

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

The Retirement Speech of a Certain Professor

Aru kyōju no taishoku no kotoba (1928)¹

NISHIDA KITARŌ

This is a story told by one of the waiters at Rakuyū-kan² that someone seems to have written down, but that apparently took place some time ago.

ONE EVENING IN early summer, in the large banquet room of the Rakuyū-kan, numerous people gathered under the illumination of strings of electric lights. The scene was the typical celebration dinner for a retiring professor, one of many held around then. It would have been uncomfortably warm that evening, had it not been for the billowing curtains of the open windows that made the room seem cooler than it was. Gathered here were those who had not seen each other in ages. One group of people had here in this place situated themselves around the table and were engaged in pleasant conversation. No sooner had dinner begun it seems than it was time for dessert. A professor sitting across from the retiring professor rose to his feet and in a clear voice extolled his achievements. The retiring professor, appearing shy and self-conscious at being the focus of attention, stood up and said something by way of appreciation, but mumbled so badly no one could make out what he was saying. The dinner over, and with everyone in a relaxed mood, the retired professor, perhaps thinking his words of appreciation rather too

¹ The article is compiled in NKZ 12:168-171. Nishitani Keiji's comments preface this article in Nishitani K., ed., *Nishida Kitarō* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1968), pp. 452-454: "This is also from the *Thought and Experience Continued* collection. It well conveys the atmosphere of Sensei's commemorative retirement-farewell dinner and Sensei's frame of mind then. Afterwards, we students of his got together to discuss a commemorative project, but Sensei quashed the idea saying that his work would begin from now."

² An elegant dining hall belonging to Kyoto University used for official events.

perfunctory, again stood up, and reminiscing on his career, began to talk.

With this day my years of public service come to an end. I recently took down a copy of [Charles] Lamb's *Essays of Elia* and read "The Superannuated Man" essay. It so expressed the feelings I have today that I was strongly moved by it. Thinking back, my life has been extremely simple. The first half I spent sitting before the blackboard, the second half I spent standing in front of it. Facing the blackboard I made an about-face—and there my biography would come to an end. Yet even the stick of kindling we use to start up tomorrow's stove comes with its own history, and so there must be memories that attend a person. Though my life has been ordinary, as I reminisce the sixty years that have transpired I cannot help but feel a person's destiny is like a swirling eddy in the stream. I was born in a remote village in the north country. As a child I attended the village elementary school and grew up playing among the pine groves and sandy hills of the parental home where I lived with my father and mother. At age thirteen or fourteen I was taken by my older sister to Kanazawa, to be put in normal school. My village had no one with the education to be a teacher, and so I was enrolled in this school for teachers. But for good or ill I was stricken with a heavy bout of typhus and had to stay out of school for a year. During that time I was just beginning to understand things about the world, when I was taken out of normal school and placed in professional school. The professional school had just been redesignated Fourth High and Middle School, and so I became a student at Fourth High. At Fourth High it came time for me to select the professional course I would enter in the future. This was a choice young students agonized over, and I too was at a loss what to do. Especially as it was a matter of either entering into mathematics or into philosophy it was an extremely difficult choice for me. The advice of one teacher whom I respected was to opt for mathematics. Philosophy was not just a matter of rational ability, he said; it required poetic imagination as well, and he told me frankly that he was not sure whether I had that sort of ability or not. The line of reasoning he set forth of course made sense, and so I simply did not have the confidence to refute it. But all the same I somehow could not bring myself to invest my entire life into the dry and meaningless study of numbers. While entertaining doubts as to my poetic ability, I ended up choosing philosophy. My days as a Fourth High student were by far the most enjoyable of my life. In youthful ardor I let my spirits rein free, living all the while as though I had not a care in the world. As a result halfway through I stopped going to school altogether. In those days I thought there was no other way to learn except by self-study, that I should throw off the harness of schooling to freely immerse myself in reading. So each day I spent at home reading. But not a year had passed when my eyes were damaged to the point the doctor forbade me to read. And then it came

NISHIDA'S RETIREMENT SPEECH

time for me to go to [college in] Tokyo, where I entered as a special student in the literature department. In those days special students led a wretched life. I felt as though my life had bottomed out. Matriculating from college I went immediately to a middle school in the countryside. From there I did a stint at a high school in Yamaguchi, and then to Fourth High where I spent ten years as a German teacher. The ten years I spent in Kanazawa worked wonders for me body and soul, and comprised the brightest time of my life. Immersing myself in my reading and thoughts, there was nothing more I could have asked for as far as the opportunity and freedom to do research went; so well-adapted was I to this niche that it never occurred to me there might be a situation better than this elsewhere. But just around the time I reached age forty, the winds of destiny began to stir and through the support of friends I was able to return to the university. At first I was a replacement for a professor who had gone abroad to study, but then I was retained in that position and now the months and years have slipped by such that nearly twenty years have passed. In recent years my family has been visited by various misfortunes that have been taxing on body and soul, and I have neither been able to achieve what I had intended nor to devote myself as I had hoped. Today, in response to the cordiality you extend, deep in my heart I cannot help but feel abashed. In an English reader I read as a child there was a piece called "The Graveyard," and I remember it saying that at whatever grave one looks, the inscription reads that buried here is a good father, good mother, good son or daughter, never someone who was bad. And so I appeal to the kindness of your hearts not to beat the corpse [of my career] and to forgive my past record in its entirety.

After saying things to this effect he returned to his seat. Among those gathered were no doubt some who snickered at the tedious recounting of his worthless life with its complete lack of depth, but there were also those who, in the depths of their hearts, smiled wryly. And at the U-shaped table where they sat, the conversation harkened back to old times, centered around the guest of honor. Then suddenly he announced he had a long trip ahead of him tomorrow and made hurried preparations to leave. Everyone went to the entrance to see him off. He walked out into the darkness of the streets and, shunning the busy center of the city, disappeared into the night.

(December 1928)

TRANSLATED BY W. S. YOKOYAMA