

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Thoughts on Kawabata's *Meijin*

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FOR nearly a century now, Westerners who write about Japan have been saying it is a land of contrasts and of paradox: it is the chrysanthemum in one hand, the sword in the other; transistors and tea ceremony, haiku poems and kamikaze flights. But the schism is in the beholder's eye. The Japanese themselves fret over other schisms, other rendings of the social fabric. The central character in Kawabata's *The Master of Go* laments the fading of grace and elegance from life and art, the disappearance of respect for elders and mutual respect between persons. Men play the game now only to win, he says, and so have lost their dignity and their self-respect. No one is concerned with preserving the "fragrance" of the noble culture of the traditional past.

It is not that Kawabata has nothing to do with the world of cameras and transistors; on the contrary, as with most modern Japanese novelists (Kobo Abe's *Woman in the Dunes* comes immediately to mind, and Tanizaki's *Some Prefer Nettles*) there is an almost scientific precision to the way Kawabata sets down every detail of his story. His tale is as painstakingly assembled as the most intricate electronic gear. And as the story unfolds, you discover that each little detail has its place, and fits into a larger scheme. That larger scheme has to do with the relation between life and death, and the unique role that Buddhist spirituality has played in the Japanese approach to both. In Kawabata's writing, the parallel lines can be followed to the point of their meeting, where tea ceremony and transistors converge, and the soul as well as the mind of modern Japan are revealed.

The reader who is at first puzzled by the seemingly pointless recitation of minute details, by the endless piling of fact upon fact, may at first distrust the patterns that seem to emerge early in the book. Two players are seated at a Go board. One is old and skilled, but his health is failing, and he must soon face death. The other is younger, skillful, but an exploiter of the newly agreed upon

rules of tournament play, and a hypochondriac. Along with an account of each day's play we are given a running medical report on each player. The older man is beginning to show a pallor of the cheeks, a puffiness of the face, beads of oily sweat. The younger man cannot stop drinking tea during play, and has trouble with his kidneys, and his bowels, and his nerves; he uses a hand-warmer in each sleeve of his kimono, he applies Salomethyl to his forehead, and uses an eye medication called (ironically) "Smile." Kawabata, in the best tradition of the Buddhist abbots, is showing us the corruptions of the body. Just as the Buddha sent his disciples to the cremation grounds to meditate on death, Kawabata is setting before us a miracle play that shows Life steadily undermined by Decay.

As the championship match unfolds, the challenger turns to the Lotus Sutra to begin each day in a prayerful mood; by the 177th move, Kawabata notes that his face has become round, full and complete—it is "indescribably marvelous." It is the face of the Lord Buddha. The old master, on the other hand, undergoes a different transformation. Here Kawabata invokes the legend of Bodhidharma (or Daruma, as he is called in Japan), the Indian monk who is said to have brought meditational Buddhism (Zen) to the Far East. Daruma entered into the meditation state so deeply that he gradually lost the sense of having limbs, and then a body, until he became only a face: a face with massive eyebrows and piercing eyes. So too the Master of Go seems to shrink and shrivel bodily, until there seems to be "only a head, almost gruesome, somehow, as if severed." The Master has become Daruma.

In the game of Go, the player trains himself to concentrate deeply, and thereby bring himself to order. A Go master should have no awareness of self as he plays. He should successfully empty himself even of the desire to win. He is skillful at Go because he is skillful at life; and his art teaches him, in the end, the proper discipline for dying skillfully.

Death, in the traditional Japanese world view, is a pollution, as are illness and disease. Pollution enters into life simply because the life force, embodied in a variety of celestial deities, cannot be everywhere, all the time. And so it becomes necessary for the whole community to call down the spirits of light and life at least once a year, to expel the demonic spirits (*oni*) who cause corruption. The expulsion is performed at rites centering on the New Year season, and is repeated, just for good measure, exactly six months later, at the end of June and the first week of July, in a kind of "shadow" New Year observance. Further expiations are performed at the lunar New Year (called in Japan *Setsubun*), when beans, oranges, and other fruits of the earth are hurled at the *oni*. Kawabata records the opening of the match in Tokyo in the last week of June, its removal to Hakone

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in the first week of July, and the conclusion of the match in Ito early in December, just as people are seen everywhere carrying home their household decorations in preparation for the New Year. A year later, the Master participates in the year-opening ceremonies at the Go club, and dies a fortnight later; and the narrator, who covers the funeral, plans to be home in time for the Setsubun rites of early February.

Every date, every detail in this novel seems to have a significance. The Master dies the day after a festival that celebrates the noble life and sad death of a Heian court official who died in exile, alienated from the life of the court. The Master dies alienated from a newly emerging culture of modernism. His life has followed the traditional calendar of exorcism and renewal. His challenger and successor attempts to rid himself of pollutions with patent medicines. Here is the true breach in Japanese culture, and in the Japanese psyche: it is the disjunction between the randomness of modern life, and an archaic wholeness of life that held together calendric time and the seasons of life, and the disciplines of living and of dying. The challenger has won the match, but he has lost the fullness of life. The Master is not just the Master of Go, but of life. Kawabata celebrates his art in this book, and mourns his passing, and the passing of his art and his world.