



OSAMU DAZAI

NO LONGER
HUMAN

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BY OSAMU DAZAI

TRANSLATED BY DONALD KEENE

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

*This translation is dedicated with affection
to Nancy and Edmundo Lassalle*

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

I think that Osamu Dazai would have been gratified by the reviews his novel *The Setting Sun* received when the English translation was published in the United States. Even though some of the critics were distressed by the picture the book drew of contemporary Japan, they one and all discussed it in the terms reserved for works of importance. There was no trace of the condescension often bestowed on writings emanating from remote parts of the world, and for once nobody thought to use the damning adjective “exquisite” about an unquestionably Japanese product. It was judged among its peers, the moving and beautiful books of the present generation.

One aspect of *The Setting Sun* puzzled many readers, however, and may puzzle others in Dazai’s second novel *No Longer Human*:¹ the role of Western culture in Japanese life today. Like Yozo, the chief figure of *No Longer Human*, Dazai grew up in a small town in the remote north of Japan, and we might have expected his novels to be marked by the simplicity, love of nature and purity of sentiments of the inhabitants of such a place. However, Dazai’s family was rich and educated, and from his childhood days he was familiar with European literature, American movies, reproductions of modern paintings and sculpture and much else of our civilization. These became such important parts of his own experience that he could not help being influenced by them, and he mentioned them quite as freely as might any author in Europe or America. In reading his works, however, we are sometimes made aware that Dazai’s understanding or use of these elements of the West is not always the same as ours. It is easy to conclude from this that Dazai had only half digested them, or even that the Japanese as a whole have somehow misappropriated our culture.

I confess that I find this parochialism curious in the United States. Here where our suburbs are jammed with a variety of architecture which bears no relation to the antecedents of either the builders or the dwellers; where white people sing Negro spirituals and a Negro soprano sings Lucia di Lammermoor at the Metropolitan Opera; where our celebrated national dishes, the frankfurter, the hamburger and chow mein betray by their very names non-American origins: can we with honesty rebuke the Japanese for a lack of purity in their modern culture? And can we criticize them for borrowing from us, when we are almost as conspicuously in their debt? We find it normal that we drink tea, their beverage, but curious that they should drink whiskey, ours. Our professional decorators, without thinking

to impart to us an adequate background in Japanese aesthetics, decree that we should brighten our rooms with Buddhist statuary or with lamps in the shapes of paper-lanterns. Yet we are apt to find it incongruous if a Japanese ornaments his room with examples of Christian religious art or a lamp of Venetian glass. Why does it seem so strange that another country should have a culture as conglomerate as our own?

There are, it is true, works of recent Japanese literature which are relatively untouched by Western influence. Some of them are splendidly written, and convince us that we are getting from them what is most typically Japanese in modern fiction. If, however, we do not wish to resemble the Frenchman who finds the detective story the only worthwhile part of American literature, we must also be willing to read Japanese novels in which a modern (by modern I mean Western) intelligence is at work.

A writer with such an intelligence—Dazai was one—may also be attracted to the Japanese traditional culture, but it will virtually be with the eyes of a foreigner who finds it appealing but remote. Dostoievski and Proust are much closer to him than any Japanese writer of, say, the eighteenth century. Yet we should be unfair to consider such a writer a cultural *déraciné*; he is not much farther removed from his eighteenth century, after all, than we are from ours. In his case, to be sure, a foreign culture has intervened, but that culture is now in its third generation in Japan. No Japanese thinks of his business suit as an outlandish or affected garb; it is not only what he normally wears, but was probably also the costume of his father and grandfather before him. To wear Japanese garments would actually be strange and uncomfortable for most men. The majority of Japanese of today wear modern Western culture also as they wear their clothes, and to keep reminding them that their ancestors originally attired themselves otherwise is at once bad manners and foolish.

It may be wondered at the same time if the Japanese knowledge of the West is more than a set of clothes, however long worn or well tailored. Only a psychologist could properly attempt to answer so complex a question, although innumerable casual visitors to Japan have readily opined that under the foreign exterior the Japanese remain entirely unlike ourselves. I find this view hard to accept. It is true that the Japanese of today differ from Americans—perhaps not more, however, than do Greeks or Portuguese—but they are certainly much more like Americans than they are like their ancestors of one hundred years ago. As far as literature is

concerned, the break with the Japanese past is almost complete.

