



Montri Umavjijani : interviewed by Tetsuya Taguchi

著者 (英)	Montri Umavjijani, Tetsuya Taguchi
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MONTRI UMAVIJANI

interviewed by Tetsuya TAGUCHI

“It is what one is giving to the writing, not what one is getting from it.”

TT: Montri, you have written many books of poetry. As far as I know, you have published more than twenty books.

MU: Twenty four, so far.

TT: I have been wondering why you write in English.

MU: Well, when I was writing my first book, in 1967, I was traveling in Europe. I needed to record my thoughts and feelings in short form. At first I kept some diaries but it didn't work very well because some feelings were too strong for prose. And then, I happened to be in Bonn, Germany, on a cold, spring night. So I wanted to record that experience. It was my first poem in Europe. I had written before in stanza and sonnet forms, but amateurish stuff. I wrote a couple of haiku-like poems, and that sort of strain seemed to haunt me. I was traveling on to Paris and many other places, and I kept writing. I finished my first book, called *The Intermittent Image*. Even though it didn't earn me anything, no material profits, I got it printed myself.

My poetry is my personal thing, so I don't care to find a publisher for it. Perhaps it's all right for my translations and essays, but not for my poetry.

TT: You were close to Kenneth Rexroth, the great American poet and painter. Please tell us about him.

MU: When I was teaching at Thammasat University, Kenneth Rexroth and his wife, Carol Tinker, came to Bangkok. By then, I had only written three books, ending with *By the Clemency of Hell*. Kenneth had a program under the auspices of USIS (United States Information Service [the cultural wing of the US Embassy]). At that time Vice-President Mondale was also visiting Bangkok, so Kenneth wasn't really being taken care of, and people goofed up his flight schedule. He went out to the airport, but the plane had already left a couple of hours before. So I took him to the Golden Dragon Hotel, which was nearby, and we had a good conversation, as we had had at the YMCA hostel, where he was staying. He wanted me to go to his place in Santa Barbara to give a talk, after I finished at the University of Iowa [Montri was invited to the International Writer's Program there], on my way back to Thailand. He wrote out invitations to 15-20 people in his own hand.

TT: When was that?

MU: 1978.

TT: Probably he came over to Bangkok from Kyoto, right?

MU: Yes, he had been staying in Kyoto for several months, and this was a side trip to a few countries. He had a program in the Philippines to attend, but he missed his flight. He was traveling with his wife and they were quite upset, but I took care of them. We had a wonderful time.

When I went to Santa Barbara, he organized a small reading for me, as I mentioned, and then I stayed with him. He put me in a small cottage where he kept all his pornography. You know that he had a large collection, a whole library, and I was put to sleep there. I have a photo taken of me with him by Carol Tinker. I looked at it years later, and he was scanning my face with all his power to see if I was a fake. You know, just as one might study a Buddha image with a loupe.

My poetry revolves around a few readers, but they are essential. Without them, I wouldn't have written anything, and I would not continue to write. All of them are now dead. Another one is Moody Prior, the Shakespearean scholar at Northwestern University. He was dean of the graduate school there. He came to Bangkok, and we were good friends until he died in 1996, when he was about 92 years old. I went to see him in Evanston in 1993, and I had a good time. I keenly realized the problem of life in the bodily form. His mind was active until the end, as was true with most of these people.

In Thailand, people usually wilt away at 50 or 60, but there are some people who don't, like Dr. Uthai Sindhusarn, who is active, yet he is almost 80 years old. It is very difficult to keep a mind active in Thailand, compared to in some other countries. You see things here that are detrimental to human dignity, but you can't do anything about them. You then accumulate despair, and finally you think that you should just go on half living. In my case, I have my own world in which I commune with people who are dead or still unborn. Joseph Conrad said in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* that one must write for readers who are dead or still unborn, for the solidarity of all mankind.

