

A Philosophy of “Death Poems”

Masato Goda

Our eyes can see various objects in the external environment, but they cannot see themselves. In fact, we need a mirror in order to see our own face. This is what Jacques Lacan calls “mirror stage”. However it can be said that any external objects such as trees, flowers, water, sky, other persons etc. can serve as a mirror for us. Anyway, just as Rousseau said on the difficulty human beings have in knowing themselves, it is very difficult for the Japanese, for example, to be aware of the particularities of their own culture through their own eyes. As for me, I have learned a lot about Japanese culture by reading much literature written by foreign writers and scholars, from which I cite *The Japanese Curios of Autumn* (1889) by Pierre Loti (1850-1923), *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun* (1926) by Paul Claudel (1868-1953), *Chrysanthemum and Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946) by Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), *The Voluntary Death in Japan* (1984) by Maurice Pinguet (1929-1991), and *Japan as a System which cannot make People Happy* (1994) by Karel van Wolferen (1941-).

Nowadays the frequent suicidal attacks or suicide bombings in various regions of the world terrorize us and people worldwide, apart from the Japanese, call these “Kamikaze”, referring to the suicidal attacks the Japanese army dared to attempt at the end of the Second World War. Nevertheless, despite the dramatic *hara-kiri* suicide committed by Mishima Yukio, we Japanese live as if the tradition of Hara-kiri has totally disappeared. However, over the last eighteen years, thirty thousand people or even more have committed suicide every year. But I don’t think we’ve made any sincere effort to understand the profound reasons for this phenomenon.

Two years after the publication of research by Maurice Pinguet, Yoel Hoffmann published his *Japanese Death Poems* where he asks, in our place as it were, what the Japanese think about death and dying (p.28). I repeat: how do the Japanese think, what do they think about death and dying? And why do the Japanese write about their imminent death in either *tanka* or *haiku* poems? To tell the truth, this association of ideas surprised me very much. However, regarding this, a French literary critic immediately came to mind. Who is he? His name is Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), well known as the author of *Literary Space* (1955), *Book to Come* (1959) and so on, and as the best

friend of a great Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas.

Since his earliest essays, Blanchot continually associated death with literary work. Regarding this, Blanchot even spoke about “the right to die” (*droit à mourir*) not about “the right to live” (*droit à vivre*). So what does “the right to die” mean here? Blanchot writes as follows: “The writer who writes a work does away with himself (*se supprimer*) in his work, and he confirms himself in it”. In order for a writer to be a writer, work is necessary. But work is not the only product of a writer. On the contrary, it is only his work that justifies his existence as a writer. In this sense, a writer confirms himself in his work. However the situation is not so simple. As soon as I write “I” on this paper, this “I” stops coinciding with the man who has just written this word, and begins to live a life of its own so to speak, without relation to the existence of the writer. The *énoncé* “I” is quite different from the *énonciation* “I.” The former is a kind of unknown and external stranger to the latter. That is why Franz Kafka said that “I entered literature when I could write ‘he’ (impersonal) in the place of ‘I’”.

“Death” is a fundamental metaphor for this alienation of the writing subject outside of his limit. To generalize this fact, Blanchot came to see the “work of death” (*travail de mort*) at the bottom of language; and to this Freudian expression Blanchot gave an original meaning by referring to an aphorism we find in Stéphane Mallarmé's *Divagations* (*Ramblings*).

I say: a flower! and, outside of the forgetting where my voice banishes any outlines, the suave idea itself of the flower, the absent from all the bouquets, raises musically as something other than calyx we have known.

Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets.

Even if a word directly designates the flower in front me, this word annihilates not only this flower but also all the existing flowers in the world and raises the idea of “flower” that we cannot find elsewhere in this world. An impossible idea, so to speak. Where is such idea of flower? Nowhere. And Blanchot named it “space of death” (*espace de la mort*). Poems or “poiein” by Mallarmé as well as by Rilke were nothing but the approach to, or exploration of this space. According to Blanchot, worry about works merged with “suicide” in Mallarmé; as for Rilke, the same worry drove him to research a more “accurate” relation to death than voluntary death. The fact that their efforts were as it were, endless testifies to that “space of death”, even if it were always open and already here, as “impossible” to reach in this world of beings.

