

## Introduction

The Japanese poet Oté Takuji (1887-1934) is especially renowned, but when it comes to cultural modernism in Japan, and especially the reception of Baudelaire, he is undeniably one of the most important poets to be mentioned, and this for three reasons. First and above all, he lived through a period of modernization of Japanese literature, and it is precisely the time when Baudelaire was introduced in Japan. Secondly, Oté Takuji himself passionately read the *Flowers of Evil* and translated some poems from the original text, which was still rare at the time. Finally, he seems to be one of the few Japanese poets who have managed to assimilate, in his particular way, symbolist theory thereby bringing a new form and a style to Japanese poetry. In the pages which follow, we will try to present some particularities of Oté Takuji's works by restoring the historical context and by examining the nature of his assimilation of symbolist poetics, particularly that of Baudelaire. This would lead us to elucidate some aspects of Japanese modern poetry.

### 1. Inevitable Baudelaire

In February 1910, Oté Takuji obtained the Lemerre edition of *Flowers of Evil*, published presumably in 1888. In 1915, he dedicated a poem, not without naivety, to Baudelaire using these words: "Dear Baudelaire, looking at your portrait painted by Émile de Roy, I dreamed of you."<sup>1</sup> This predilection for Baudelaire was not, however, something rare at the time. In fact, many contemporaries were interested in Baudelaire because to understand the Western literature of that time, Baudelaire seemed to be the guide par excellence. Kanbara Ariake, a poet of the earlier generation wrote: "Many times I thought of forsaking Verlaine and Mallarmé to return to their original inspiration, Baudelaire."<sup>2</sup> Shimazaki Toson, a novelist who had spent three years in France from 1913 to 1916 notes: "Of all the poets and writers, I preferred the works of Baudelaire."<sup>3</sup> Nagai Kafu, another writer who also went to the United States and France, stated: "The collection of poems of Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, was my ultimate Gospel."<sup>4</sup> Hagiwara Sakutarō, poet considered the founder of modern Japanese poetry admits: "I feel an ardent love like fire for Baudelaire."<sup>5</sup> Yamamura Bocho, another symbolist poet said, "If I have sympathy for something, it's for the spirit of Baudelaire."<sup>6</sup> A little later, the great writer Akutagawa Ryunosuke has his hero say, "Verlaine, Rimbaud, Baudelaire - for me at the time, they were my idols beyond idols."<sup>7</sup> These quotes should be enough to show the great impact of Baudelaire on Japanese literature at that time.

But one may wonder, why Baudelaire? Why was he so popular? To answer this question, we must put ourselves in the historical context. Let us rewind our watch back about one hundred thirty years. After the abolition of the feudal system, in 1868, dominated by the samurai, we are in the Meiji era. Faced with threats of Western colonization, the new Japanese government had to modernize at all costs and as quickly as possible. The whole of society, including the Constitution, industry, military, politics, finance, medicine, education, and not forgetting, literature were affected. In fact, the industrial modernization of Japan was accompanied by a thirst for Western literature.

From the late nineteenth century many translations and adaptations of French literary works appear. Jules Verne and Michelet arrived first, then Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau were translated. The novels of Dumas the younger, Hugo, and Fortuné du Boisgobey were translated especially by Morita Shiken and Kuroiwa Ruiko. Soon Daudet,

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1. Oté Takuji, "To the poet of *Flowers of Evil*", *Oté Takuji Zenshu*, Hakuosya, 1970, t. I, p. 382.