In Japanese universities today the Japanese literature department is invariably one of the smallest and least supported. The bright young men generally devote themselves to a study of Western institutions or literature, and the academic journals are filled with learned articles on the symbolism of Leconte de Lisle or on the correspondence of James Knox Polk. The fact that these articles will never be read abroad, not even by specialists in Leconte de Lisle or James Knox Polk, inevitably creates a sense of isolation and even loneliness among intellectuals. Some Japanese of late have taken to referring to themselves as “the orphans of Asia,” indicating (and perhaps lamenting) the fact that although Japan has become isolated from the rest of Asia, the Western nations do not accept her literature or learning as part of their own. The Japanese writers of today are cut off from Asian literature as completely as the United States is from Latin American literature, by the conviction that there is nothing to learn. This attitude may be mistaken, but I remember how shocked a Japanese novelist, a friend of mine, was to see his own name included on a list of Lebanese, Iraqi, Burmese and miscellaneous other Asian writers who had been sponsored by an American foundation. He would undoubtedly have preferred to figure at the tail end of a list of Western writers or of world writers in general than to be classed with such obscure exotics.

We might like to reprimand the Japanese for the neglect of their own traditional culture, or to insist that Japanese writers should be proud to be associated with other Asians, but such advice comes too late: as the result of our repeated and forcible intrusions in the past, Western tastes are coming to dominate letters everywhere. The most we have reason to expect in the future are world variants of a single literature, of the kind which already exist nationally in Europe.

No Longer Human is almost symbolic of the predicament of the Japanese writers today. It is the story of a man who is orphaned from his fellows by their refusal to take him seriously. He is denied the love of his father, taken advantage of by his friends, and finally in turn is cruel to the women who love him. He does not insist because of his experiences that the others are all wrong and he alone right. On the contrary, he records with devastating honesty his every transgression of a code of human conduct which he cannot fathom. Yet, as Dazai realized (if the “I” of the novel did not), the cowardly acts and moments of abject collapse do not tell the whole story. In a superb epilogue the only objective witness

testifies, “He was an angel,” and we are suddenly made to realize the incompleteness of Yozo’s portrait of himself. In the way that most men fail to see their own cruelty, Yozo had not noticed his gentleness and his capacity for love.

Yozo’s experiences are certainly not typical of all Japanese intellectuals, but the sense of isolation which they feel between themselves and the rest of the world is perhaps akin to Yozo’s conviction that he alone is not “human.” Again, his frustrations at the university, his unhappy involvement with the Communist Party, his disastrous love affairs, all belong to the past of many writers of today. At the same time, detail after detail clearly is derived from the individual experience of Osamu Dazai himself. The temptation is strong to consider the book as a barely fictionalized autobiography, but this would be a mistake, I am sure. Dazai had the creative artistry of a great cameraman. His lens is often trained on moments of his own past, but thanks to his brilliant skill in composition and selection his photographs are not what we expect to find cluttering an album. There is nothing of the meandering reminiscer about Dazai; with him all is sharp, brief and evocative. Even if each scene of *No Longer Human* were the exact reproduction of an incident from Dazai’s life—of course this is not the case—his technique would qualify the whole of the work as one of original fiction.

No Longer Human is not a cheerful book, yet its effect is far from that of a painful wound gratuitously inflicted on the reader. As a reviewer (Richard Gilman in *Jubilee*) wrote of Dazai’s earlier novel, “Such is the power of art to transfigure what is objectively ignoble or depraved that *The Setting Sun* is actually deeply moving and even inspiring. . . . To know the nature of despair and to triumph over it in the ways that are possible to oneself—imagination was Dazai’s only weapon—is surely a sort of grace.”

Donald Keene

PROLOGUE

I have seen three pictures of the man.

The first, a childhood photograph you might call it, shows him about the age of ten, a small boy surrounded by a great many women (his sisters and cousins, no doubt). He stands in brightly checked trousers by the edge of a garden pond. His head is tilted at an angle thirty degrees to the left, and his teeth are bared in an ugly smirk. Ugly? You may well question the word, for insensitive people (that is to say, those indifferent to matters of beauty and ugliness) would mechanically comment with a bland, vacuous expression, "What an adorable little boy!" It is quite true that what commonly passes for "adorable" is sufficiently present in this child's face to give a modicum of meaning to the compliment. But I think that anyone who had ever been subjected to the least exposure to what makes for beauty would most likely toss the photograph to one side with the gesture employed in brushing away a caterpillar, and mutter in profound revulsion, "What a dreadful child!"

