

KINOSHITA MOKUTARÔ

## Between "Nostalsie" and "Sehnsucht" – Kinoshita Mokutarô's Europe



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"Pilgrimage to Europe" and "Return to Japan" – a pattern widely observed among modern Japanese intellectuals from the 1860s up to the 1980s, finds a singularly nuanced and particularly complicated example in Dr. Ôta Masao, alias Kinoshita Mokutarô (1885-1945). At first sight, the "looping pattern between the West of fantasy and the Japan of nostalgia" does not typically fit in his case. Does he represent a more or less deviated specimen, an antithesis to or an extreme limit of the "looping pattern"? If so, why and to which extent? By analysing Kinoshita Mokutar's Europe, as a sort of antidote to the general hypothesis of the conference, this paper tries to elucidate the underlying conditions of the "looping pattern" in question.

Three peculiarities must be pointed out in Mokutarô's case. Firstly, his yearning ("Sehnsucht") for Europe was deeply connected with his nostalgia for the historical Japan of his youth. Secondly, Mokutarô's critical insight and erudition prevented him from being easily hypnotized by a fantacised image of the West. Thirdly, his trip to Europe at the age of 36 was no less a discovery than a confirmation of the Europe he had already expected even before his departure. Let's have a closer look at these three points.

In 1907, at the age of 22, young Mokutarô was attracted to the European-Japanese hybride culture fostered under Japan's first contact with the West in the second half of the 16th century, known as the Nanban Era. In his early poems and dramas, tinged with colorful exotism, the fantacised West was not in opposition to the historical past of Japan, but these two elements were tightly amalgamated to each other from the beginning.

"Golden Powdered Wine" the first piece which illustrates the opening of his collection of poems, *Poems after the meal* (Shokugo no Uta, composed in 1910, published in 1919) composed at the "Amerikaya-bar" (in Roman characters) begins with French words:

Eau-de-vie de Dantzick  
 A wine where the gold floats,  
 Ah May, May, liqueur glass,  
 The stained glasses of my bar,  
 The Violet of the rain falling on the town.

The poem ends with the following refrain:

Under the sweet flowers of Paulownia a melodious flute,  
 The soft coat of a young black cat,  
 The Japanese *shamisen* which melts my heart.

Eau-de-vie de Dantzick  
 Yes because it is May, it is May

(Vol. 1, pp. 170-71)<sup>1</sup>

The juxtaposition of the melancholic sound of a Japanese musical instrument “*shamisen*” and the flavor of an imported European liquor, “Eau-de-vie de Dantzick” creates a soft combination of auditive and olfactive effects. And this intimate and amorphous atmosphere is contrasted by the sharp visual accent of the cristal cuts of imported wine glasses. The aliteration “Eau” [water in French], “*Ougon*” [Gold] and “*Oo, Gogatsu*” [Ah May], by the width of the vowel [o] and by the depth of the consonant [g], contributes to create a rhythmical undulation evoking the oceanic waves, while the repetition of “liqueur glass” and “stained glasses” in the following lines accentuates the metallic tinkling sound and crystal transparency of the curious objects transported by foreign vessels sailing to Japan. Alongside the alphabetical characters for “EAU-DE-VIE DE DANTZICK” in capital letters, the complicated Chinese characters deliberately chosen by the poet in translating into Japanese these exotic objects like “bar”, “liqueur glass” and “stained glasses” highlight the sense of “*dépaysement*” by their visual effect on the text. The phonetic precision for European terms given by “*katakana*” letters beside these Chinese characters add to the pedantic erudition of the young poet.

“The violet of the rain falling on the town” reminds us of the famous lines by Paul Verlaine; “*il pleure dans mon coeur comme il pleut sur la ville/Quell’est cet langueur qui pénètre mon coeur ...*”. Nagai Kafû (1879-1959) who made his literary début with his *America Stories* (Amerika Monogatari, 1908), has already translated into Japanese these lines by Verlaine and inserted them in his *France Stories* (Furansu Monogatari, written in Lyon in 1907, published in 1909, after his return to Japan) (vol. 3, pp. 379-80). Shortly after, Horiguchi Daigaku (1892-1981) gave his own version of the same Verlaine’s lines and they were enthusiastically recited.