My English poetry started and I traveled. In the East we have the tradition of travel poetry. But mine is somewhat different in that it is a search. Each book has its own unity, and sometimes I did research on certain things. Like for going to China I had been reading Tu Fu and Li Po

for a long time. Going there, I almost felt that the past was coming back. And then again, the sense of reincarnation in Buddhism and Hinduism is most congenial to poetry, because it makes us become one with the past and the whole human race and all times of history. So sometimes I'm addressing certain things directly, communing, and I think this has a tremendous effect on my language. The language is simple and is twisted around. I wrote a poem and the printer made an error, but still it meant something. It took on another meaning. Nobody noticed.

TT: In some ways your poems are very open, not tied down to any tradition.

MU: I take a compassionate attitude towards the world and everything seen. And this world has a lot to pity.

In my Noh book [*The Noh of a Return*], some experiences are intensified. I was twenty years later in exactly the same place. I conjured up some spirits like in a Noh drama. It's psycho-chemistry, in the same spirit of the Noh.

TT: So you are trying to find the spirit of the land?

MU: Yes, of the land, but also of the future.

TT: The future?

MU: Yes, the future, too, not only the past. So sometimes poetry can be prophetic. I was ill and depressed in Mexico [*The Renaissance of the Sun*], and I felt this could not go on. And a few months later they had a revolution in which Salinas was ousted. Also in Romania [*A Long Old Roman Road*]. I was there for the Eminescu centenary, their national poet. I visualized myself being blinded for execution, and that happened to

Ceaușescu.

Poetry takes on different aspects – epic, lyric, and dramatic. The shortest ones would be dramatic, like the Noh and the Myanmar poetry [*Captive in Myanmar*]. I had only five days in those places. I was writing frantically – when I was alone and in restaurants. People didn't notice because they thought I was keeping a diary.

TT: Do you edit and arrange your books yourself?

MU: Yes. When I write, I use only European blocks [notebooks], which are 50 pages and unlined. I will usually fill about 100-150 pages on a trip, which is about 1,000-2,000 pieces, and then from that I pick up about 300-500. There was a time I had no money and so I put aside the manuscript. Later, I published it together with another one I had just finished [*The Book of Maitreya* and *The Other Side of the Moon*]. You know, it is what one is giving to the writing, not what one is getting from it.

I think that poetry will be mature if one really suffers for it. Without publicity, without the egocentric thing... This happens to many people when they become famous, and they have to search in their drawers for old manuscripts to rework. They cannot do anything. I'm very happy that I am not known. Sometimes I asked people to hold my blocks [notebooks], and I thought to myself that they are the most important things to me. The people handled them roughly, but to me they were a string of beads I needed to touch in meditation. I think material wealth and fame kill. Poetry is a state of solitude. The more solitude the better. And then you have to deepen your knowledge by reading, by traveling, by meeting with people. I like to pick up words and phrases from people, also non-native English speakers, because they come up with some interesting turns of phrases.

TT: Give me an example of how you might write a poem?

MU: Once I was riding on a train in Sweden, and it was early morning, beautiful in autumn, and there were long strips of land with pine leaves... I saw a woman sleeping, and I looked at her and thought, “Her shoes are worn badly.” Then I wrote a poem, “Her shoes / are worn sadly / like her life [*So Dies the Dream*].” I changed badly to sadly, which was my actual observation. And that is one way that I might work on a situation.

TT: So in a way you are always meditating?

MU: Yes, always, but meditation brings different fruits, never the same. Different events, different everything...

In 1986, when I was in Singapore [*The Tacit Touch of China*], I wrote a poem in which I said, “Not being well known / I refuse to answer the door / after midnight.” I probably heard a knock on the door, but if I had been famous I would have rushed to answer it, but no... not past midnight. It's a global feeling.

Another one from that time on poetry: “I would not recognize / myself in a mirror / unless I smile or get angry.” That's the kind of thing that gets crystallized into its own type of specific situation.

TT: I think your poetry has effected your whole life?

