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The Aesthetics of Decay

The Japanese aesthetics of Wabi-Sabi among various interpretations can be understood as well in the sense of – »contemporary aestheticism which advocates the dissolution of the distinction between art and life.«¹ The concept of Wabi, which developed its positive and profound meaning under a strong influence of Zen Buddhism, can be translated as »loneliness; insufficiency, refined poverty; a humble life in solitude with nature as companion; to lead a solitary life, contemplating nature and appreciating the spiritual and aesthetic values underlying insufficiency.«² Wabi-Sabi, the two central concepts of Japanese aesthetics, can be found already at the transition of Chinese painting to Japan. In their later development the concepts have been remodeled in a specific Japanese way, so that today only their Japanese character is being stressed.

If we look back into Chinese philosophy, in which the Ji (in Japanese Sabi) originates, we come across it in the sense of absolute quiet, tranquility and peacefulness. However, if we try to systemize some of the common meanings of this notion, we come from a broad apparent heterogeneity into sedimental thought which approaches the tranquil support as a potential position of change, namely movement, whose mover itself remains unmoved. In Daoism, we come across the notion of ji in the Dao de jing, as well as in Zhuang Zi.

Dao de jing (25)

»There was something formed out of chaos,

That was born before Heaven and Earth.

Quiet and still! Pure and deep!

It stands on its own and doesn't change.

It can be regarded as the mother of Heaven and Earth.

I do not yet know its name:

I 'style' it 'the Way'.

¹ Amy Newman, »Aestheticism, Feminism, and the Dynamics of Reversal,« in *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 193.

² Setsuko Kojima and Gene A. Crane, *A Dictionary of Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: The Japan Times, 1987), 380.

Were I forced to give it a name, I would call it 'the Great'.« ...³ that is solitary quiet, tranquil, voiceless, spaceless. In Zhuang Zi the same character appears in the connection with the state of quiet tranquility and peacefulness. In Tian dao it appears in relation with the »absence of activity – quiet sitting«.

In Buddhism we come across Ji as peace, silence, calm in connection with nirvana. It is used, in a sense, to extinguish various unnecessary ruminations, so that the ultimate reality could spring out. The various complexities of meanings that appear in Buddhism could be united in the following categories:

- calm, silent, mute, sad, tranquil, deserted;
- tranquility and silence of the truth
- in connection with the true wisdom as yoke of two virtues (truth and intelligence) that should in Buddhism lead one to salvation
- the transition into nirvana – the state without troubles and sorrows, without the movements of time – the condition for delight in peace and nirvana.

According to its meaning Sabi is Ji. It expresses the liberation of the human path from sorrow and torments. It is interesting that the other possible translations – silence, sadness, abandoned state, loneliness, negligence, melancholic standstill – lead us to the world of nirvana, which in its essence is not something joyful. It is the notion of spiritual condition of withdrawal, liberation from perplexed reflections. At the description of the place, the character is used as designation of entirely silent, mournful place without people. When the landscapes are described the character is used for a tranquil, silent, deserted condition without any voice, shape or form. In an artistic sense it reveals the impression entirely voiceless and shapeless, and as a point where everything is extinguished and there in no existence left.

In the works of early Neo-Confucians (brothers Cheng) Ji appears in connection with the demand of removing the turbulent thoughts as:

- the entire tranquility and peace
- one should wait until the point where everything is extinguished and the absolute quiet is achieved
- one should keep the inner peace and protect oneself from inner movements
- with this experience and feeling you can reach whatever place without obstructions and remain tranquil, unexcited. This is the way to accomplish the entire world.⁴

³ Lao-Tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, trans. Robert G. Henrichs (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 77.

⁴ *Ercheng quanshu fu suoyin (Complete works of the Brothers Cheng)*, ed. Zhu Xi (Tokyo: Chubun shuppansha, 1979).

The notion of Ji as a condition emptied from everything – the point where everything is extinguished, where one can find tranquility and peace, leads us to the aim of various yogic or meditative techniques, which should help us to achieve the transcendence of logical, discursive pattern of searching and gets to a basis for a different approach with oneself. It is the loss of Ego and the return into the condition where the body and mind are still uniform. There is no antagonism of body and soul, since in this state of egolessness the state of vacuity is achieved. »Aesthetic ekstasis«⁵ is not only »standing apart from self«, but reaching the state of transcending the Ego. The border between the outer world and oneself is overcome – or better said, between that which conditions us to think about the external existence of »external« world, the process in which mind's false notion about »one's« body, which cannot be separated from all the rest is overcome. The logic starts at the point where the body and mind are separated and is related to the level of intellect, whereas the body should represent the affective side of human personality. In the realm of Wabi-Sabi, however, the Sabi Kokoro is cultivated. The notion of Kokoro leads to the trans-linguistic sphere in which »the domain of internal language coincides with that of 'consciousness'«. ⁶ Kokoro itself »in its broad sense,... signifies the whole domain of inner subjectivity covering both the 'not-yet-activated' and 'already-activated', the ground and its manifestation, including images, ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions,«⁷ the notion of Sabi Kokoro depicts the human mind, which is released from profane engagements, far away from the noise of the world dwelling in the realm of mystical silence and peace. This condition is the liberation from human sorrow and gloomy rumination.