Kitahara Hakushû’s (1885-1942) famous preface to the *Collected Poems* by Mokutarô, written in retrospect in 1919 (Taishô 8) clearly points to the secret of Mokutarô’s *ars combinatoria*, or the technique of combining nostalgia to the lost old Japan and aspiration to Europe which remained still unknown:

Mokutarô has brought us various imported exotic goods – all kind of curious etiquettes, fantastic narratives from the southern barbarian sea, diamond-cut glass wares, perfumes, exotic wines, rare birds, saraça silks ... In addition, guided by this particular sense for exotic imported goods, Mokutarô did not fail to discover the new style of Japan, the Edo of oil paintings, the Nagasaki of copper plate etchings, ... the rust of a

lance in the peppermint liqueur, the chrysanthemum patterns on a Spanish coat ... All these are discovered and carefully scrutinized by Mokutarô. Moreover, in Kiyochika's *ukiyo-e* prints he tasted the atmosphere of a Parisian bar in Montmartre; under the red lantern and paper cherry blossom flowers, he seated Pierre Loti's girl and as a Dutch player of *rabeca*, he let her play in intimacy a melancholic night *shamisen*. Mokutarô discovered an incomparable poetical state of mind indeed. (vol. 2, pp. 174-75)

This passage reminds us that Hakushû himself has composed in 1910 a quatrain "In Gold and Blue" [Kin to Ao to no] where James MacNeil Whistler's "Nocturn at the Thames river" is transposed on the Sumida river, reflecting the poet's mind floating between the Old Edo and the Modern Tokyo.

Nocturn in Gold and Blue  
Duet of Spring and Summer  
To the Young Tokyo a chanson of Edo  
My heart in between the shadow and the light

The double image of Edo and Tokyo, flickering "between the shadow and the light", shows in and by this alternation, that the aspiration to European Civilization is not incompatible with the nostalgia for the old Tokugawa Japan. Rather than the looping model which separates aspiration from nostalgia, the "*mitate*", or the pastiche and transposition model of seeing the Sumida river, for example, as reflecting the Seine, would fit better. In his *Strolling in Tokyo* [Hiyorigeta, 1914], Nagai Kafû himself refers to Mokutarô and Hakushû as initiators of this poetical imagination of toponymical associations (vol. 13, p. 304). However, Kafû himself had lamented: he does not regret the loss of the old Edo, but he does regret that he can no longer hear the melancholic sound of Japanese *shamisen* with the same ear that he had before his departure to Europe, and that loss – of his own sensibility – makes him weep ... (*A Sneer*, Reishô, 1910).

Kafû's double alienation from the memory of Edo, which consisted of the combination of the material loss of the old town and the mental gap caused by his stay in America and Europe, forced him to re-experience Tokyo in a double-negation. But such a complicated looping process of a new home-comer was alien to Hakushû and Mokutarô, who had not yet been in Europe, when they organized in 1908 the symposium of the *Pan no Kai*, at the riverside of the Sumida. It can be reminded that Mokutarô once compared Zola's description of the Seine in *L'Oeuvre* to the Sumida river (in his text published in *One Inch Square*, Hôsun, vol. 1/5, 1907). Yet their optimistic way of superimposing the image of the dreamed Europe on the shabby restaurants on the bank of the Sumida river does not imply a blind idealization of things coming from Europe.

As a young student, Mokutarô strongly criticized as superficial the uncritical reception of the Western "dernières modes" put forward by his contemporary Shirakaba School. Famous for its spiritual adoration of the West, the Shirakaba School was promoting such artists as August Rodin, Heinrich Vogeler and Vincent Van Gogh. In contrast to the naive enthusiasm of the Shirakaba School, Mokutarô's bookish and critical understanding of the West hindered him from being easily hypnotized by, and satisfied with, the idealized West of fantasy.

His controversy with the Shirakaba School makes Mokutarô's position clear. "A Morning at the Station", an oil painting by Yamawaki Nobuyoshi, exhibited at the Third Official Exhibition sponsored by the Ministry of Education (Bunten) in 1909, was the origin of controversy. While Nagai Kafû, Bernard Leach (1889-1979) and Arishima Ikuma (1882-1974) highly appreciated Yamawaki's endeavor by comparing it to the "Gare de Saint Lazare" by Claude Monet, Mokutarô together with Ishii Hakutei (1882-1956), criticized this painting as a poor and treacherous imitation of French Impressionists. He observed in Yamawaki's work a "lack of balance" between the "enthusiastic desire to express" and the "technical mediocrity". The result was, to use Mokutarô's own expression – and which would no longer be politically correct nowadays – "the painting gives the impression as if it were a dumb person who has gotten mad". Mokutarô maintained: "In order that the enthusiasm should be transmitted, it must be expressed with a proper technical skill, and in accordance with the recognized 'contract' of the painting" ("kaiga no yakusoku") (1911, June; vol. 7 p. 368). Mokutarô proposed to the painter to have a

better understanding (*Verstand*) of Europe by learning from Édouard Manet, “Vermittler der Überlieferung” rather than from Vincent Van Gogh or Paul Cézanne, who “incarnated the Modernity”.