Indeed, the more carefully you examine the child's smiling face the more you feel an indescribable, unspeakable horror creeping over you. You see that it is actually not a smiling face at all. The boy has not a suggestion of a smile. Look at his tightly clenched fists if you want proof. No human being can smile with his fists doubled like that. It is a monkey. A grinning monkey-face. The smile is nothing more than a puckering of ugly wrinkles. The photograph reproduces an expression so freakish, and at the same time so unclean and even nauseating, that your impulse is to say, "What a wizened, hideous little boy!" I have never seen a child with such an unaccountable expression.

The face in the second snapshot is startlingly unlike the first. He is a student in this picture, although it is not clear whether it dates from high school or college days. At any rate, he is now extraordinarily handsome. But here again the face fails inexplicably to give the impression of belonging to a living human being. He wears a student's uniform and a white handkerchief peeps from his breast pocket. He sits in a wicker chair with his legs crossed. Again he is smiling, this time not the wizened monkey's grin but a rather adroit little smile. And yet somehow it is not the smile of a human being: it utterly lacks substance, all of what we might call the "heaviness of blood" or perhaps the "solidity of human life"—it has not even a bird's weight. It is merely a blank sheet of paper, light as a feather, and it is smiling. The picture produces, in short, a sensation of

complete artificiality. Pretense, insincerity, fatuousness—none of these words quite covers it. And of course you couldn't dismiss it simply as dandyism. In fact, if you look carefully you will begin to feel that there is something strangely unpleasant about this handsome young man. I have never seen a young man whose good looks were so baffling.

The remaining photograph is the most monstrous of all. It is quite impossible in this one even to guess the age, though the hair seems to be streaked somewhat with grey. It was taken in a corner of an extraordinarily dirty room (you can plainly see in the picture how the wall is crumbling in three places). His small hands are held in front of him. This time he is not smiling. There is no expression whatsoever. The picture has a genuinely chilling, foreboding quality, as if it caught him in the act of dying as he sat before the camera, his hands held over a heater. That is not the only shocking thing about it. The head is shown quite large, and you can examine the features in detail: the forehead is average, the wrinkles on the forehead average, the eyebrows also average, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the chin . . . the face is not merely devoid of expression, it fails even to leave a memory. It has no individuality. I have only to shut my eyes after looking at it to forget the face. I can remember the wall of the room, the little heater, but all impression of the face of the principal figure in the room is blotted out; I am unable to recall a single thing about it. This face could never be made the subject of a painting, not even of a cartoon. I open my eyes. There is not even the pleasure of recollecting: of course, that's the kind of face it was! To state the matter in the most extreme terms: when I open my eyes and look at the photograph a second time I still cannot remember it. Besides, it rubs against me the wrong way, and makes me feel so uncomfortable that in the end I want to avert my eyes.

I think that even a death mask would hold more of an expression, leave more of a memory. That effigy suggests nothing so much as a human body to which a horse's head has been attached. Something ineffable makes the beholder shudder in distaste. I have never seen such an inscrutable face on a man.

THE FIRST NOTEBOOK

第一の手記

Mine has been a life of much shame.

I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being. I was born in a village in the Northeast, and it wasn't until I was quite big that I saw my first train. I climbed up and down the station bridge, quite unaware that its function was to permit people to cross from one track to another. I was convinced that the bridge had been provided to lend an exotic touch and to make the station premises a place of pleasant diversity, like some foreign playground. I remained under this delusion for quite a long time, and it was for me a very refined amusement indeed to climb up and down the bridge. I thought that it was one of the most elegant services provided by the railways. When later I discovered that the bridge was nothing more than a utilitarian device, I lost all interest in it.

Again, when as a child I saw photographs of subway trains in picture books, it never occurred to me that they had been invented out of practical necessity; I could only suppose that riding underground instead of on the surface must be a novel and delightful pastime.

I have been sickly ever since I was a child and have frequently been confined to bed. How often as I lay there I used to think what uninspired decorations sheets and pillow cases make. It wasn't until I was about twenty that I realized that they actually served a practical purpose, and this revelation of human dullness stirred dark depression in me.

Again, I have never known what it means to be hungry. I don't mean by this statement that I was raised in a well-to-do family—I have no such banal intent. I mean that I have had not the remotest idea of the nature of the sensation of “hunger.” It sounds peculiar to say it, but I have never