

Santōka: Towards a Fuller View

As is inevitably the case with all of us, Santōka is seen in different ways by different people, but many Japanese, young or old, have never heard of him, which is to say have never seen him. If you say the name it is recognized because some years back someone in Hokkaido decided to name a chain of ramen noodle shops Santōka, written with the same ideograms as the poet's haiku name.

Otherwise a young person might recall a haiku poem that is included in their schoolbook. 分け入っても分け入っても青い山 (Going on in ongoing mountain green.) That is the end of Santōka's public presence in the life of this land. Who can say what presence he might have in the personal life of this one and that one? There are a plethora of testimonies to be found online on blogs and what not.

There was a time when a Santōka poem was not in a schoolbook. The older than younger generation know nothing of him through compulsory education and if they encounter him at all it is by chance. Even though many enjoy the ramen noodles named after him they often don't inquire what the name means. Or if customers do inquire there is a high probability the shop's noodle makers can't answer.

Though some who do know who he is have told me they have no idea what Santōka's haiku mean, none of the non-haiku-specialist persons I've met are aggressively anti-Santōka. Haiku experts, on the other hand, are another world. I've been told by some of them that Santōka's works are not haiku. That does not bother me because whether his poems are technically haiku is a matter beyond my expertise. What concerns me is whether they are poems. To me, they are clearly poems.

"To me." Yes.

Along with the denial due to the fact that Santōka free-style haiku step outside the parameters of what was or is accepted as being formally or officially or technically haiku there is, for certain readers, a social distaste for the content of some of his work. It may be that there is a bit of overlap, in Japan, in what is considered formally incorrect and what is considered

socially inappropriate; that is a matter to be looked into later. For one speaker, the judgmental word 乱れている [midareteiru] can mean that a poem is seen as disordered, disheveled in form. For another speaker, 乱れている can mean a poem is considered lewd or licentious because it refers to sex organs, sexual desire, prostitutes or nudity. The number of such poems are few.

Not only the form and content of his poetry but Santōka's way of life displeases some. The fact that he was married and had a child he was unable to care for requires some to relegate him to a disreputable class of human beings. Another matter that gives rise to disapproval is that he did not live the way most others feel obligated to live. He did not lead a settled life working a steady job. Santōka is not alone in unstable life. Consider this quote from Kaneko Mitsuharu's autobiography SHIJIN (POET):

"Meanwhile, in keeping with the poverty of my life I had to abandon all show and had to plunge my hands into the mud to catch even little fish. Nihilism helped me in this. As long as I passed for a man of refinement, I was unable to eke out an existence. For I was so inexperienced in practical life and was also likely to make a mess of whatever I did, I felt that I was simply on the way to becoming a beggar."

There are quite a few other poets and artists who came from families with money but, for some time at least, lived a vagabond's life, a "messy" life. This does not necessarily mean they did not want to work. Social class, though no longer an officially determined caste system, still penetrated society and "young gentleman" could not take a job cooking burgers at McDonald's [anachronism noted].

Conservative criticism leveled at Santōka's lifestyle does not care to acknowledge that such a way of life was not Santōka's alone. Though he himself in diaries refers to his own life as "messy," it was a messy time all around. Messy was not uncommon as a way of life.

We need to keep in mind that there were slums in Japan's big cities. All over the world systems of capitalist industrialization create slums. Kagawa Toyohiko's collection of poems SONGS FROM THE SLUMS (1935) describes the scene in Kobe.

What is called modernization produced such results for those from rural communities. Driving them into big cities, driving them into coal mines.

Leaving Japan was another possibility. Young men went off to Hawaii seeking good wages working on plantations, to California, to South America....

The life of small farmers was miserable. That situation is described in Nagatsuka Takashi's novel \pm (SOIL), which is based on actual people though names have been changed. A poor farm woman, wife and mother, dies from infection after self-aborting a pregnancy by using a twig. This was because there was no means to support yet another child, and no money to pay a professional to do the procedure.

Modernization in Japan was not a development arising organically from Japan itself. (Does it arise organically anywhere?) In Santōka's time the Japanese government, or society as a whole, was as yet unsuccessful in providing for it's population.

