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Ennui by Abe Kōbō

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Darcy L. Gauthier
Ennui

Abe Kōbō
倦怠

O spider
When your body blazes like spirit
Dream casts its net into the immaterial
O shroud of death
Wrapped in its endless web you hallucinate
A herd of beasts, thirsty, running for shore

Commentary

Abe Kōbō (1924–1993) is perhaps best recognized for his novels, film adaptations, and plays. However, his first work of literature was a small collection of poetry, self-published in 1947 (and later published by Shinchōsha in 1997). The collection, *Mumei shishū* 無名詩集 (*Poems by a Nameless Poet*), was printed one year after Abe relocated to Japan from his childhood home of Manchukuo (Manchuria), a puppet state Japan established during the Fifteen Years War (1931–1945). Though poetry sometimes appears in his other writing, this is Abe's only attempt at a full collection. Rather obscure and infrequently discussed in academic criticism, its poems have, aside from a few isolated excerpts, never been translated into English.

I have translated here one poem from this collection, “Kentai” 倦怠 (“Ennui”), which is in many ways representative of the whole in terms of its style and thematics. *Mumei shishū* is philosophically abstract, esoteric, and at times impenetrably cryptic. These qualities, as well as its romanticism focusing on themes of life’s suffering and death’s appeal, are due no doubt in part to Rainer Maria Rilke’s influence. In the postscript to a collection of Abe’s short stories published in 1968 (*Yume no Tōbō* 夢の逃亡, or *Dream’s Flight*), he reflects,

Actually for me Rilke was “the symbol” during the Second World War. If I look at it now, I also feel the meaning of that symbol might have been “the tranquillity of the dead.” In order to establish a liaison with death, I chose a guide map to the country of the dead. In the post-war period, for me, it was necessary that I first start from the image of death.
(my translation)

Perhaps, then, Abe has self-reflexively embedded himself into the poem “Ennui” as a spider weaving his web of death yet trapped in it as well. We also see his attempt to communicate a certain experience of the immediate postwar, a trauma that cannot be fully grasped or calculated, the ineffability of which is perhaps best suited to poetic expression.

I have tried to make this translation as faithful to the original as possible, realizing that this is to a large extent a futile effort. Abe’s poetry has much to unpack and, as is the case when “unpacking” anything (language no less than luggage), the contents seem to have magically increased in volume as they inhaled their new atmosphere, making it impossible to fit them all back in their original container. The translation is as literal as possible in terms of word choice, line breaks, and line order, and it remains free-style, with no stress patterning or rhyming (rhyme is not typical in Japanese poetry). However, I was unable to convey certain nuances of the original. For example, the final line ends with a particle, *wo* を, which would typically be followed immediately by a direct object. Instead, it is left suspended, and the direct object it marks (the “herd of beasts”) is in the previous line. The final two lines thus invert the order of clauses that is typical

in a Japanese sentence (direct object–verb, i.e. “herd of beasts hallucinate”). In Japanese, this form of anastrophe is not uncommon, but I felt it would sound strange in English, so I decided that replicating it (“you, wrapped in its endless web / a herd of beasts, thirsty, running for shore, hallucinate”) would make the lines inappropriately awkward—and would, moreover, weaken the emphasis in the original on the herd of beasts as the final image of the poem. However, in doing so, I have perhaps sacrificed a certain literary flourish, as well as the sense of suspension or return accomplished by ending with a particle.

I would like to thank Dr. Atsuko Sakaki for her insightful commentary on my translation.