The "Dew" Imagery

— Part I —

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Dew comes unawares and goes unawares. It forms a tiny drop of water on a cold surface, glistens for a brief time and then evaporates. Asians observe this phenomenon and put a special emphasis on the ephemeral quality of dew, saying, "Life is as short as the morning dew." Europeans perceive it differently, however, and see a fresh or refreshing image. In their minds, the Oriental idea of the transience of dew has no meaning, and so their proverbs referring to the ephemeral quality of life never make use of the word "dew." For example: "Life is short and time is swift," or "Das Leben ist nur ein Moment, der Tod ist auch nur einer," or "Hier, aujourd'hui, demain, sont les trois jours de l'homme." Even their dictionaries do not contain any explanation about the ephemerality of dew. By contrast, our dictionaries such as Kōjien and Kokugo Daijiten are particular about it in addition to a few other images of dew like "tears" and "a very small amount," but never mention a fresh or refreshing quality of dew. The reason for this difference between East and West in treating dew is a problem the writer is interested in.

I

In Japanese literature the ephemeral dew symbolizes "fleeting beauty." Even only to utter a sigh for a short life is impressive enough to make it poetical and the ephemeral dew helps to exalt our sense of vanity and evanescence:
This waka poem was composed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, as he breathed his last at Fushimi Castle at the age of sixty-two in August, 1598. In examining Japanese history, we can find no other heroes greater than Hideyoshi, for he rose from obscurity to power in his own lifetime, from a mere farmer to a military ruler holding sway over the entire land. Even for such a man of extraordinary fortune as Hideyoshi, death was an inescapable fate to which he had to surrender. Hideyoshi's farewell poem, however, may be quite a mediocre one except for the sorrow of impermanence emphasized by the word “dew.”

Kamo no Chômei makes a morning glory and dew race for ephemerality:

Like the dew on the morning glory are man and his house, who knows which will survive the other? The dew may fall and the flower remain, but only to wither in the morning sun, or the dew may stay on the withered flower, but it will not see another evening.

Chômei was born three years before the outbreak of the Hôgen Insurrection (1156). It was a time of chaos. Battles between the Genji and the Heike took place one after another, and so a sense of vanity and evanescence was easily accepted. The war-time present was denied the future, because the future
meant danger or death. Consequently, the future in the *Heike monogatari* is always expressed in a metaphorical phrase such as “the next world” or “the world beyond.” Only through death were they able to look forward to the future. Their recognition of time was always “today” in contrast to “yesterday.” For example:

Lady Giō had long brooded over the possibility of such a turn of events, but she had not expected her lot to change so precipitously, favor *yesterday* and banishment *today*.

*Yesterday* they were dragon gods riding in triumph upon the clouds and commanding the rain. *Today* they lay like dried fish exposed for sale in the market.

Only recently (*Yesterday*), when the Heike had ridden side by side to crush the rebels in the eastern provinces, they numbered one hundred thousand. This day (*Today*), when they weighed anchor on the western sea, they numbered only seven thousand.

(Italics and parentheses mine)

A sense of insecurity prevailed over the land, where people could no longer seek happiness in this world. The faint light that lured them to a better fortune in the world beyond was a dewdrop lingering on the edge of a leaf.

An aesthetic and exclamatory expression of impermanence that surpasses all others can be noted in the *Tsurezuregusa* of Kenkō (Essays in Idleness):

If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to
vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty.

This calls to mind the beautiful passage of the Kabuki play, *Sonezaki Shinju* (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki):

Farewell to this world, and to the night farewell.
We who walk the road to death, to what should we be likened?
To the frost by the road that leads to the graveyard,
Vanishing with each step we take ahead:
How sad in this dream of a dream.

Here Tokubei and Ohatsu are determined to die, and so they cleave tall grasses standing in their way as they walk hand in hand in search of a place suitable for their deaths. Dewdrops falling off the grasses vanish before their eyes. At the end of Adashigahara lies the Sonezaki Wood, where they decide to perish like the dew. Can there be a place more pathetically lyrical than this? For Adashino or Adashigahara the dew that disappears after a transient flicker is indispensible.

II

At this point the writer would like to make a few comments on the dew which frequently appears in *The Tale of the Heike*. The Heike's rapid rise, brief glory, and equally rapid fall can be likened to the short life of dew. Or rather the tale itself is as sadly sweet as the dew. However, the sense of vanity and evanescence emphasized by the author of the tale is different in quality from the ideological one emphasized by Kamo no Chômei. The
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former is derived from the reality witnessed by the author himself, the reality of the Heike's fall as a result of the struggle for power between the Heike and the Genji, between the old and the new. What is important is that the author has actually seen the truth of impermanence before he says, "A brave and violent man (Kiyomori), he too must die away in the end." "A dewdrop of life" in the Heike is nothing less than a life that the Heike themselves have managed to sustain, even though they have known that there would be no tomorrow for them. They must have perceived the inevitable fate of their family but resisted until the last moment falls upon them.