Some who introduce Santōka place him in a tradition of wandering Buddhist poet-monks such as Priest Saigyō. In fact it seems that before marriage Santōka spoke of a desire to become a Buddhist priest, using that as an excuse in an attempt to dissuade his father from forcing him to marry Sakino.

If we are looking only diachronically, only interested in linking to traditions, then it would indeed seem logical to conclude that Santōka might be last in the line of wandering poet-monks. That is not a full-bodied way of seeing him though. Such a way of looking, because it ignores synchronicity, gives us a less complete idea of Santōka's scene than we'd get if we look at what is going on in the contemporary society. It was a time of crisis. Various forces--connected with the modernization mentioned above--shook Japan economically, socially, politically and psychologically. Santōka was shaken not only by his own family's matters.

Imagine an imaginary wall on one side of which were those profiting from the multitude of political, economic and social changes that had begun with the Meiji Reformation and continued through the Taisho Era. Basking in prosperity. On the other side of that wall were those who were not basking, who suffered because of all the changes. Prosperity was not an evenly spreading phenomenon. Some were left out, cut out, thrown out (of the system). If a word of complaint or criticism was uttered, privately or through a narrative such as socialism, communism or anarchism, one opened oneself to charges of sedition, to ostracism, censorship, beatings, and imprisonment. (Depending on the year and what was criticized.)

For women there was prostitution as "comfort women" on the homeland or shipped off to service the Japanese military abroad. Eventually there weren't enough Japanese women to satisfy the military expansion abroad. That is why the military, through local "procurers" or at times directly, "enlisted" local women. This was the beginning of the seemingly never-ending issue of acknowledgement/denial, responsibility, apology, and compensation.

The war machine, too, was a product of colonialism which itself was a product of modernization. The term modernization is a euphemism for processes that are not altogether praiseworthy or even modern, really. They are "modern" because, for example, a Gatling gun is used instead of matchlock guns. There were structural changes, changes in political structures, economic and social structures. Gatling gun structures to replace matchlock structures. Times change, things change: what is modern about that?

Santōka's home ground, Yamaguchi Prefecture, formerly known as Choshu, was on the winning side during the Boshin War, helping to overthrow the shogunate. Areas which were on the losing side, such as what is now Fukushima Prefecture, in the world of who-gets-what are not recipients of a sparkling destiny. Regarded even now as unimportant, expendable, these are the areas chosen for deployment of nuclear power plants. Distinctions of unimportance to the state are (almost) secretly embedded in postal codes.

But Santōka was from a victor's region, from a known family (the "Great Taneda"). His ancestors originated in what is now Kochi Prefecture on Shikoku, where they were 郷士 (Gōshi: country samurai, samurai farmers, something like country squires maybe). Santōka was top of his class in middle school (even after his mother's suicide), accepted later at a prestigious university. One might imagine he'd choose to live on the better side of the imaginary wall.

"Things happen." After arriving in Tokyo he attended a prep school, then entered Waseda University. Things did not go well with his classes. It is said that this is when he began drinking heavily.

Before Tokyo he was in a high school in Yamaguchi. The school was not in his hometown but in the neighboring city and prefectural capital Yamaguchi. It was for him a boarding school environment which he didn't take to well, where he had few or no friends. Weekends he would return home to Hōfu.

There is something happening here. In his hometown he's top of his class. He has friends with whom he brings out a lit mag. But he is uncomfortable being

away from home--even though it's not far--in a boarding school environment. Farther away in Tokyo, things get progressively worse with schoolwork and then begins the drinking. We don't know which comes first. Was "problems with classes" a cause of the drinking or was drinking a cause of problems with classes? Or both occur together as a result of being far from home? Santōka was homesick?

Three years in Tokyo brings on a nervous breakdown. Neurasthenia is the English for the official diagnosis.