2. Kanbara Ariake, *Himno*, Nihon Tosho center, 1989, p. 131.

3. Shimazaki Toson, "About *Artificial Paradises*", *Waseda Bungaku*, February 1910.

4. Nagai Kafu, *Nagai Kafu Zenshu*, Chuou Koron sya, t. V, 1948, p. 40.

5. Hagiwara Sakutarō, "New Desier", *Hagiwara Sakutarō Zenshu*, Chikuma Shobo, t. IV, 1987.

6. Yamamura Bocho, "This Existence", *Yamamura Bocho Zenshu*, Chikuma Chobo, t. IV, 1990, p. 466.

7. Akutagawa Ryunosuke, "Him", *Akutagawa Ryunosuke Zenshu*, Iwanami shoten, t. XIV. 1996, p. 10.

Zola and Maupassant became the inspiration for Japanese naturalism. As for Baudelaire, it was not until 1905 that his name truly acquired wide recognition among the Japanese reading public, with the publication of the famous anthology of poems translated by Ueda Bin, *Kaicho-on (The Sound of the Tide)*. Oté Takuji referred to this book when he translated the works of Baudelaire. It should be noted that in 1898 Ueda Bin had already presented Baudelaire in an academic journal, *Teikoku Bungaku (Imperial Literature)*, known for defending the intellectual movement of Estheticism. In the article, Baudelaire is treated as the father of the Symbolist school followed by Verlaine and Mallarme. Naito Aro and Oritaké Ryohou followed Ueda Bin by translating some poems of Baudelaire in the same journal. This journal (*Teikoku Bungaku*) played a very important role in the reception of Western literature. In fact, Oté Takuji was an ardent reader of this magazine and he even made clippings to take notes.

As for the works of Baudelaire, we must remember the strong presence of English translations at that time, and at least four authors, whose works were read enthusiastically by a great number of Japanese writers and poets should be mentioned. First, the book that had long remained as the dominant reference, *The Poems of Charles Baudelaire* by Frank Pearce Sturm, published in London in 1906, consists of an introduction by the translator and fifty poems in verse and eighteen prose poems. The second to be mentioned is a collection of poems translated by an American symbolist poet of French expression, Stuart Merrill. This anthology, entitled *Pastels in Prose* published in 1890, consists of twenty-two authors which include Louis Bertrand (Aloysius Bertrand), Théodore de Banville, Gautier, Baudelaire, and so on. The next book is of James Huneker, *Egoists, A book of Supermen* published in 1909. This book shows Baudelaire as precursor of Verlaine, Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, etc. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) and the collection of prose poems of Arthur Symons also played a decisive role. Many Japanese translations of Baudelaire were based on these books until about the 1930s. With few exceptions, such as Oté Takuji or Mitomi Kyoyu, most writers of that time read the English translations and translated Baudelaire from English texts. Again, Oté Takuji stands out from the rest of his contemporaries by translating Baudelaire from its original text.

Alongside these English and Japanese translations, Baudelaire was introduced in universities. Lafcadio Hearn showed great interest in Baudelaire whose works were studied in his courses at the Imperial University of Tokyo, and later in the Waseda University. In 1915, two professors of University of Tokyo, Otsuka Yasuji and Matsuura Hajime, introduced Baudelaire in their programs. The two future specialists of Baudelaire, Tatsuno Yutaka and Suzuki Shintaro attended these classes. Tatsuno would be the first Doctor of Letters at the university with his doctorate thesis about Baudelaire, and Suzuki would translate the *Flowers of Evil*, which remains even today a great reference.

At Waseda University where Oté Takuji was a student in the faculty of English letters, Noboru Katagami gave courses on English poetry in which he must have studied the poems of Baudelaire. Waseda University had Shimamura Hougétso, who returned from England and Germany in 1902, and who edited the academic journal *Waseda Bungaku*, known as the defender of naturalistic literature, that our poet Oté Takuji read. It was hard not to know Baudelaire at the time of Oté Takuji. This atmosphere consisted of many elements, such as the passion of writers, poets and critics, English and Japanese translations, university classes, academic journals and literature reviews. It was almost inevitable to read Baudelaire, and so did our poet Oté Takuji. But to go further, we may wonder the role of Western literature in the modernization of Japanese literature. What did Japanese authors take from this literature that was so different from their own tradition and language? And more over, why did they show such a great interest in another civilization so different from their tradition?

## 2. The Situation of Japanese literature of the time

Until the Meiji era, that is to say until the opening of the country, the word poetry, "shi" "詩", designated mainly poetry written in Chinese characters, "Kanshi" "漢詩" which had

its own particular rules. While the word song, "uta" "歌" meant basically "Waka" "和歌", which is a short poem condensed into 5, 7, 5, 7 and 7 syllables. Many literary men of Meiji thought that these two poems were outdated and no longer corresponded to the new era. Just like the samurais had to abandon their swords to meet the modern society, or the westernized society in other terms, the new generation thought that they needed to turn their back on traditional Japanese literature, which dates from at least the tenth century, and undertook the prodigious task of creating a new one. This negation of tradition created a large empty space that needed to be filled, giving a necessity and the pretext to import Western theories such as naturalism or symbolism.

Thus they tried to create a new poetic by introducing and translating mainly English, French and German poems. The quest for a new poetic form was ignited in 1882 by a collection of compositions and translations entitled *Shin-tai shi-syo*, which means "new form of poetry." Since then, it has been understood that a translation of poems does not mean a simple transposition of words from one language to another. Translation was a synonym for a new poetic creation. Which was also the case with Oté Takuji. This is one of the important particularities in the history of Japanese modernization of literature.

