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The pull of the flesh or the call of the spirit? - Weighing the impact of the dual forces inherent in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's novel *The Two Acolytes*

This paper seeks to take issue with Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's novel *The Two Acolytes* vis-a-vis an examination of the dual perspectives embedded within the rubric of the text, in relation to the theme of sexual temptation. While the paper shall attempt to delineate the twin perspectives and responses to the resonant concern of carnality and temptation of the flesh within the novel, it shall simultaneously explore the delineation of such perspectives in Jun'ichirō's literary canon and the gradation vis-à-vis which Jun'ichirō has progressed from a depiction of a masochistic-natured erotic gratification cum indulgence in sensual pleasure and decadence to a spiritual enlightenment and anti- *bonnō* path. Also, in its final denouement, the paper shall attempt to trace the similarities (if any) betwixt the twin perspectives of Jun'ichirō's novel so foregrounded and the attitude of the priest towards his geisha parishioner in Ariyoki Sawako's *The Village of Eguchi*.

Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's novel *The Two Acolytes* is the culmination of the shift of Jun'ichirō from his opulent, sybaritic and libertine ways, evinced in the characterization of his debauched and decadent fictional heroes of former works to the ascetic, self-abnegating or perhaps abstemious way of life as propagated by the tenets of Buddhism. In the novel, the two acolytes who were greatly disconcerted by the fact of " never having actually seen the creature they called ' a woman' " are socially isolated in the thorough Buddhist milieu of Mount Hiei, and are unaware of any worldly phenomenon. Having been brought up in the pious environment of the central worshipping place of the Tendai sect, they are ' forbidden' to descend the mountain and

as such are circumscribed to the severely abstinent and strictly celibate mode of living. In allowing the acolytes to consult Buddhist scriptures on the ever-so-more intriguing subject of 'women and womanhood,' Jun'ichirō not only displays an erudition that has its inception during his schooling and consequent perusal of Zen philosophical texts but also allows the reader to make a foray into pertinent Buddhist literature such as the Utenōkyō ('Sutra of King Udayana'), the Hōshakukyō ('Great Treasure Store of Sutras'), the Nehangyō ('Nirvana Sutra'), the Chidoron ('Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom') and the Yuishikiron ('Treatise on Consciousness Only'). In further allowing one of the acolytes to transgress the boundaries of the spiritual environ of Mount Hiei and making him a receptacle of worldly pleasure, as evinced in the messenger's words who tells the other acolyte of his friend's wife and "a crowd of courtesans more beautiful than the twenty-five bodhisattvas," Jun'ichirō posits the dichotomous existence of these elements in a stroke of literary brilliance. Encapsulated within that one succinct phrase of the messenger is the dichotomous hermeneutic of two contesting and contrary worldviews- the resolution and reconciliation of which, it seems, Jun'ichirō himself was unable to achieve. The libertarian, avian spirit of the acolyte who now enjoys his life as a carnal idealist is pitched in sharp contrast against the spiritual leanings of the acolyte, who seeks knowledge of the 'forbidden', yet fails to answer the call of the manifestations of the flesh. This is further evinced by the text when the acolyte who has 'descended' the mountain, and as such the spiritual plane into the earthly (lowly?) realm of passion and the flesh, writes a letter to his companion at Mount Hiei:

The truth is, the outside world is not a dream, not an illusion. It's a sheer delight - in fact a paradise, the Western Pure Land here on earth. I have no use any more for the doctrine of " Three Thousand Phenomena in a Single Thought" or for the meditation on " The Perfect Interpenetration of the Three Truths." Believe me, the joy of being just a common layman involved with the passions is infinitely preferable to being an ascetic practicing the " Perfect and Sudden Way" to enlightenmment [sic]. I urge you to change your way of thinking and come down from the mountain at once. (Tanizaki Jun'ichirō in *The Two Acolytes*)

In showing the other acolyte as resisting the temptation, and even abhorrent of the manifestations of the carnal, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō has perhaps etched out a path that he might have chosen. Although that contestation is as debatable, as is the resolution of the twin pulls of the antagonistic forces in operation within *The Two Acolytes*, any reviewer, commentator, critic or a plebeian reader can trace the unswerving objective rendering of either side of the duel. One may choose to lean on either the side of the spiritual- the abstinent, ascetic, celibate mode of life or the schema that endorses, promotes and bolsters a unison of the ' male' and ' female,' in all ways. One may also argue for a healthy blend of the two modes of living, albeit in a way that the text neither speaks of nor suggests.

Now that one can blatantly observe the dual perspectives on earthly pleasure embedded within Jun'ichirō's novel, one is at a better position to view the contrary forces in his work, from a biographical vantage point of criticism. Religion, as implicit within his grandfather's embrace of the Christian religion and his grandmother's Buddhist leanings, had always

resulted in an incendiary duel within Jun'ichirō. Whilst he could appreciate the spiritual tenets that his grandmother propounded, in conformity with her chosen religion, the supplication in front of the solemn Virgin Mary (a western goddess) was far more intriguing and exciting for young Jun'ichirō. As such, any clear demarcation between religious assiduity and stasis and an unconscious yearning for exotic beauty of 'woman' was impossible. This is further evinced by the muddled and murky personal relationships in which Jun'ichirō was embroiled. His marriage with his first betrothed, and consequent engagement to her sister, and other marriages, are all proof of the confounding matter of his allegiance towards either side of the debate. Interestingly, Ariyoshi Sawako, in her work, *The Village of Eguchi*, also foregrounds a similar duel. However her approach is intelligible and interesting in more ways than one, as pitted against the simplistic mold of Jun'ichirō's approach to the matter in *The Two Acolytes*. In depicting Father Gounod's appreciation of Kofumi's art, albeit partial, she carefully posits the incapacitating trait of a unidimensional mode of living- the spiritual. However, she is also observant to posit the increasing enthusiasm of Father Gounod for Kofumi's performance and points out how richer life becomes when one can associate with the 'earthly,' albeit, in this text, in conjunction with the artistic form of dancing. This is evinced in Father's own words that foreground the plurification of meaning/s and significations in his life, since Kofumi's arrival. Similarly, Kofumi's interest in Catholicism also serves to reiterate the debilitating influence of a unidimensional mode of living, and as such, Sawako, seems to me, to attain the resolution that Jun'ichirō either fails or refuses to offer. This reconciliation of opposites in terms of an

amicable, healthy blend in lieu of a 'complete, wholesome' mode of living seems to be the perfect close to the debate discussed in the rubric of this paper.

Thus, it is clear that literary perspectives can never be pinned to definitive, authoritative readings, much less singular ones. They continue to be embroiled in critical dialogues as these to illuminate the reading responses to texts and their subtexts and result in a multiplication of the thematic reverberations embedded within the text.

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