

The Human Condition after Hiroshima: The world of Inoue Hisashi

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What could be said for the human being after Nanking, Dresden, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Whatever the motivation, this is what we did to each other, and continue to do to this very hour. How can a writer write about goodness when people of all nations, autocratic or democratic, take up murder and torture with the same eager sense of merriment that they do an innocuous hobby?

For the postwar writer the dilemma was plain. How can you create a positive character who is motivated by both a clear knowledge of innate human cruelty and an unfaltering loving kindness? Given the real world, the only hero appears to be an anti-hero; the only emperor is the emperor of the oven.

Postwar Japanese literature produced a stunning variety of novelists, from Mishima Yukio to Murakami Haruki, from Ooka Shohei to Nakagami Kenji, and many more of brilliance. Their work is distinguished by a truth to human nature, with our offensive blemishes on display for all the world to see. They are influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by the catastrophic defeat of Japan in its war of aggression, and strive to come to terms with it in a good part of their literature.

But one author stands out as being in a class by himself: Inoue Hisashi. He, too, has been deeply affected by the war's aftermath, but his method of overcoming the grief has been somewhat different from his contemporaries.

My interest in his work began when, more than 30 years ago, I saw his 1971 play "Dogen no Boken (The Adventures of Dogen)," a witty and satirical portrayal of the Kamakura Period (1192-1333) Zen monk, Dogen. I was attracted, like all of his fans, to his ingenious use of language, his cutting humor and perhaps more than anything -- to use a word that now seems most out of fashion -- his humanism.

Inoue was known then primarily as a popular writer of humorous fiction and as the most clever player on words in contemporary literature and theater. His fantasy novel of 1970, "Bun to Fun (Boon & Phoon)," about the ups and downs in the career of a no-hope writer whose characters come to life, has sold more than two million copies to date. He is also one of the few Japanese novelists who has created a full-blown, warts-and-all portrait of a non-Japanese, in his hilarious and sympathetic 1972 portrait of a French priest, "Mokkinpotto no Atoshimatsu (The Fortunes of Father Mockinpott)."

But what makes Inoue's literature stand out is not his humor or his clearly cosmopolitan sensibility. It is the essential humanity, an endearing humanity, that his characters possess. Even the evildoers in his prose and drama -- be they thief, imposter or vengeful soldier -- display the kind of redeeming features that virtually all other authors, East or West,

are loath to give them. The result is that the essential humanity (read that as goodness) of these characters rubs off on us all.

Whereas in the literature of Miyazawa Kenji, the writer who has most influenced Inoue, this goodness comes from the religious/sacrificial gene, for Inoue it is passed on as plain and simple love. Sound soppy? Well, it may be. But it is never uninformed. Inoue is an ardent student of history. He is probably Japan's most scholarly popular writer.

The humanism in the modern Japanese sensibility, at least in Inoue's case, may stem in part from Victorian England. One of his favorite books is "David Copperfield"; and it is easy to see the common ground between Dickens and him. Both writers are immersed in the mores of their era; both are masters at re-creating the details of their surroundings; both give the underdog the benefit of the doubt and the tools to rectify their misery.

Inoue was born in 1934 in a small town in Yamagata Prefecture. He lost his father when he was 4 years old and was subsequently sent off to a Lasallian home for children (no doubt the inspiration for Father Mockinpott originated in this experience). Perhaps a childhood spent in relative poverty in Tohoku reinforced the Victorian message of charity amid the struggles for survival.

Thanks to all this, and to his natural empathy for the weak and abused, Inoue came to express something very Japanese, a quality that has survived the period of fascism in this country, the disorientation of the immediate postwar period and the do-nothing cynicism of the present-day political elite. This is a genuine belief that there are good people wherever you go, and that the primary theme of our miserable species is not destruction but renewal.

Clearly, the theme of the renewal of life after a

catastrophe, man-made or otherwise, is not a Japanese monopoly. But the Japanese seem to be quick to resign themselves to fate, due perhaps to a Buddhist belief in acceptance of one's destiny as, to use Miyazawa Kenji's beautiful phrase, "the petals of Karma."

The Japanese find the bootstraps immediately and persist in pulling on them no matter how much time and effort it takes. Their swift recovery after the war was due, in large part, to this almost instant resignation to the past and a dogged commitment to the future.

Nowhere is this theme of renewal seen more clearly than in Inoue's 1994 play (now a feature film), "The Face of Jizo," whose original title is "Chichi to Kuraseba."

The context of this play is very specific. It takes place in Hiroshima three years after the dropping of the atom bomb in 1945. All of the details and trappings of this play place it in its time: the farm-girl mompe slacks that the 23-year-old Mitsue wears; the manner in which her father, Takezo, lights the fire under the bathtub; the innocent conversations that take place between Mitsue and Kinoshita-san, the bashful young man who fancies her.