Alongside this movement in search of a new poetic form through translation, towards the end of the nineteenth century, many poets denied the use of traditional literary terms and wrote free verse in the colloquial style, which had been considered not adequate for poetry. The younger generation tried to introduce colloquial language in its poems to create new poetry for the new era. And thus, it was natural to see the prose poems appear in Japanese literature. This is one of the reasons why the *Spleen de Paris* was received with enthusiasm in Japan.

Many Japanese artists admired foreign literature with an almost touching naivety. We must see an internal element in it, which was also the case of Oté Takuji. Most young authors were from relatively undeveloped rural areas, and young poets were caught in an existential dilemma of both wanting to forget their origins, which embodied the old feudal Japan, while keeping an incurable nostalgia for their roots. Foreign literature taught in major universities in the capital was considered as elitist culture. The assimilation of this new culture seemed to free them from the old tradition and give them the right to be modern and cosmopolitan.

Japanese poets were thus forced to make many choices: what theme? What form? Spoken language or written language? Which style? On what theory to rely on? Finally, what is poetry? After the denial of their traditional art, it was necessary to justify their choice and they had to prove for which reason their work could be acknowledged as poetry. This was where the fundamental need to import Western literature came in. Some thought that symbolist theory could provide the key to this situation. This was the case of Oté Takuji.

### 3. The case of Oté Takuji

Regarding the relationship between Baudelaire and Oté Takuji, besides their taste for perfume and provocative themes, we can deduce two important aspects. First and foremost, a long work of translation provided him with a chance to create a new style. Second, his assimilation of Symbolist theory made him an atypical poet. These two aspects led him to create a language appropriate to the new free verse poetry.

As we mentioned above, Takuji was one of the earliest Japanese poets to translate Baudelaire from its original text. As soon as he obtained the Lemerre edition in 1910, he began his long work of translation. Most of his translations were published between 1915 and 1927. Several times, he reworked the same poem that he had already translated. When we look at the differences between the earlier translations and the last one, the style and choice of words change dramatically. *The Flowers of evil* was more than a source of inspiration; the translation work gave Takuji, in fact, an opportunity to reflect not only on the poetic form but also on the tone, the color and the touch of Japanese words. Oté Takuji stands out from other Japanese poets by his assimilation of Symbolist theory. He

managed to overcome the colloquial free verse. In his bachelor thesis entitled "My Poetics of symbolism," written in 1912, he deployed his ideas freely, which were often borrowed from others' theories, like Arthur Symons. Yet this thesis allowed him to embody his ideas of the new poetry. "Real phenomena began to live in my mind, near, far, familiarly and deeply. And the illusions of their symbols are drawn" wrote Takuji in 1912.<sup>8</sup>

Oté Takuji, thinking of Baudelaire, described a feeling where everything becomes symbol, and where the subject and the object lose their borders: "All these things think through me, or I think through them" as Baudelaire wrote in the *Confiteor of the Artist*. He tries to make his way in "the forest of symbols." In other words, each word must become a symbol in order to create a sensation. Furthermore he had a special sense of words. In his bachelor thesis, he analyses and compares three languages, Japanese, English and French. Just to quote an example, we can look at and analyze the word "Onna (女)" which means "woman":

"Onna" For a Japanese word, it is relatively significant. Soft, reluctant color and scent, but rich. Some music a lot of dance.

"Woman": This word has no personality adequate to poetry.

"Femme": First, its waking dance is vivid. This word has a touch and scent of a blooming young girl. It has a very cheerful tone in its music. This is the best word suited to poetry.<sup>9</sup>

While regretting the lack of music in the termination of Japanese words, he thinks that this monotonous tone is related to the traditional behavior of Japanese people who tried not to show their feelings. To the Japanese language, he prefers French words in which he appreciates "touch, color, fragrance, music and dance."<sup>10</sup> If he discovered such sensations by translating French poetry, he tried to find or to create similar impressions in his Japanese poems. So the poetry of Oté Takuji does not seek to convey a message or describe an object, but rather to revive an atmosphere recalled by the force of symbols. Consequently, his poetry is not appropriate to interpret, but it is to be heard, seen and felt. Arguably his poems refuse to be interpreted or analyzed, which makes it difficult to translate.

