

〔研究ノート〕

## On William Oandasan's Poems<sup>1</sup>

— A Comparative Study —

by *Atsuo Nakagawa*

At present, the writer sees three related streams of poetry on the American continent: the main one originating with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, has been flowing, ever-growing, down to the present. There are countless college and university graduates and students who are their followers or disciples—mostly of Williams who was influenced by Pound. Another stream or rather its tributary is the poetry produced by the poets who put stress upon, or think much of, taking in shamanism and primitive elements in their poetry, such as Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder and Jerome Rothenberg, who were somewhat, but not closely, connected with the Beat Generation. And the other stream is the haiku poetry. We cannot draw a more distinctive line between the former two than between them and the haiku one. Yet even between the haiku stream and the former two, we can hardly draw a clear line, for some haiku poets like Raymond Roseliep have been trying to bridge the gap and successful, while most of the poets belonging to the former two have written haiku or haiku-like poems.

As for this young American poet William Oandasan, he is really versatile and his creative activities range over the three streams. That is the reason why the writer is greatly interested in him as one of the world's future poets. And thus the writer tries here to study some of his unusual, good poems through a comparative method.

William Oandasan is a writer of fused peoples and backgrounds

(northern California, the Philippines, Canada, the Southwest, Chicago). As a young poet, "acculturated in modern literacies among older oral forms, he searches for a blending of voice and value in schooling himself a native in America." His ideal, then, would be to make use of the composite place and heritage in his land, reciprocal assimilations, thus seeking fusions. Naturally, with those backgrounds, he has written some excellent, unique poems which are worthy of attention and studying, which the writer is to quote here and examine, comparing them with other poems. In this way the writer intends to show how the poet's ideal or intention is reflected in his works.

In the first chapter titled "Round Valley Songs," Oandasan returns to his Yuki<sup>2</sup> homeland and its culture, and produces excellent poems like *tanka* which is one of the oldest Japanese lyrical forms. It also reminds us of short ancient Greek poems:

a valley ripe with acorns  
and yellow poppies everywhere  
as I lay here  
dreaming of you

A Japanese *tanka* Oandasan's poem reminds the writer of is this:

<i>kaze ni chiru</i>	(In my sleeves I catch
<i>hana-tachibana wo</i>	mandarin-flower petals
<i>sode ni ukete</i>	scattered by the wind
<i>kimi ga miato to</i>	and am reminded of you
<i>shinobi tsurukamo</i>	who stood here
	where I am now)

It was written about 1,500 years ago by an anonymous person and collected in the *Manyoshu* (771). And this type of songs in which the poet thinks of his love, wife or some other persons who were dear to him, while watching or looking at natural phenomena, especially

flowers, were mostly written before the medieval ages in Japan. Therefore the songs of this sort belong to ancient times. They are what Oandasan calls "poetry" which "could be spoken, and had to be heard as written poetry when listened to."

The following ancient Greek poem is also recalled to the writer's mind though there is less similarity between it and Oandasan's than between the latter and the Japanese one, but their tonal qualities are somewhat alike:

*Forsaken*

Moon's set, and Pleiads;  
Midnight goes by;  
The hours pass onward;  
Lonely I lie.

Sappho of Mytilene (tr. by F. L. Lucas)<sup>3</sup>

The chapter titled "Moving Inland" is a search for home for modern poets. Oandasan writes a *choka*-like<sup>4</sup> poem or a linked haiku about his native place:

SEBASTOPOL

sitting at foot of hills  
westside of Santa Rosa Valley  
little town of gravesteins

sixteen miles westward  
dormant beneath the coastline  
San Andreas Fault

somewhere south in spring mist  
San Francisco lies  
struggling to survive

toward the sun rising

Valley of the Moon  
 twenty-six miles away  
  
 sunshine melting  
 last frost in silence  
 the township slumbers  
  
 eastside of town  
 smelling worse than fermented grapes  
 Laguna de Santa Rosa  
  
 hidden in April fog  
 quieter than night  
 the public park  
  
 railroad tracks  
 hard, cold, austere  
 through the center of town  
  
 hill after hill  
 apple blossoms roll  
 onward toward infinity  
  
 beside a country road  
 leading west to the sea  
 my humble home

It is a panoramic view of the area in which the poet's home is. Beside it being a form of *shudai rensaku* (a number of haiku grouped under a subject), it also reminds us of Japanese *choka* produced early in the history of Japan like the following:

Song Composed by Yamabe-no-Sukune Akahito  
 Climbing to the Top of Kamioka Hill

*Mimoro no*                      [The old capital, Asuka,  
*Kannabi-yama ni*              (I'd like to frequent

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*ihoe sashi* without interruption  
*shiji ni oitaru* just as meant by the name  
*tsuga no ki no* of *tsuga*\* growing thick  
*iya-tsugitsugi ni* on god-residing Mount Kannabi,  
*tama-kazura* spreading their branches and roots  
*tayuru koto naku* leaving little space between them)  
*aritsutsu mo* is surrounded by high hills  
*yamazu kayowamu* and run through by a great river  
*Asuka no*  
*furuki miyako wa* On spring days  
*yama takami* the hills are never boring to  
*kawa tohoshiroshi* gaze at

*haru no hi wa* On autumn nights  
*yama shi migahoshi* clear sounds of the current are  
comforting

*aki no yo wa* In the morning clouds  
*kawa shi sayakeshi* cranes fly about

*asa-kumo ni* And in the evening vapor  
*tazu wa midare* stream frogs sing joyfully

*yugiri ni* Everything seen from Kamioka  
*kawazu wa sawagu* brings tears to my eyes  
for fond memories  
of the old capital.]