To give oneself entirely without any second thought, but still stay tranquil, unexcited, this is the basis from which one can reach the entire world. The condition of complete tranquility and the experience of Ji is the condition for anything coming into being. Another dimension of Buddhist notion of Ji and in later development Sabi is important, namely the one where the condition is reached where there is no alternative or differentiation anymore. How did the Japanese understand the notions of life and death in this context, on the level of realization of the truth in the sense of a psychophysical awareness far above the pure intellect? It is namely the spiritual level on which the bifurcations of good-evil, black-white, beautiful-

⁵ Hilde Hein, »Refining Feminist Theory,« in *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, 11.

⁶ Toshihiko and Toyo Isutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

ugly, life-death are overcome since it opens up the way of transcendence in a sense of the wisdom of ultimate reality. It is the level far beyond the one described in Nietzsche as »Life itself recognizes no solidarity, no 'equal rights', between the healthy and the degenerate parts of an organism: one must excise the latter – or the whole will perish. – Sympathy for decadents, equal rights for the ill-constituted – that would be the profoundest immorality, that would be antinature itself as morality!«⁸ It is rather an activity which leads one to a transrational level, which is not inferior to the rational cognition, since it encompasses all kinds and grades of experience.

We must take into consideration the fact that in the realm of Buddhist aesthetics, particularly in the domain of Wabi-Sabi, rationality as such does not offer us universal, common, and generally valid standpoint, since many aspects of the concepts under investigation can be experienced in meditation and not understood just with knowledge, by pure erudition. They appear by following a radical empirical experience – experience of intuitive recognition of the things in their undifferentiated unity. In the process of such an experience, the level of tranquility is reached, the absolute quiet, Sabi and voidness that are the basis of the profoundest and most important insights. One of them being the notion of death and decay which in the light of oneness of things and events never gained negative connotation, or to say it with Zhuang Zi: »Life is the companion of death, death is the beginning of life. Who understands their workings? Man's life is a coming together of breath. If it comes together, there is life; if it scatters, there is death. And if life and death are companions to each other, then what is there for us to be anxious about?«⁹ It is the attitude which is in accord with the notion of interrelatedness of everything: »The ten thousand things are really one. We look on some as beautiful because they are rare or unearthly; we look on others as ugly because they are foul and rotten. But the foul and rotten may turn into the rare and unearthly, and the rare and unearthly may turn into the foul and rotten. So it is said, You have only to comprehend the one breath that is the world. The sage never ceases to value oneness.«¹⁰

In the Buddhist context the metaphysical notion of impermanence, transience or ephemerality was created. It supports the Buddhist idea that all material things are considered to have come into existence through some cause and are subjected to the process of creation, abiding, transformation

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 734.

⁹ Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 235.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

and extinction. This process, moreover, is cyclical: all things are born and die over and over again. The cycle of rebirth can be escaped only by eliminating all desire and thus attaining nirvana or enlightenment, the only stable, nontransient state. Such an attitude is present in the aesthetics of classical Japanese works like *The Tales of Ise*, and it also makes it possible to find beauty in its vanishing and to accept the fact that the transience and evanescence of all things make everything even more beautiful.

The Japanese model has not offered any illusions. At various stages of Japanese history it was felt necessary to educate people in confronting the inevitability of corporeal death. Therefore the temple images were formed which are very naturalistic and therefore even more persuasive than the frescoes of the Death dance in Europe, where death takes the form of the skeleton. The Japanese images take a different form and have a slightly different idea behind them. The fact that humanity is sentenced to death and to impermanence is shown by the temple images, which depict the entire process of decay of the human corpse, from death to final disintegration. Such was just one of the ways in which the deep acceptance of death has been shown in the realm of aesthetics in the Japanese history. The other one is the tradition of writing the death poems, the poems in which the Buddhist monk, philosopher or poet expressed his views on life and death on the verge of his own death. Usually they were written by Zen monks, some of which were believed to have the power of predicting their own moment of death. The poems show us the attitude of these Buddhists towards death, which is not something unexpected, an event which they would want to evade or postpone.

The blossom became one of the dominant symbols of the transience of human existence and its beauty. In various stages of the year it got either the undertone of hope, longing or sadness, depending on the stage in which the blossom has been. Unlike Europe which cherishes the stage of the full-blossom and India which worshipped the blossom itself, Japan developed a deep aesthetics of dead blossoms lying on moss or stones. This reflects the worship of the entire life-cycle, including the stage of decomposition and decay, and does not worship only youth, vigor and vitality.