Shunkan, the superintendent of the Hosshōji temple, was accused of his conspiracy to overthrow the Heike and exiled to Kikai-ga-shima, where only death was to await him. Even so, he dared live on:

While I had strength, I climbed the mountains to collect sulphur and from time to time bartered it for food with merchants from Kyushu. But day by day I have grown weaker and weaker, and so I am now unable to do so. On a fine and still day like today, I go down to the beach and beg some fish from the fishermen; I join my hands and kneel before them. When the tide is out, I pick up shellfish and seaweed. And so I have survived till now — the dewdrop of my life sustained by the grass of the sea.

Compared with Shunkan's severe life on the island, how elegant was Chōmei's life of seclusion in the mountains! Chōmei describes it in his Hōjōki (The Ten Foot Square Hut) as follows:

I am now sixty years old, and this hut in which I shall spend the last
remaining years of my dew-like existence is like the shelter that some hunter might build for a night's lodging in the hills, or like the cocoon some silkworm might spin.

* * *

Sometimes we gather the Lalong grass or rockpear or help ourselves to wild potatoes or parsley, or we may go as far as the rice-fields at the foot of our hills and glean a few ears to make an offering to the deities.

The above quotation gives us the impression that Chômei led a hard life depending on wildly grown grasses and herbs for sustenance, but actually his circumstances must have been better. He was at least an aristocrat, though of low rank, and so he inherited the estate of his great-grandmother on his father's side, which enabled him to support himself. Thus it was that when he was in a good mood for a long walk he went over the hills to visit the temple of Ishiyama or the pine wood of Awazu by Lake Biwa, and enjoyed the radiant view of cherry blossoms in the spring and of golden foliage in the autumn. He was even able to comfort himself by playing the biwa (lute) or the koto (harp) when he was tired of chanting sutras or offering prayers to the Amida Buddha. It seemed that he never stepped out of his role as an aristocrat.

Since he spent most of his life in Kyoto during the Gempei War, he must have seen troops marching in and out of the capital and confusions taking place there as the war went on. However, how strange it is that he did not say a word about the miseries of war. Looking away from reality, he chose to be alone in the mountains only to lament the transient quality of life. Thus he satisfied his elegant desire to remain aristocratic. The dew-like life or the dewdrop of life which appears in the Heike is realistically more moving, for the author did not look away from the reality but actually
stared at it, or experienced it.

Shigehira, a son of Kiyomori by Tokiko, was a warrior of extraordinary quality in both swordsmanship and poetry, but bad luck had it that he was taken alive at the battle of Ichi-no-Tani. The Heike presents two elegant side stories to do justice to his nobility, “Shigehira’s Lady” and “Senju-no-Mae.” The following two waka poems are those exchanged between Shigehira and his lady when they meet through his guard’s good offices:

Aukoto mo Seeing you briefly, 
Tsunyu no inochi mo The frail dewdrop of my life
Morotomo ni Sustained a pace...
Koyoi bakari ya I cannot but suppose
Kagiri naru ran That this will be our last night.

Kagiri tote Since I bid adieu,
Tachi wakarureba Convinced that this is the end,
Tsunyu no mi no My life’s joy has passed.
Kimi yori saki ni Its dewdrop will disappear
Kienubeki kana An age before yours expires.

Shigehira’s poem, as a whole, means to say a simple fact that can be condensed in the last line, “this will be our last meeting,” but the “dewdrop” in this poem is not so frail as that in the Hojoiki. Shigehira’s is the dewdrop of life that has survived many battles. The lady’s reply too has a simple connotation, “Its dew drop ( I ) will disappear before you die.” The dewdrop here sounds sadly frail and gives us the impression that death awaits her at any moment. However, it is the dewdrop that has been
sustained on the tip of a leaf at the threat of a puff of wind. Shigehira’s departure from the capital was so abrupt that she was unable to accompany him on his long journey to the western provinces. Not knowing his whereabouts, she was unable to write to him. Thus she has narrowly sustained a dewdrop of her life that seemed ready to vanish in an instant.

III

Issa, one of the most distinguished haiku poets in the Edo period, speaks of impermanence in simile to dew:

Tsuyu no yo wa The dew-like world!
Tsuyu no yo nagara I know this is the dew-like world.
Sarinagara And yet, intolerable.