Yamawaki quickly reposted to Mokutarô. To regard Manet as a conciliator to the tradition was, according to Yamawaki, only a retrospective interpretation made by critics and historians. Those who spoke of conciliations would only appreciate works of art already recognized and accepted by society. What mattered in art was only expression. In art full of vitality, there was no margin between the received sensation and the intended expression. How could a “contract” slide in between? Artisanal technique or stylized skill were only enemy to expression. The achieved painting was only a scrap left behind in the course of creation ... (Yamawaki in *Shirakaba*, vol. 2/11, 1911).

Yamawaki’s cult of subjective expression of the self (*jibun*) was defended by Mushanokôji Saneatsu (1885-1976), charismatic leader of the Shirakaba School, who found Mokutarô’s attitude “impure” and “unforgivable”. Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889-1961) also wrote an essay “Painters of Revolution” in the *Shirakaba* Magazine (vol. 3/1, 1912). By reporting the First [French] Post-impressionists Exhibition organized by Roger Fry at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1910, Yanagi implicitly criticized Mokutarô’s backwardness and conservative aesthetic judgement.

While Mokutarô was proposing to the Japanese painters to try to conciliate the latest European tendencies with Japan’s actual situation, such a compromise was harshly rejected by Yamawaki and other members of the Shirakaba School. By their passionate enthusiasm for Europe, the Shirakaba School contributed to the “synchronization” of the Japanese cultural climate to that of contemporary Europe, with which they so wanted to identify. Yet, in Mokutarô’s eyes, this synchronization appeared to be illusory, superficial and fallacious as it was completely lacking in historical understanding.

Here is a paradox to be noted. The Shirakaba School is often regarded as Europe-oriented because of the fantasized image of Europe which they represented and propagated. Yet the Shirakaba School is typically *Japanese* in its enthusiastic adoration of the Other, the West. In contrast, Mokutarô’s position, advising a search for Japan’s own cultural balance first and foremost, seems at first glance to be rather nationalistic. And yet his philological approach in trying to understand European history by going back to its Greco-Roman origin, proved more faithful to the European humanist tradition. By cautioning the

Shirakaba School against blindly worshipping Europe, Mokutarô proves himself to be more Europeanized in his critical consciousness than the members of the Shirakaba school.

### 3.

While Mori Ôgai (1862-1922), Mokutarô's spiritual mentor, stayed in Berlin and Munich as a medical student in his twenties, it was only at the age of 36, in 1922, that Mokutarô came to Paris, as a visiting professor in dermatology. At his age, the pilgrimage was more a confirmation of his bookish knowledge than a fresh discovery of young sensibility. In contrast to Ôgai's "Sturm und Drang" experience, difficulty in adaptation and inadequate language ability prevented Mokutarô from frequenting the Parisian salons and easily making acquaintances. Instead, he was attracted by the tradition which sustained the contemporary European modernity. One curious episode in this context is his fortuitous encounter with Théodore Duret shortly after his arrival in Paris.

One of the last surviving friends and champions of Édouard Manet and the Impressionist painters, Duret (1838-1927), then at the age of 84, was a well-known art critic. Invited by Duret to his apartment in the rue Vignon, together with Kojima Kikuo (1887-1950), Mokutarô asked Duret his opinion about Matisse and Picasso who represented the new generation of artists. Mokutarô was surprised by the old man's unexpected answer.

The old man frankly answered that he was busy all his life studying the history of Impressionism, finding out documents and describing the facts. All his material was collected from living eyewitnesses, from what he saw with his own eyes. As for what happened after, he didn't have any idea ... It was a revelation for me. In retrospect, I can explain my surprise. How happy the Frenchmen are! They can concentrate all their life on the study of an epoch which interests them. What a difference in Japan, where the critics are forced to run after the ever-changing latest modes until they lose their breath. (*Chûô Bijutsu*, Feb. 1927, pp. 81-85)