*miru goto ni*  
*ne nomi shi nakayu*  
*inishie omoeba*

Poem No. 324, *Manyoshu*

\*A variety of evergreen pine whose name *tsuga* is the pillow word introducing the epithet *tsugi-tsugi* meaning "consecutively."

This is what is called a poem of *kunimi* or "country-survey." In ancient Japan there was a custom or a tradition for emperors, princes, high-ranking officials or poets to go up to a high place and overlook their capital, hometown, native village, or a place where their wives or loves lived, enjoying a panoramic view or remembrance of their once-familiar scenes. This seems to have come from ancient China. And according to Mr. Yutaka Tsuchihashi, to enumerate place-names means to praise the richness of the land.<sup>5</sup> Is Oandasan praising his native place, too? The writer guesses so. This poem must be one of the poet's experiments in form, and yet it seems he had not seen or read Japanese *choka* though he had seen *renga*<sup>6</sup> written in the U. S. Perhaps he had in mind a linked haiku, not a *renga* when he wrote this because each three-line stanza of the poem is somewhat independent in meaning, but he may never have thought that the poem is after a Japanese *choka* in both form and manner of depiction. Yet what is beautiful with his "linked haiku" is that we do not see any apparent intention of producing a special or novel effect on the writer's part. It is as naturally, naively and simply written as the Japanese *choka*. But according to the editor Lincoln again, it seems to be one of the poet's "experiments in forms and tongues, other cultures, new ways of seeing, old truths: 'a fine coming together of the urban education and the rural environment.'" It is an example of his "'common objects and settings' transported 'toward the extraordinary.'"

As the above two examples show, Oandasan's poems contain primitivism, and his haiku collected in the chapter "Syrenyu" (meaning *senryu*)<sup>7</sup> also prove that he has a gift for writing the shortest poem which is the most primitive, but not crude, form of poetry in the writer's view:

burning so brightly  
darkness round the firefly's



solitary flame

It is an excellent haiku—in the conventional pattern, yet at the same time in the form of what the writer calls a “dimeter tercet.”

If we compare the following with a well-known haiku of Yosano Buson who was also a painter,<sup>8</sup> we may understand Oandasan better:

full moon:  
woods on one side                      town on the other  
the path between

\*

The Spring View  
The rapeseed flowers!  
The moon is in the east and  
the sun in the west

Buson (tr. by Edith Shiffert)<sup>9</sup>

Buson's haiku has a natural beauty shown in the diurnal motion of the earth, while Oandasan's seems to aim to depict fusion—harmony in the order of nature.

Finally it is further interesting and illuminating to compare one of Oandasan's longer poems titled “Natural Law” which is found in the chapter “Moving Inland,” with a common type of poem “A Sparrow on the Sight” by Mr. Jun'ichi Kikkawa.<sup>10</sup> Both are written on the theme of shooting a creature. Kikkawa after killing a sparrow, laments saying:

All of a sudden,  
a red streak  
ran across my heart,  
and then, a bleeding  
which still continues  
to stain my white shirt.

Kikkawa's regret and repentance over the kill is a natural human sentiment, while Oandasan stands above the natural struggle of creatures including human beings and sees them from a transcendental position, saying:

No one will witness  
This killing but trees,  
Grass and insects locked  
In their own struggles.  
Even nature lies  
As if asleep,  
Powerless in making  
A quick end of it  
As it is in preventing one.  
The light of life,  
High above the drama,  
Shines on.

We see, as might be expected from a poet who loves nature's harmony, a lightness to lessen the weight of visions and moral commitments in the latter.

This lessening effect might not be thought highly of in the modern world of poetry. Yet it is true that many readers are weary of disgusting depictions of hard-core atrocities and other miseries and tragedies. Isn't this a time for poets to return to their ancestral poet-shaman's word rituals which link different things together and transform them so that they may perform ancient collective and ecstatic rites of re-birth in total fusion and harmony and synthesis.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> For his poems, see: William Oandasan, *A Branch of California Redwood*, ed. Kenneth Lincoln (Los Angeles: The Regents of the University of California, 1980).



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All the unspecified quotations in prose are from the editor's "Foreword" to the book.

<sup>2</sup> A Wintum word meaning "stranger." According to Kenneth Lincoln, the beginning of the Yuki, i. e., the poet's tribe the *Ukono'm*, is a pit of rich red clay from which the first man and woman were created near Round Valley.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from *Greek Poetry*: Everyman's Library, No. 611 (Dent).

<sup>4</sup> *Choka* is the longer form of the ancient Japanese poetry contrasted with the shorter one, i. e., *tanka* (short song). It is composed of five and seven syllable lines which are repeated in that order until it ends with another seven-syllable line added to the last one. There is no set length for it.

<sup>5</sup> See *Kayo, I, Kansho: Nippon Koten Bungaku*, ed. Hiroshi Tsuchihashi and Yasaburo Ikeda (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1975), pp. 29-33.

<sup>6</sup> *Renga* is a poem which links a stanza consisting of two five-syllable lines and one seven-syllable line which is placed between the two, to another stanza of two seven-syllable lines. One linked unit of this poem came to be linked to another until the number of linked stanzas reached 44, 50, 100, 1,000, 10,000, etc.

<sup>7</sup> *Senryu* is a witty, satirical (or sometimes funny or sarcastic) short verse in the same form as that of the haiku. Oandasan does not seem to understand what *senryu* really means; he should have given the title "Haiku" to the chapter.

<sup>8</sup> (1716-83). He is one of the three greatest masters of haiku.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from *Haiku Master Buson* (South San Francisco: Heian International, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 57 and 58 (1981).