buddhism, while Keats devoted himself to the creation of the cult of beauty based on the reality of the world, not by the existing Christianity but by a systematized religion of his own.

It is only because of this that Keats's beauty is not so idealistic as Kyukin's—in other words—it is a beauty established upon the harshness and sufferings of the present world, or a beauty of Reality very close to the very essence of existence. So it is no wonder that the misery of the world hung heavy over the poet who earnestly struggled to create a new system of beauty, and here lies an unparalleled agony of Keats who has a real creative mind.

On the other hand, Kyukin's beauty is somewhat more ideological one that will represent the poet's deep scholastic culture in contrast with that of Keats who was restricted to an elementary education. And this is, you might reasonably remark, the very reason why Kyukin's poem is rich in the beauty of poetic form and imagery

but not in the realistic grasp of his poetic materials. True, Kyukin built up his intelligent conception of beauty, often emancipating too far into the luxurious civilization of ancient Japan, intoxicated in its rich classical odour and colour, but not thoughtlessly carried away by the impulse of mere sensation nor degraded into mere sentimentalism, thanks to his learned power of intellect.

His beauty is, in short, a beauty of emancipation and abstraction, embellished by Japanese modern intelligence, deepened by her aesthetic ideal and enlightened by the awakening of the Buddhistic philosophy, while that of Keats might actually be concluded as a beauty of reality—the one based on the more realistic view of life and poetry. It is what is called a beauty of extraordinary intensity and sensitiveness of mind. So it would be fair to say that beauty could be “a discovered law of life,” for Keats who would always speculate on poetry with profundity of insight.

For all such discrepancy, there is, as mentioned above, a firm and common ground between the two poets in their final interpretation of beauty and truth—a feature in common that a true poet must form himself, amidst the bitter world of mortality, through their profound sympathy with the suffering of all mankind, his own ideal truth, beauty. As a result of such painstaking procedure, a true poet could genuinely be born and his ideal could finally be attained!

Note

- (1) Midori Matsumura: *Susukida Kyukin* (Kawade, 1957), p. 177.
- (2) A Japanese poet (1871—1953), born in Sendai, graduated at Tokyo Imperial University. Visited Europe 1901—1904; Since 1924 taught poetry at Tohoku University. Author of poems: *Tenchi Ujo* (1899), *Basho* (1901), and others. Famous for his complete translation of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* into Japanese.
- (3) Kyukin Susukida: *The Poetical Works of Kyukin* (Osaka Mainichi Shinbun, 1925), p. 8.
- (4) E. de Selincourt: *The Poems of John Keats* (Methuen, 1935),

p. 408.

- (5) Kyukin Susukida: *Ochiba* (Shishiboe Shobo, 1908), p. 20.
- (6) *Ibid.*, pp. 226—227.
- (7) *Ganto-Chingin*, St. VIII.
- (8) *The Fall of Hyperion*, Canto I, 147-149.