

Kiwao Nomura (Japan)

Orpheus Subjects

What would you do if you were to lose the person dearest to you? This is the only question I would like to ask here. Everyone would be overwhelmed with grief. Though, at the same time, one would wait until time heals the wound. There is a saying in Japan, *saru mono ha hibi ni utoshi* ("out of sight, out of mind"). That is probably the way the world works. However, on rare occasions, there are those who just cannot come out of their enclosure of mourning. They dwell on the loss of their dearest ones, and keep asking such questions as, "Why did my loved one have to die?" or "Why is he (or she) not coming back?" This leads us to the beginning of the subject of Orpheus, something I would like to present here.

For instance, take the modern French poet Michel Deguy and his unique essay called "To the Eternal One." The poet, who lost his wife to cancer, is trying desperately not to lose the memory of her as it fades into the abyss of oblivion, and continues to write obsessively about his memories where she plays the dominant role, driving himself into the *écriture* of endless mourning. Such an attempt by a normal person would be wasteful at most, but this hopeless Orphic action is essential to the poet above all else.

You have probably heard of the mythical figure of Orpheus and how this myth has shaped the undercurrent of Western literature and art. This is something you already know, even without having to refer to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. The difference between Orpheus and others in mourning was that he was a gifted lyre player and could even go down to the underworld by using this skill. This is attributed to the fact that the name Orpheus is synonymous with poets. But, because of that skill in playing the lyre, he was forced to wander in a fear that one does not have to encounter normally. And by breaking his promise, he would lose his dearest one twice—the second time truly and forever—and even end up causing his own death. How thankless to be a poet! However that may be, the double melody of death and poetry is always heard throughout all Orphic subjects. (I digress, but in Japanese, poetry and death are homophonous [*shi*].) It appears that the *Sonnets to Orpheus* by Rainer Maria Rilke and the "Orphic resolution on the earth" that Mallarmé aspired to are emphasizing that side of

Orpheus as a poet.

The main subject of my story begins here, but curiously, there is a myth in Japan that is quite similar to the myth of Orpheus. It is the myth of "Izanami and Izanagi" which is included in *Kojiki* ("Record of Ancient Matters"), the oldest book in Japan, and this may be one example that proves that Orpheus is a worldwide subject. But this is not the only example. One of the crowning works of modern Japanese literature is a children's story by the poet Kenji Miyazawa (1897-1934) called *Ginga tetsudo no yoru* (*The Night of the Galactic Train*). In my own view, this work occupies a privileged position in terms of expressing the subject of Orpheus.

The poet Kenji Miyazawa lost his dearest younger sister Toshi to tuberculosis in his early days. The two siblings were both devoted Buddhists, and through the sharing of their beliefs, they had a deeper connection than an ordinary brother and a sister would have. There are even some researchers who suggest the possibility of incest. At all events, after the death of his younger sister, what Kenji was supposed to write was decided. How do the death of his sister Toshi, *écriture* of himself, and their salvation relate? Going after this question, the poet was led to write psalms such as *Eiketsu no asa* ("Morning of Bereavement") and *Aomori banka* ("Aomori Elegy"), and most of all, "*Ginga tetsudo no yoru* (*The Night of the Galactic Train*). This work was rewritten numerous times over a period of more than ten years, and after the death of the poet by the same tuberculosis that killed his younger sister, this work is presented in front of us, never to be finished.

On the evening of the star festival, the main character, a boy, has a dream about riding a mysterious train that runs through the galaxy. His best friend is also on the train, and the two of them have a great journey together. The repetition of fantastic scenes where earth and space overlap is written poetically and is of breathtaking beauty. It has no precedent. However, as soon as the boys make a promise to each other, "Let's go on together until the end," the best friend disappears from his seat and the boy is left alone by himself. After waking up in the meadow where he had fallen asleep, he learns that the best friend has died that night, drowned, trying to save a female classmate. In other words, the train that runs through the galaxy is a vehicle that takes the dead from this world to the other world, and it turns out that the boy who rode that train was

going down to hell, just like Orpheus did.

It is quite obvious that Kenji's younger sister Toshi is superimposed on this best friend. Kenji equals the boy who equals Orpheus. He is trying to visit his younger sister Toshi, who equals the best friend who equals Eurydice, and goes down to the underworld. Then, by utilizing the poetic *écriture*, he attempts to turn that entire underworld into a living paradise, but fails in vain. But is this all? Could it be that this failure implies another way to salvation? This question remains unsolved. But even so, perhaps it can be said that the subject of Orpheus captures the unprecedented depth and beauty of this story of *Ginga tetsudo no yoru* (*The Night of the Galactic Train*).

As we have touched upon this rather hurriedly, the Orphic influence is the kind of subject that touches the depth of my soul and awakens intrinsic experiences regarding life, death and poetry that must be stowed away there. Discussing this, to me, is to exemplify "the best thing I have ever read," the theme of this panel, and at the same time to connect those things with and dream about "one book that I want to write."