A lonely young man, a sensitive young man with a literary inclination. A homesick young man. He eventually finds home in homeless wandering

まっすぐな道でさみしい

Straight ahead outreaching loneliness road

It may be, too, that his condition can also be called a general sense of social rootlessness of which his own personal loneliness is a symptom. Things are happening to us on different levels, some we're often not conscious of. This is a rootlessness that comes from, again, Japan's modernization. It is a sense of isolation caused by the break up of traditional culture, a break up of community. It is a loss of belonging. It is a loss of the world described by Lafcadio Hearn in every single piece he wrote about Japan. It is a loss even those on the prospering side of that imaginary wall were victims to. It is a loss creating an emptiness that eventually is filled by fascism and is still being filled by conservative thought that takes form as, to offer one example, a movement to reform the constitution because it is "not really Japanese."

Conservative thought here can be characterized as a nostalgia for the way things were, for all that's been lost. It sees the past as good and seems to not often make a distinction between what in the past actually helped life go on and what might have been destructive. In an ideological sphere it means an appeal to the past as "real, or pure, Japan."

The search for genuine Japan has been carried out from ancient times. The chronicles of old distort history so as to establish legitimacy for the rulers of the time, to make it seem they were always here, to give them gods from which to originate, to dissociate the land from Korean peninsula progenitors. Which means that from its beginning Japan is what certain people say it is.

Then there was the long ago importation of Chinese culture. Again comes the need to identify what is pure Japan. Scholars were given the assignment. National scholars (scholars of ancient Japanese language and literature).

The conservative desire is to play roles that attain value because of their connection to a fabricated image of genuine Japan. "All the world's a stage." By doing so they hope to reap rewards. In other words an idea of sacred Japan is invented so that those whose business it is to manipulate images can slap on themselves symbols of authority, of power, that derive from that invented idea.

Conservatives play the game. Santōka doesn't. That is why they shun him. But, now that Santōka is gradually, reluctantly, being accepted into the canon, conservatives are warming to him. Conservatives, it would seem, lack principle, lack any real taste. Their secret desire is only to reap cream.

It is not my purpose here to defend Santōka. His way of life does not upset me. Whatever his shortcomings, the poetry he gave us goes long and deep.

In Japan there is at times, in places, an uneasy connection between tradition and change. For some, there was the golden age of the Edo era and then the split when modernization was made compulsory starting in Meiji. The result is a troubled identity both captive to and appreciative of modern convenience but feeling at a loss as to what it really means to be Japanese. What people are left with is social conditioning encountered at home and in school, social conditioning which substitutes for whatever the genuine Japan was that was lost--which we can was a matter of conditioning too--and then they are told this or that is what Japanese culture is. Ikebana and Tea Ceremony, festivals, etc.

Both home and school are external authority, excessive adherence to which creates a vacuum within, a vacuum filled with whatever it may be that passes for or is accepted as a life lived. Without being judgmental, let's say that it is filled with busyness, with being preoccupied with one thing or another which may or may not be considered beneficial to self, community, society, or world.

Where adherence to external authority is strongest, a conservative personality develops. By conservative I mean rigidly attached to any particular ideology, whether that ideology takes the form of a religion or the form of politically right, left, or moderate.

This definition of conservative is used in relation to Santōka, who, through walking, cottage-dwelling-simple-life, sakè, water, Zen, and poetry, allowed himself an unalloyed existence.

Where there is less attachment to the external, it is possible for a more independent personality to develop, an invisibility of sorts.

What, then, is taste when it comes to poetry? There is the personal, individual, subjective element and there is the consensual, shared, social element which is overwhelmingly (to the extent many people never get to hear of a poet) controlled by conservative forces.

The present is not what might be called a poetic age in Japan. Mass media controls the world of song. Conservative forces control mass media. Conservative forces control education. Even when poetry is presented to young people in a schoolbook, there is inevitably commentary telling the young readers what the poem is about. The commentaries I have seen, though not lies, present the safest interpretations possible. This is to keep young minds from being "disturbed" by a poem's multidimensionality, by the fact that there are so many elements running through a poem, so many forces involved, that it becomes impossible to say definitely what a poem means. It means life, ultimately. Multidimensionality, though a natural condition, is somehow threatening to a school.