The aloness, solitude, which is not loneliness, with its negative connotation has been cultivated as the way of positive alienation.¹¹ In the death poems, also it is an important undertone, since it makes us aware of the fact that death is the very moment which is essentially experienced by each in-

¹¹ Futing Liao, »Positive Alienation and its Reflection in Taoist Thought,« *International Sociology*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1989), 5-17.

dividual alone, without the interaction with the others which characterizes the life. The Japanese attitude towards death, or better, towards acceptance of it in all its manifestations, including the stages of dissolution and decay, has often been understood wrongly, like certain morbid mysterious and esoteric practice. However, it cultivates the sense of beauty, which is present also in the death poems, based on the equilibrium and equanimity and on subjective fullness of Awareness, born from a specific form of contemplation, which enables a continuity between the inner and outer speech of the poet. This can be experienced only on the basis of enlightenment, a state in which the consciousness has liberated itself from any form of theoretical rumination and has reached the natural simplicity very close to the Daoist practice of wu-wei, the absence of any form of intentional activity, which influenced also their attitude towards death: »I received life because the time had come; I will lose it because the order of things passes on. Be content with this time and dwell in this order and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. In ancient times this was called the 'freeing of the bound'. There are those who cannot free themselves, because they are bound by things. But nothing can ever win against Heaven – that's the way it's always been. What would I have to resent?«¹²

Sabi, which in its later development has been connected with simple, rustic utensils for the tea ceremony, can be translated as: »patina; agedness; solitary look; rustic simplicity; the quiet beauty of things in a state of natural decay; active appreciation of the value of things seemingly negative, such as rusticity, agedness, loneliness, deficiency«¹³ has been cultivated also in the landscape painting. The solitary angler, never seen from the front, enclosed and surrounded in the haze, represents the tranquil beauty of a highly realized man and his place in the Cosmos in desolation and solitude, covered with a patina of simplicity. Striking, with the air of naturalness, transcending the notion of what would be called the poverty that is, indifferent to material luxury. In the midst of life but still far from others, distanced from them, as to be fishing, diving deeply into the ultimate reality holding to it in its suchness. Deeply aware of the fact that when we most badly need a neighbour, we always happen to be alone, he sits in the boat, knowing that the path of discovery has to be walked by each of us alone. What would be called his own Self has been identified with the ultimate reality which left no room for feeling lonely. Everything was one and realizing this, one is not separated from anything anymore. In this realm of nonattachment nothing-

¹² Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works*, 84-5.

¹³ Setsuko Kojima and Gene A. Crane, *A Dictionary of Japanese Culture*, 278.

ness became the basis of existence and the distinction of him and other disappeared. Knowing his own heart, he was pursuing the activity not yet differentiated into this or that. There he was meeting with original face.

With no expectations and hopes from the Other and for the future, the fisherman, solitary angler, knows that it is not the virtue, which is the basis of human relationships, but insufficiency. Virtue being distinctively human and very limited, shaping the temporally agreements that regulate people's coming together, being together and separating during their momentary existence in the flow of eons. With this realization, there is no space for mourning and recovery from it, since the solitary angler represents the unlimited spiritual richness of the realized man, the quality of satoric awareness. Therefore, he is able to place his life in the proper relation to the universe. Leading a solitary life he contemplates the enormity of all things and his own powerlessness. In his embodiment of Wabi-Sabi, he represents the refined poverty and rustic simplicity, the profound aesthetic appreciation of poverty, deficiency, loneliness, agedness. There is nothing to tend to or aim at, no remoteness and no horizons of the future well-being anymore. Still, the mind is directed to infinity, free from frustrations caused by limitations, aware of the permanent changes of nature as well as the ones in touch with it. The transience gives the deep appreciation of the life as such, its shortness and each and every moment in it. As the inhabitant of the world of Wabi-Sabi, his state goes beyond conceptualization, beyond being grasped by the words, since it transcends the expression. Subtle intuition gives room for nature to apply patina of age and appreciate all transformations as being each in themselves beautiful.

The aesthetics of decay, so well expressed in the Sino-Japanese concepts of Wabi-Sabi (ji), as well as in the tradition of Japanese death poems, directs us to the fact that the solution of the existence puzzle is not to be searched for outside, but in our heart-minds. The pure, absolute reality in its suchness, as revealed to the enlightened mind is beyond the distinctions as: beautiful-ugly, good-bad, death-life, Wabi and Sabi. Therefore it gives no room for the illusions, since it represents the sobering down from the impoisonment of the existential illusions. Various techniques of achieving harmony and the practices of purification of one's heart formed part of the realm of aesthetics in the Sino-Japanese tradition. The individual spirit has been developed by mind-expanding exercises, and the sense of the illusionary Self or Ego has been undercut through the direct experience of the universe and one's place in it. Such a process is developed on a level different from the logically-discursive one, which in the Buddhist context gets transcended by the switch of consciousness, where the distinctions reveal themselves as illusion-

ary and arbitrary. Death poems point at the liberation from the bonds of death and life by the deep insight into human existence, which is experienced on the level where one teaches »with the voice of silence«. ¹⁴

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¹⁴ *Japanese Death Poems*, ed. Yoel Hoffmann (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1986), 91.