Mitsue works at the local library. One day, returning from work during a violent thunderstorm, she finds that her father has taken refuge in a closet. The story unfolds as this father and daughter, two very ordinary people (Inoue's heroes are invariably everyman or everywoman, even when they are famous), talk and argue and cry over a period of a few days.

As we watch the play we learn that Takezo, in fact, perished three years before in the blast. He has come back to life with a single purpose: to convince his daughter to go on living and to marry. For her part, Mitsue has lost all hope in an abyss of survivor's guilt.

But many would ask a simple question of this play. How can you treat the tragedy of this father and daughter without putting it in the context of the war and Japan's heinous execution of it? Doesn't the playwright know what his country did to bring destruction on its own head?

Of course Inoue is aware of what led to Hiroshima. He addresses this very question in the prologue to "The Face of Jizo":

"Hiroshima. Nagasaki. When these two are mentioned, the following opinion is increasingly heard. 'It's wrong to keep acting as if the Japanese were victims. The Japanese were the victimizers at the time in what they did in Asia.'

"The second sentence is certainly on the mark. The Japanese were the perpetrators of wrong throughout Asia. But as for the first sentence, I remain adamant that this is not the case. This is because I believe that those two atomic bombs were dropped not only on the Japanese but on all humankind."

Amid this horror, Inoue Hisashi's approach has been an ultimately personal one. In "The Face of Jizo" we enter the life of an ordinary father and daughter who were caught up in a holocaust. Was it of their own making? Did they deserve what they got because they were Japanese citizens at a time when their country was prosecuting an evil war?

That's beside Inoue's point. In this play he seems to be telling us to look at our own lives, at how we would have been affected had our fate put us in Hiroshima in August 1945. We have all been daughters or sons or mothers or fathers. We can easily enter Takezo's mind when he scolds his daughter for not looking after her future. We know how embarrassed Mitsue is by her father's philandering.

Inoue has given us a profound expression of the modern Japanese sensibility. The message is

not political, nor does it purport to encompass a mass of grief, to speak for millions of innocents whose only guilt came from being born in an aggressor country at the wrong time. The message is that the loss of a single life is a tragedy for all humanity, no matter on what side of a war that life once stood.

"One person can do a little," said Inoue on an October 7 television program recorded in 2004 when the playwright was in Bologna. "Two can do a little more. Three people together can do even more for others."

Japanese authors of fiction have generally done their best since the war to avoid appearing political. The very term *seijiteki*, which translates literally as "political," has a rather negative connotation in Japanese, more akin to the English "tendentious" or "biased." A few authors, perhaps best represented by Oe Kenzaburo, have not shied away from dealing with our sinister political nature, but not to the extent that they have written what we would call political novels.

Inoue Hisashi represents a different approach, one that is symbolic of a particular aspect of the sensibility of the modern Japanese. He seeks out those qualities in people that one can only call endearing, and he gives them such a potency in his characters, both in his fiction and his theater, that we cannot help but be affected by them despite our more cynical and "realistic better judgement."

Hisashi Inoue has written plays, like the 1979 drama "Shimijimi Nihon -- Nogi Taisho (Deeply, Madly Japan: General Nogi)," that have been somewhat critical of the Japanese emperor. In prose and drama he has delved into the life and times of a host of historical characters, from the Meiji Era novelist Higuchi Ichiyo to participants in the Tokyo War Crimes Trial; from the Portuguese Jesuit missionary Luis Frois to the early Showa Era novelist Hayashi Fumiko. He has even written a popular satire

about a small district in Tohoku that declares its independence from Japan.

The dominant theme in all of these works is the everyday lives of their characters, their small pains and slightly larger joys. This is where, according to his Japanese sensibility, the big issues start and end: at the feet of ordinary men and women.

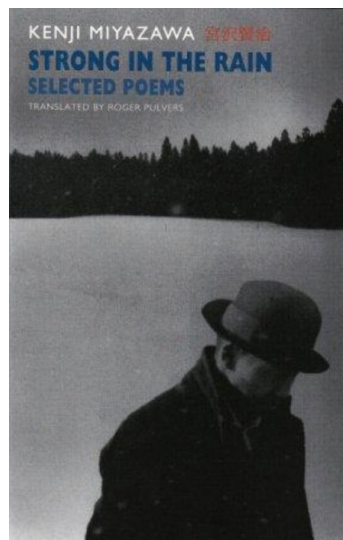
The Japanese sensibility as expressed by this country's authors, playwrights and poets has, needless to say, a multitude of facets. Whether due to a European and American bias in favor of Western letters, or the simple tyranny of language, this sensibility, with all its riches, has remained a largely unknown quantity outside

Japan.

This ignorance has constituted perhaps the greatest loss to 20th- and 21st-century world literature that can be imagined.

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Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright and theater director, and a professor at Tokyo Institute of Technology. He translated all the Japanese writings quoted in the five-part Japan Times series "Revealing the Japanese Sensibility," that included the present article. A collection of his fiction and nonfiction writings, "Half and More," will be published by Shinchosha in 2005.



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