It is said that Issa composed this poem on the occasion of the first anniversary of his son’s death. What he wanted to say was: “Human life is as transient as dew. I know well it is true, but when it comes to the early death of my son, I cannot help loathing the truth.” In this connection, the dew of the Heike can be considered the glitter of wrath rather than the faint light that tries to comfort the departed spirits of the Heike in the world beyond.

Another of Issa’s poems makes humorous use of dew with an emphasis on its transient existence:

Hito towaba If people ask of you
Tsuyu to kotaeyo Just answer, “We are dewdrops.”
Gatten ka Understand?

In this poem Issa appears to be a man of understanding in the friendly
downtown atmosphere, giving nothing but encouragement to an eloping couple. In another place, however, he appears differently. In the chapter, “Elopement” in a collection of his essays he refers to an incident of elopement which actually took place at Fukawa in Shimōsa Province where he happened to be staying. In this case the couple disappeared in the night fog on board a boat loaded with many daily necessities, including food. Perhaps this kind of well-prepared elopement could not have Issa's sympathy. The elopement of a couple who are brought to bay and find no other means but a sudden disappearance is what he can really encourage.

Chapter 6 in the *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise) presents a story in connection with the dew that suddenly disappears. On a dark night a man succeeds in taking out a lady to whom he has given his true love for a long time. As they walk along a stream, the lady takes notice of glittering dewdrops on the roadside grass and asks what they are. At that moment there is a roar of thunder and the rain begins to fall in torrents, and so the man puts her in a nearby warehouse and stands guard outside waiting for dawn. He does not know that a demon is in the warehouse. The demon mercilessly eats her up. Her cry is not heard because of the roars of thunder. The day breaks. The man enters the warehouse only to find her gone, and so he stamps his feet on the ground and cries:

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Shiratama ka
Nanzo to hito no
Toishi toki
Tsuyu to kotae te
Kie na mashi mono o
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When my beloved asked,
"Is it a clear gem
Or what might it be?"
Would that I had replied,
"A dewdrop!" and perished.

This is of course a fantasy based on a true incident: The brothers of a
court lady heard her cry on their way to court and took her home. This is all there is to say about the story, but the transient quality of dew lends much of lyricism to the story where the man laments, “I finally held a gem in my palm, but now that it has gone, I wish I could go with it.” The sweet sadness and helplessness he felt is pathetically beautiful.

To sum up, the dew in Japanese literature mainly has two characteristics: (1) that which shines in reflection to the sun or moon and (2) that which disappears after a brief space of time. In the Western mind, however, the dew shines as lustrously as jewels but does not disappear so swiftly as the Oriental dew. For this reason, the English versions of the Tsurezuregusa and the Ise monogatari have to be annotated for a correct understanding of the Japanese dew. In the former Professor Donald Keene notes: “The word Adashi (impermanent), contained in the place name, accounted for the frequent use of Adashino in poetry as a symbol of impermanence. The dew is also often used with that meaning.” In the latter Professor Helen Craig McCullough explains: “The poem’s rather slight interest lies in a conventional play on the resemblance between dew and the ephemerality of human life. If the writer had but known of the tragedy to come, he would have preferred to die—to vanish swiftly as the dew—rather than experience the grief he now suffers.”

IV

Western dew, by contrast, shines and glitters until it becomes a symbol of freshness or vigorous youth. John Milton makes use of such a “fresh” image of dew in Book V of Paradise Lost. In the first place dew is likened to pearls shining in the dawning light, scattered as seeds on the earth:

Now Morn her rosie steps in th’ Eastern Clime
Advancing, sow'd the Earth with Orient Pearl,
When Adam wak'd, so customd, for his sleep
Was Aerie light, from pure digestion bred,
And Temperat vapours bland, which th' only sound
Of leaves and fuming rills. Aurora's fan,
Lightly dispersed, and the shrill Mattin Song
Of Birds on every bough; . . . (Bk. V, 1-8)

Milton's extraordinary talent in poetry can be noted in the personified morning that sows not seeds of dew but of pearls on the earth. In the middle of the same book these seeds of pearls grow into "Pearly grain":

. . . though in Heav'n the Trees
Of life ambrosial fruitage bear, and vines
Yield Nectar, though from off the boughs each Morn
We brush mellifluous Dews, and find the ground
Coverd with Pearly grain: yet God hath here
Varied his bounty so with new delights,
As may compare with Heav'n; . . . (Bk. V, 426-32)

Milton's "mellifluous Dews" gives us the impression of a vibrant dew that does not easily vanish like that before the eyes of Tokubei and Ohatsu in *Sonezaki Shinju*. More important, these "mellifluous Dews" are not only a metaphor for pearls but also for "manna" blessed by heaven in the Book of Exodus (16: 14-15) in the Old Testament.