Now let us see the evolution of Oté's writing by comparing two translations of Baudelaire, one published in 1911 and the other in 1927. The following passage is the beginning of the poem "The beautiful ship." Here is the 1911 version:

I would like to talk with you, Ah, weak enchantress!  
Diverse beauty that tells your youth,  
I would like to paint your beauty,  
Where your girlhood grows

私はお前と話したい、おお弱弱しいアンシヤンテレス！  
お前の若さを語る様々の美しさ。  
私はお前の美しさを描いて見たい、  
幼な姿の伸び行くところ<sup>11</sup>

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8. Oté Takuji, "Poetic / Divers writings", *Oté Takuji Zenshu*, Hakuosha, 1971, t. V, p. 236.

9. Oté Takuji, "My symbolist poetic", *Oté Takuji Zenshu*, Hakuosha, 1971, t. V, p. 14.

10. *ibid.*

11. Charles Baudelaire, "Beautiful ship", translated by Oté Takuji, *Oté Takuji Zenshu*, Hakuosha, 1971, t. IV, p. 201.

And here is the version 16 years later:

I would like to talk to you, oh, gentle woman,  
Diverse beauty which adorns your youth,  
I would like to paint you  
The beauty of your girlhood which touches its maturity

わたしはおまへに話したい おお よわよわしい たをやめよ  
おまへの若さをかざる さまごまの美しさを、  
わたしはおまへをゑがいてみたい  
おとなびてゆく をさな姿の美しさを<sup>12</sup>。

Apart from corrections of mistranslation, the difference is clear. There are fewer Chinese characters in the second version; the word "enchantress" is translated in Japanese instead of the word in Katakana that is used to carry the sounds of foreign words. We can also remark spaces between words that give rhyme to phrases. The tone is softer and the choice of words are more refined. Takuji even adopts a classic style of writing and uses formal words. It almost seems like he returns to the Japanese traditional language. But these changes cannot be so simply interoperated.

In the Meiji era, if the Japanese industry, medicine or the political system could be modernized by implanting western technology, the language could not be modified. Language remained the deepest root of the culture and it was obvious that poets cannot give up their language as if the samurai abandoned their swords. The new generation, including Oté Takuji, were fully conscious of this fact. No matter how great their enthusiasm for the Western literature was, and no matter how hard they tried to deny their own tradition or their identity, Japanese poets were not allowed to abandon their own language. Takuji wrote these words to one of his friend in 1916:

A very strong smell of Japanese people's old and historical blood remain in Japanese words. It should not be difficult, since we are Japanese, to extract the blood pulse of the Japanese language and give this blood transfusion to ourselves. But it will still need an unlimited effort.<sup>13</sup>

We must not see a simple return to his roots or furthermore a conservative attitude in these words. Far from it, Oté Takuji tried to conceive of Japanese almost as a foreign language just like French or English. In other words, he tried to rediscover his own language to create a new poetry. In order to show this particularity, we shall finally quote a poem by Takuji which was published with his translation of "The beautiful ship" in 1927.

My dear lover  
My dear lover who decorates a white flower,  
Now, in the twilight, the glow of lights tear  
A wandering bird waddles and smell the word  
In a white light, my lover who still bluishly glimmers,  
To the whirlwind that occurs in a flock  
I hide my face aloofly,  
I am flowed, flowed,  
Folding these wings that rise sharply.  
Cherishing a sadness, wanes  
A blind raven who has no voice.

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12. *ibid.*, p. 364.

13. Oté Takuji, "Correspondence", *Ote Takuji Zenshu*, Hakuosha, 1971, t. V, p. 458.

こひびとよ、  
しろい花を、ゆふべのやうに飾るこひびとよ、  
いま うすうすと ひかりの木立はやぶれ、  
さまよふ鳥は よろめいて言葉を騒ぐ  
しろじろと なほあをあをとほのめく恋人よ、  
むらがりおこる つむじかぜのなかに  
わたしは へうへうと かほをかくし、  
ながれるのです ながれるのです、  
さわぎたつ このはねをおとして。  
むなしさをかかへて おとろへる  
いつぴきの こゑのない めくらの鴉です。

It is difficult to assert that Oté Takuji effected an extreme refinement of Japanese language through the translation of Baudelaire's works. But at least we know that his contact with the *Flowers of Evil* allowed him to discover the musical beauty and figurative sensation of both the French language and the Japanese language. Assimilation of Symbolist poetry and translation work led him to create a fragrant, clear and beautiful Japanese appropriate to the new free verse poetry.