The purpose of schools seems to be to limit vision to a dimension that is acceptable to the conservative powers that be. To limit vision is to limit taste, to reduce it. Japan at present is not a tasteless society but it is a society in which conservative taste forces everything unlike it away towards the unknown.

Limiting the kinds of poetry people are exposed to, limiting the interpretations people are exposed to, creates a bonsai effect: a populace with dwarfed sensitivity. Many Japanese will not enjoy hearing they are underdeveloped. More often than not the person doing the telling will be disliked, ostracized, censored, ignored. Banished, exiled, was the old practice. What else can be expected?

Yes, a poet, artist, etc. can leave the mainstream and seek life elsewhere. Call it avant garde this or that, call it the world of experimental whatever. The fact that it must be adjectivized [sic] means metaphorical banishment. This is where Santōka was. Free-style haiku. At present he is becoming more acceptable. But why?

Santōka's reputation has taken an upward swing here in Japan. Might that swing have something to do with the 4 book-length English translations (not to mention translations in other languages) that appeared from 2000 to 2011? These are by Burton Watson (2003), Hiroaki Sato (2002), and two by this writer (2005 and 2011). In that time span too and probably more influential than the English language translations, which are little known by most Japanese, there was an NHK (Japan's public broadcaster) documentary which in part featured a respected actor (Takenaka Naoto) playing Santōka in Buddhist priest robe and kasa hat carrying a begging bowl walking around in zōri sandals to a soundtrack of haiku poems. There was talk of a movie being made about Santōka, but that project seems to have died.

The main collection of Santōka's poems 草木塔 (Grass Tree Cairn, hereafter GTC) appears in a well received movie called 貴方へ (To You) which stars the late Ken Takakura. Plus, recently (around 2012) a major Japanese newspaper published a survey in which Santōka ranked among the top 5 most respected Japanese poets of the modern era.

What is taste? It seems it can be a quickly shifting phenomenon in Japan, as when writers who supported the imperialist war are soon extolling democracy after defeat. Bad taste. Is taste something that changes along with popularity's ups and downs? As mentioned above, public taste is conditioned by conservative forces. When those conservative forces, in this case NHK, allow a program about Santōka to be aired, what does it mean?

Japan is now making efforts to include physically and emotionally challenged individuals in general society (workplace, school, ...) instead of keeping those individuals separate. As that scene develops, it means that it is safe now for mass media to present Santōka for general consumption. Because he is said to have been emotionally troubled, because he is said to have been suffering.

The NHK documentary included testimonials by readers who, plagued by their own spiritual or emotional difficulties, find solace in Santōka poems. Which is all well and good. Poetry can help, is healing. No doubt.

Does the media phenomenon mean that we must now read Santōka according to the Zeitgeist with its preoccupation with disorders, counseling, and therapy? Has it always been a sick world that is just now awakening to its own pathology? In therapists' waiting rooms will we find copies of Grass Tree Cairn?

In the movie FOR YOU, the character played by Kitano Takeshi gifts the grieving (over the loss of his wife) Takaura Ken character with a copy of GTC.

Over the years we are exposed to images of Santōka ranging from "an eccentric, drink-loving haiku poet" "enlightened Zen Master" (John Stevens, 1980) to long suffering Buddha-self-help psychotherapist. Always with the imagineering is there an underlying agenda?

Alas: "Poet" will never be enough for the world. The poet must always, it seems, be dressed up, made presentable for consumption.

We see that conservative media masters are willing to sponsor a certain image of Santōka. Big Brother Japan is there for us. What is being offered is something reduced to a particular dimension that will assist the state apparatus, a dimension of poem-therapy to be provided as the powers that be grind us, work us to death, reduce our earnings, strip us of rights, put children into poverty, expose us to radiation, etc., etc.

Should we celebrate Santōka's greater exposure? Or should we be wary anytime we see a documentary about a poet on TV?

The problem with the new Santōka is that the psych-talk reading is not the poem. It is an aspect of his poetry that is being expropriated for uses Santōka never anticipated.

Pure Santōka poetry is unalloyed. It isn't anything but poetry. Same as his life. He was all about being unalloyed.

Scott Watson

万流庵 The All Flowing Cottage

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