Mokutarô himself had translated as early as 1913, though in abridgement, Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* into Japanese, and criticized the

superficial imitation of European non-naturalist tendencies among Japanese young artists, as had been observed in Yamawaki's oil painting (*Bijutsu Shinpô*, Feb. 1913, pp. 147-52; March 1913, pp. 176-82). Backed by a Théodore Duret, even the critical distance of Mokutarô suddenly appeared to be no less precarious than the worship of Europe by the Shirakaba School which Mokutarô had criticized. Mokutarô's insistence on the uselessness of Japan's effort to catch up with European modernity which lacked in historical understanding of the underlying tradition, had found a confirmation in old Duret's utterance. This revelation was all the more vital to Mokutarô, as Duret's own writing on Manet and Impressionist painters had been a lighthouse for Mokutarô's rediscovery of the Edo period in his adolescence. In his necrology to Théodore Duret, published in 1927, Mokutarô made the following statement:

Thanks to our knowledge of French Impressionism and its idea, how our adolescence was happy! Had it not been for Impressionism, as a mirror of comparison, we would not have appreciated so much Japanese ukiyoe prints and the Edo period nor the atmosphere and the sentiment which they emanated. The Parisian customs rendered by Manet, Monet and Renoir were transmitted to us by photographic reproductions which stirred up our imaginations and our aspiration to the "galant" French life. The same admiration was transposed to our country and induced us to be immersed in the aesthetical world by a Harunobu, a Kiyonaga, an Eizan or an Eisen. Those who initiated us to Impressionism were, at first Richard Muther, Julius Meier-Graefe, Camille Maucclair and finally our Théodore Duret. (*Chûô Bijutsu*, Feb. 1927)

The pilgrimage of Japanese *ukiyo-e* to Europe had created the *Japonisme* movement among European artists. And it was the return of Japonisme to Japan that permitted Mokutarô's nostalgic rediscovery of Tokugawa Japan. Richard Muther's book *Die Geschichte der Malerei in 19. Jahrhundert* was revealed to Mokutarô in 1913. Surprisingly enough, one chapter on a short history of Japanese Art is inserted in this book between the chapter on European Realism and Impressionism. The book is conceived as if Japanese art had been indispensable to explain the evolution realized by Impressionism. Clearly Muther had borrowed the idea from Théodore Duret. The influence of Japanese art on Impressionism is surely overestimated by these European writers. Yet it cannot be denied that this exaggeration helped Mokutarô to rehabilitate a forgotten *ukiyo-e* print-maker, Kobayashi Kiyochika (1849-1915), shortly before Kiyochika's death.

Kiyochika's series of Famous Sites in Tokyo, is now known as luminous images ("Kôsenga"). Here lies a double paradox of the Western fantasy and the nostalgic return to Japan. Duret and other European art critics pretended that the luminous effects and vivid color in *ukiyo-e* prints proved the faithfulness of Japanese artists to the light effect of the outdoors. In reality, however, it was not until Kiyochika's diligent learning and meticulous imitation of the European academic *chiaro-scuro* technique that the light effect was at last taken seriously by Japanese print-makers. Koyochika even hoped that his Europeanized renderings of light effect would facilitate the exportation of his works to Europe (in vain, of course, for European customers no longer appreciated such imitations of European art fabricated in contemporary Japan). Moreover, it was not until Mokutarô began to introduce Impressionistic aesthetics in Japan about 1913 that the forgotten "Kôsenga" was exhumed from oblivion and re-estimated.

Here between the fantasized Japan (fostered among Western Impressionists) and Japan's ratification of the Impressionist aesthetics (in and by its nostalgic rehabilitation of Kobayashi Kiyochika's "Kôsenga"), a double cross-purpose closes as a Möbius ring. In Mokutarô's case, the looping pattern loses its diameter between the "West of fantasy and the Japan of nostalgia". Fantasy about Europe and nostalgia for Japan are, as it were, superimposed on each other to form an inseparable entity. "Pilgrimage to Europe and return to Japan" are no longer two successive chronological phases in Kinoshita Mokutarô's intellectual biography. Return to Japan has already been prepared by and with his aspiration to the West of fantasy, and Mokutarô's stay in Europe gave retrospective confirmation to the constant reciprocity between "nostalgie" to Edo culture and "Sehnsucht" to Europe.

Let me conclude with the hypothesis that this double reference prevented Mokutarô from easily fitting into the predominant looping pattern of the fantasized Europe of illusion which for many modern Japanese intellectuals often caused disillusion, and a regressive return to the over-idealized Japan of nostalgia.

#### NOTE

- 1) Unless otherwise mentioned, the quotations are from *Kinoshita Mokutarô Zenshû*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

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