In the second half of the seventies, Blanchot was very much read by Japanese students. Since when have Japanese read Blanchot? As far as I know, Tanabe Hajime was one of the first who mentioned Blanchot's *Literary Space* in his “Notes on Mallarmé” written in 1961. Do you know Tanabe Hajime? Tanabe was one of the greatest philosophers in modern Japan. If we can call Nishida Kitaro our first philosopher, Tanabe is our second. Tanabe was born in 1885 and died in 1962. His name is linked to his grand theory called “Logic of Species” which, as a new ontology of Nation-State, made an enormous impact on many Japanese intellectuals and students facing the imminence of war. It cannot be denied that “Logic of Species” more or less served as the ideology for total mobilization.

Yoel Hoffmann cites the remark made by a famous scholar of German literature named Takahashi Yoshitaka (1913-1995) in his *Death and the Japanese* (1959).

A certain Japanese professor has defined Japanese culture as a “culture of death”. In a long essay, he argues that the “collective unconsciousness” of the Japanese is governed by a strong attraction toward death. His theory somehow explains even the peculiar five- and seven-beat rhythm that characterizes Japanese poetry. “If Freud was correct,” his thesis concludes, “and the death wish is a basic desire in all human culture, then it can be admitted that one culture in particular may represent that desire”.

1959 was the very year that Tanabe published his “Todesdealektik”(Death's dialectic) in order to celebrate the 70th anniversary of his lifelong rival, Martin Heidegger.

For example, Tanabe gave a lecture titled “Death-Life”(死生) to the students of Kyoto Imperial University who would soon be mobilized. This was on May 19th in 1943. Tanabe explained the title of his lecture.

“Death-Life”(死生) is an expression used in Confucianism; we say “Death and Life”(生き死に) in Japanese and “Life-Death”(生死) which originally signifies metempsychosis, whereas we use it in ordinarily life in the sense of “Death and Life”. I too, would like to use either Death-Life or Life-Death in their ordinarily sense without making the strict distinction between them (8/247).

Tanabe enumerates three possible attitudes toward Life-Death. First, the naturalistic attitude which consists of regarding death as well as life as a natural event we cannot control. It resembles the Stoic's position according to which it is inutile to think about death or about life. Spinoza said the more a human being becomes free, the less he thinks about death. On the contrary, in the second attitude we actively consider death-life as our own problem because death and life are bound to

one another inseparably, so life is always haunted by death. Martin Heidegger's philosophy can be classed in this category. In his philosophy, death is the limit (Grenze) of existence; and in our ordinarily life, something calls us to make resolutions in the face of death.

These two attitudes did not satisfy Tanabe. The first attitude cannot explain the birth of religions which he said, must be caused by anguish concerning death-life. Just like Hoffmann, Tanabe remarked that even very famous Zen monks had been drawn to religion by the fear of dying. As for the second attitude, it conceives death as only an ideal and not as something concrete. And Tanabe asks himself: are there ways of renewing life, not by such an abstract death but by really dying? And he answers "yes".

I cannot name the third position; but let's call it temporarily, "the practicable position". It consists not in idealizing death, but in really dying. However, this seems very fantastic. Because we cannot think if we are dead. "Practice" signifies to really die. Practice cannot be practice without dying really. Plato said philosophy is nothing but the "exercise of dying"; exercise of dying is impossible in thought only; I myself have to die really in order to exercise death (8/256).

You may think that Tanabe spoke about the "impossible", but Tanabe thought it was rationally possible to distinguish between the second and third positions. The second position signifies a resolution to die; but death here is conceived only as possible someday. On the contrary, the third position which Tanabe called "decision to die" (決死) conceived death not only as possible but necessary or ineluctable. In this respect, I'd like to quote an impressive passage: "Hiersein throws itself there. This means life throws itself into death; so life and death come to replace one another and we can overcome the alternative life and death" (8/257).

"Decision to die" signifies to throw oneself into death; but if I survived after this decision, my survival signifies "resurrection": "dead I" is revived. What is important here is that the link between the decision to die and resurrection is not accidental at all. It does not mean that if a Pilot-Kamikaze survived accidentally, he would be resurrected. "Decision to die" implies necessarily "resurrection", so that paradoxically we can live at the same time as really dying and really being resurrected. Needless to say, Tanabe's lecture encouraged willy-nilly the spirit called *sange* (dispersion of flowers) at this time.

After the defeat of Japan, Tanabe forced himself to stop writing and but later published the *Philosophy as Metanoia*. I cannot detail here the changes which occurred in the philosophy of Tanabe. But in spite of these changes Tanabe seemed to retain the motif "Death-Life." In fact, after 1950, Tanabe returned to this problema by referring to Zen buddhism, in particular to Suzuki

Daisetsu on the one hand, and on the other poets such as Paul Valéry, Stéphane Mallarmé and Reinard Maria Rilke which he read for the first time.

