

Foreign Studies

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Are the Japanese stranger than any one else, or do they simply have a stronger sense of National identity than others, making them particularly immune to foreign influences? A rather ironic state of affairs considering their proserpity for emulation.

Endo is a Christian Japanese, who in this book, consisting of three disparate parts, unified by the theme of Foreign studies tries to study the particular problem of Japanese studying abroad and their inevitable frustrations. The first two pieces are of a rather slight nature, the bulk of the book taken up by the story 'And you too' about a Japanese university lecturer on French literature travelling to Paris to study, of all authors, the Marquise de Sade.

One of the challenges of literature is to present a new point of view, if possibly to impart to the reader the sensation of being another human being. Thus one picks up the story eager to learn how it feels to be a Japanese in a western country and thus to get a key to the impenetrable alienness of the Japanese temperament. However, such a task is not an easy one to fulfill, as the associations that words engender are external to a text, and thus in order to recognise the subtleness of the Japanese perspective one may already need to be Japanese.

The story is simple, not to say transparent. The protagonist of the story, - Tanaka, has been sent to France by his university to improve himself. He is very much aware of how important this is to his career. He covets a lectureship at, what one surmises, is a fairly prestigious university. He is an expert on 18th century French literature, a somewhat esoteric field, and thus he feels threatened by a younger colleague, following close upon him, who has chosen contemporary fiction, actually making himself visible by contributing articles to the press, an option readily open to himself. He has chosen de Sade, because he has not previously been touched by Japanese scholars, thus ensuring him a foothold. The fact that there is almost no connection between himself, a timid scholar, sexually innocent, and the 18th century libertine de Sade, given to sexual excesses and transgression, maybe only making sense in a traditional Catholic context, gradually dawns upon him. In fact through an initial encounter with a French biographer of de Sade, he is questioned, why he, an Oriental, should be concerned with de Sade at all, something he initially represses. Tanaka is conscientious, he is truly fascinated by the alien culture of Paris, so eager to become part of it, although his attempts to do so are inept. Like a pilgrim he haunts the places where de Sade had marked through his various transgression, and he feels within himself a strange desire to want to bring those very stones back to Japan, or at least to bend down and lick them, thus trying to incorporate them within himself.

He spends a solitary life, spending most of his time in the National library. He lives frugally, avoids contacts with most of the expatriate Japanese, antagonizing them in the process. One friendship of sort is struck, between a fellow architecture student in the same hotel. This student has been longer in Paris, trying to understand the culture, yet feeling

that it is too much for him, and that he eventually has to pay a price for his attempts, namely his health, succumbing to Tuberculosis necessitating an abortion of his stay and a premature return to Japan, a fate intrinsically abhorrent. But Tanake stays apart, timid, furtively dreaming about Parisian prostitutes, but too inhibited to strike out.

His competitor, the younger man, shows up in Paris without due notice. He feels threatened. The other man is so successful and systematic. Cultivating the right contacts, establishing the right connections, making his visit to Paris an integral part of his career. Tanake avoids him at all costs.

Two extended pilgrimages are undertaken, both in order to visit the ruin of de Sades castle - La Coste, outside Avignon. Both times in the winter struggling up a snowy slope. The first time as a failure, the second time succeeding, as he is desperate and anxious about the outcome of a recent X-ray investigation, threatening him with the same fate as his friend. On the second time standing in the ruin his gaze is transfixed by a red spot on the wall. He associates the red spot with life and vigour, a trace of de Sade he does not want to fade away. Shortly thereafter he feels something warm in him, and he coughs blood, splattering on the white snow. That blood and the spot on the wall become inextricably connected. It is clear he has too succumbed to tuberculosis and has no choice but to return back to Japan as an extended hospital visit in France would be financially impossible. And so the short story ends as he learns that his place at the hotel, where Proust once died, is going to be taken over by another Japanese student.

The novel is written in a rather wooden style, and the actions and thoughts of the main characters are a bit too well delineated. Paris appears as a bleak city heavy with stone and with a dark and damp climate that is oppressive, otherwise there is little evocation of place and time. The latter is supposed to be in the late fifties, but the treatment of tuberculosis points rather to the forties. A few peripheral characters are invoked to show the futility of accommodation. One particularly sad one, a Japanese married to a French wife, tells him that his soul is split into two, and his French one is empty. He too, in spite of twenty years in France, speaks the local idiom poorly. What is it with the Japanese that makes them so inured to the acquisition of the local language? A congenial inability of fusing? The unfortunate expatriate speaks nostalgically about things Japanese for ever barred to him.