MU: Yes, yes, it made my trips... Now I have only three more trips to make in my life. I don't know if I can make them. I would like to go to (1) Egypt, (2) Spain and Portugal, and (3) Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

The pyramids have been calling me. They want to commune with me their mystery. You know that academics and historians have divulged facts or evidence of this or that, but I don't think we know anything substantial about the past, about human history. When I was in Teotihuacan's area or

the Maya's, I felt that I discovered something. There wasn't much to see. You can only get encrypted notes; you can't get to the life. But when I was there, I was intent on touching the life. So I heard some balls rolling about and things came to life, even for a moment. It was my moment in meditation. History can only live in our meditation, because in our meditation we recognize mankind as one, despite the difference of ages and races.

TT: Have your poems been translated into other languages?

MU: Yes, but not fully. Just a few selections into German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Tamil, Polish, Chinese, Croatian, and Japanese.

TT: Who translated you into Japanese?

MU: Mainly Takachi Jun'ichiro and Yoshioka Mineko did, and also a woman in Nagasaki, named Kazuko Takatsuka, translated something of mine for a newspaper a long time ago as poems in the haiku form.

But the only serious translations are in Romanian, where they issued a volume with 500-600 poems, and they are going on to do a second selection of mine. The translations are by Vasile and Lucia Sav, who are a highly competent, husband and wife team in Cluj. Vasile had translated Tibullus and Propertius, and he could match the Romanian with the original Latin versification word by word, syllable by syllable.

Because he published his work in the time of Ceaușescu, now he is poor. He used to be published by Editura Univers, the government publisher. Now nobody cares. They write small poems and then publish them in small editions. I met Vasile in a bar and then we became good friends. Then he wanted to translate me. His wife is an English teacher. They had translated several novels of Margaret Atwood into Romanian.

Sometimes they weren't able to get a publisher, but they found one for my book because I had translated Eminescu and Blaga into Thai. I was already somewhat known there because of that. At one time an interview with me was printed in nine literary newspapers in one week. It's a strange kind of country. People don't keep their word; they keep other things! But, they are compelled by poetry. Because I translated their national poets – Eminescu and Blaga – I can take a room for free for a week or so, courtesy of their cultural foundation, which now has little money. Before, they had enormous sums, but then everyone was watched. I couldn't even walk in the marketplace during the centenary [of Eminescu].

TT: We're running out of tape. Do you have any final words about poetry?

MU: A poet's knowledge is unpredictable. It doesn't follow the usual track. So sometimes I get some insight, or I get into some nonsense!

Montri Umavijani's Books of Poetry Mentioned in the Introduction and the Interview:

- The Intermittent Image*, Bangkok, Mongkol Press, 1968
- By the Clemency of Hell*, Bangkok, Prachandra Press, 1977
- The Tacit Touch of China*, Bangkok, Amarin, 1986
- So Dies the Dream*, Bangkok, Amarin, 1987
- The Book of Maitreya*, Bangkok, Amarin, 1988
- The Other Side of the Moon*, Bangkok, Amarin, 1988
- A Long Old Roman Road*, Bangkok, Amarin, 1989
- The Renaissance of the Sun*, Bangkok, Lunar International, 1993
- Captive in Myanmar*, Bangkok, Aksornsamai Press, 1996
- The Noh of a Return*, Bangkok, Aksornsmai Press, 1998
- A Tale of Two Towns*, Bangkok, Aksornsmai Press, 1999.

モントリー・ウマヴィジャニの詩の世界

田口哲也

モントリー・ウマヴィジャニは1941年生まれのタイの現代詩人である。彼は現代タイ文学の中では特異な存在である。Prince Thammatibes (1715-1755) の *Royal Barge Songs* のみずみずしい英訳の他、タイの文化・文学を英語圏に精力的に紹介する一級の文化人であるが、モントリーは詩人としてはよりインターナショナルに知られている。

1980年代になると英語の詩の読者層は飛躍的に世界中に広がっていった。その一因となったのが世界各地で盛んに開かれるようになったポエトリー・フェスティバルやリーディングである。モントリーも1988年にバンコクで世界詩人会議を主催した。国際的に共有されるイデオロムが詩の世界に広がっていくのはボードレール以降であったが、今日ではそれがさらに一歩進められ、英語による詩の世界の共有が可能になったのである。