In the text titled “Memento mori”, Tanabe referred to a *koan* of Zen Buddhism at the time of Tang. Two Zen monks made a visit of condolence. While striking the coffin, the young monk Zengen asked his teacher Dougo: “Is this life or death”? But Dougo answered that “It is neither life nor death”. On their way back, Zengen posed the same question again to his teacher and said to him “If you don’t answer, I will hit you”. The teacher didn’t answer, so Zengen hit his teacher. After the death of Dougo, Zengen posed the same question for the third time to his superior, Sekisou, who answered: *Iwazi-iwaji* (Unsayable-unsayable). At last Zengen came to understand that life and death, despite the fact that they distinguished one from another as incompatibles, do not conform to the law of contradiction, and that we cannot decide if it is life or death.

Thus, in the world ordered both by the law of conjunction (~and~) and the law of contradiction (either~or~) opens the space (*espacement*) of “neither~nor~”, from which the word neutral (*neutrum*) is derived. I cannot help but remind myself that Blanchot characterized the “space of death” as “neutral”. In other words, man is neither dead nor alive in the “space of death”. As seen above, Tanabe at the time of war said that the “space of death” opened itself for the man who had already decided to die and that by really dying this man could be resurrected. Then what did Tanabe say about this point in 1958?

In general, when man, facing the alternative of death or life, decides to reject actively his own “self”, he can keep, while being dead, a tense relationship with life, and what is more, transform death into life” (13/169).

Tanabe had not changed at all. In fact, Tanabe wrote of Master Dogen (1200-1253) in 1939, that there are both death and life in the absolute reality of *Zenki* (全機). *Zenki* signifies all the functions of the universe; and Tanabe quoted the words of Master Dogen according to which “In the revelation of *Zenki* which isn’t life nor death there are both life and death”. Tanabe’s fundamental idea as well as his preference for Zen Buddhism, was invariable despite his manifestation of anguished confessions just after the defeat of Japan. But curiously enough, as I’ve mentioned above, Tanabe in his last years took up French symbolic poets such as Valéry and Mallarmé and came to reconsider the relation between philosophy and poetry by examining Martin Heidegger’s essays on Rilke, Hölderlin and so on. I must add that Tanabe himself was a poet belonging to the Araragi school.

Almost simultaneously with Tanabe, Blanchot wrote his essays on Valéry, Mallarmé, Rilke, and Hölderlin, taking into account the concept of death in Heidegger’s philosophy. For Yoel Hoffmann,

“death poems” are not poems written just before one's death. Then what makes poems “death poems”? It is not that poems speak about death either directly or metaphorically. For Blanchot as well as for Tanabe, it depends on the attraction “Space of death” has on Poiein. In other words, “poetic existence”, Hölderlin said “*dichterisch wohnet der Mensch auf der Erde*”-- must approach the “Space of death”, open it and try to live in it. Just like poets, Zen monks live in the “Space of death” both as not alive and not dead. From this point of view, Tanabe criticized Valéry for failing to reach the “Space of death” and abiding with the simple dichotomy of life and death.

In Mallarmé's *Igitur*, *Igitur (conséquent, cependant)* commits suicide because of the absolute contingency of his existence. If one of my ancestors cut off his genealogy, I would not exist. However, this position is insufficient for the “Space of death”. It still obeys the law of contradiction as well as the law of identity. In fact, *Igitur* thinks what might be inexistent can or must negate itself.

Unlike Valéry, Mallarmé was not satisfied with this concept. According to Tanabe, he made great efforts extended over 30 years to overcome it and to write *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. This title testifies against *Igitur* that one must affirm and accept contingency. Very paradoxically, “decision to die necessarily” professed by Tanabe, does not abolish the contingency; it is precisely this paradox that makes the “resurrection” possible. The “Space of death” is the “nowhere”, where the decision to die reverses itself into resurrection; and Tanabe saw there the birth of “love” stronger than so called “mortal life”.

I am uncertain whether my thoughts concerning Tanabe can be applied to Yoel Hoffmann; nevertheless, it cannot be denied, at least by me, that Tanabe showed the philosophical foundation of what Hoffmann calls “death poems.”

*Regarding the texts of Hajime Tanabe, only the volume and page numbers of his Complete Works (in 15 volumes) published by the Library Chikuma in 1962 are indicated.