例えば白石かずこが今日では日本でもむしろ世界中で知られるようになったように、英語による詩集の出版を続けてきたモントリーは現在では一介のナショナルなタイ現代詩人というよりも、国際的な詩人と呼ぶほうがふさわしい。

とはいえ、モントリーの感受性がタイの風土にしっかりと根づいているのも事実である。バンコクにある国立シリラート病院の敷地内には法医学博物館と外科博物館がある。ここには額に穴のあいた頭蓋骨、ふたつに割られたホルマリン漬けの顔、シャム双生児などが展示されている。「妙齢の美女が死体となり、やがて腐乱し、白骨となる過程を観じるのが仏教の骨相観。これを、日常生活のなかで行うのがタイの人々だ」と、あるガイドブックは記している（「バンコクで遊ぶ」：48）。モントリーの詩には恐らくわたしたちの先祖がはるか昔に戦慄をもって邂逅したはずの仏教的時間＝空間感覚が充満している。投機筋の暗躍によって破壊された母国の経済の回復を密かに祈

る1999年の詩集 *A Tale of Two Towns* の中から彼の作品を三篇紹介しよう。

“ 詩人 ”

彼女はこんな春を見るはずだったのに
いま、私が見ているこの春を
たぶん私がひと秋早く着いてしまったのだろう
彼女はまだ待ち続けている

“ 昏睡 ”

眠りは最高の旅だ
遠くの世界に行くには特にそう
この三つの世界を自由に旅する夢遊病者には
料金が課されることもない

“ 雨 ”

ようやく止んだ
ひとりの女の子が
まるでずぶ濡れになった一輪の花のように
通りを歩く

タイの文学と社会思想についてはこのテーマがそのまま副題になっているサティエン・チャンティマートンの「チャオプラヤー河の流れ」に詳しい。編訳者の吉岡みね子氏は「訳者あとがき」でモントリーの作品を自らの訳で三篇引用した上で、「タイ古典時代に比べると、詩作と散文の数は逆転こそ

したが、これは決して現代文学において詩の衰亡を意味するものではない」と述べている。

私がモントリーの存在を正確に知ようになったのはハーバードのアジア研究所から出ていた *Stone Lion Review* に載っていた John Solt の記事を通してである。 *New Directions #41* にはすでにモントリーの初期の作品がリプリントされているとの由であるが、この記事は英語圏での恐らく最も早い紹介のひとつではなかろうか。本編のインタビューの中にも出てくるが、アメリカの偉大な詩人・画家であったケネス・レクスロス (Kenneth Rexroth) はソルト宛の書簡の中で「モントリーはタイの最も偉大な現役詩人であり、私の知る限り最高に素晴らしい人間である」(“Montri is Thailand’s greatest living poet and as fine a person as anyone I know.”) と述べたとされる。

インタビューは99年12月にバンコクのランドマーク・ホテルで行われた。正装して携帯を持ち歩く詩人の姿はまるでビジネスマンであるが、ゆったりとした物腰、しかしその端々から発せられる鋭いものの見方、いままでの私たちの常識を覆すような世界観、宇宙観は間違いなく第一級の文学者のものであった。それにしても彼はさすがに詩人。私たちが待ち合わせた時間はまだ早く、地下のカフェーは営業を始めていなかった。だがそこは「マイ・ペン・ライ」(‘Never mind’) の国。巨大な噴水の近くの白いテーブル越しに向かい合ってテーブルをスタートさせた。インタビューが終わった瞬間、私たちの背後の噴水は突然大きな音を立てて水を吐きだし始め、店の営業の開始を知らせた。

References

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Solt, John, ‘The Poet Montri Umavijani,’ *Stone Lion Review*, No.8 (Fall 81), 15-19.

「バンコクで遊ぶ」、トラベルジャーナル、1997。