Truly the dew in the Old Testament is a symbol of heaven's blessing or heavenly life:
Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine. (Genesis 27:28)

And of Joseph he said, Blessed of the LORD be his land, for the precious things of heaven, for the dew and for the deep that coucheth beneath. (Deuteronomy 33:13)

Israel then shall dwell in safety alone: the fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also his heavens shall drop down dew. (Deuteronomy 33:28)

By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew. (Proverbs 3:20)

All in all, in science the Oriental dew and the Western one are the same, but as phenomena very different. In the world of the Old Testament, namely Syria and Palestine, the rain falls only at a certain time of the year, but the dew at dawn is so abundant that it looks as though it has rained during the night. Temperature greatly changes between the daytime and the night. Thanks to the dew in the night, trees and grasses almost withering in the ferocious sun—even dried streams—come to life. Nature appears afresh at dawn. Truly the dew is heaven's blessing and brings down a joy to everything on the earth. Without knowledge of this joy, Psalm: 133 cannot be understood:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his
garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon
the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.

In those days Israel as a nation was no more and the Israelis were scattered throughout Babylon, Persia and Egypt. Far away from their mother land, how feverishly they must have longed for their homes! Their only pleasure was to make a pilgrimage to the place where their God dwelled. The poet sings of his joy, now that his cherished hope has been fulfilled and he has been able to see many of his friends tied with the same faith, in two metaphors: (1) the precious ointment upon Aaron's head and (2) the dew on Mt. Hermon descending on the mountains of Zion.

In the work of the Old Testament ointment is a symbol of nobility and dignity. On Aaron's breastplate twelve jewels were inlaid and on them the names for twelve Israeli tribes were carved. Thus Aaron represented all the tribes of Israel before God. The ointment upon his head meant that all who were gathered before God could also feel blessed. The poet then likens his joy to the dew on Mt. Hermon. Hermon is a mountain on the border of Syria and Palestine. Geographically Hermon is so far from Zion that the dew of the former can never flow down to Zion. But for the poet's imagination, how grandiose and pleasing the picture of Hermon's dew descending upon Zion is! What a refreshing sight it is!

God's blessing on the Israelis is promised by the dew as in "I (Jehovah) will be as the dew unto Israel." (Hosea 14: 5) This dew enables flowers to come out and trees to grow with fresh green leaves. Thus, as long as the dew descends upon Jerusalem, it is blessed by heaven to keep alive. Compared with the swiftly vanishing dew in Japan, how vitally powerful the dew in Israel is! In the dry world of the Old Testament, where it rarely rained, the
dew was the precious source of water supply, so precious that the dew was
brought down only to the righteous people who obeyed the commandments.

The shining dew also had a mysterious power that enables even the
dead to come to life:

Thy dead 
men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise.
Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of
herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead. (Isaiah 26: 19)

This is why Milton's Paradise dawns with “dewie ray” and “On to thir
mornings rural work they haste/Among the sweet dews and flowers”. (Bk. V, 211–12) With sweet dews the morning work begins.

The “sweet dew” is not limited to the morning. After sunset it symbol-
izes comfortable sleep as in “. . . the timely dew of sleep/Now falling
with soft slumbrous weight inclines/Our eye-lids; . . .” (Bk. IV, 614–16)
Shakespeare too makes “the dew of sleep” appear from time to time in his
works; for example, he has Lady Ann say: “For never yet one hour in his
bed/Have I enjoyed the golden dew of sleep/But have been waked by his
timorous dreams.” (King Richard III, Act IV, Sc. 1) and has Brutus say:
“Fast asleep? It is no matter; /Enjoy the honey-heavy dew of slumber; /
Thou hast no fantasies, /Which busy care draws in the brains of men; /
Therefore thou sleep'st so sound.” (Julius Caesar, Act II, Sc. 1)

All these different images of dew between East and West are, as we
have seen, derived from different religious views of life. The dew in the East
was perceived not positively but negatively under the influence of Buddhist
pessimism. In sharp contrast to Greek mythology and Judaism, Buddhism
emphasizes the sorrow of the present world and rejects its transient pleas-
ures. From the Middle Age onward, when Japan suffered from a series of civil wars, the negative or pessimistic aspect of Buddhism came to be accepted by the people, whose salvation could no longer be attained in this world but only in the world beyond.

The vitally powerful image of dew in the West is nothing but the product of Judaism whose emphasis lay on life rather than on death. On top of this, it was a belief that was upheld by the Israelis who led difficult lives coping with the severity of nature. In contrast to Asian people who enjoy an abundance of rain brought by the monsoon, Europeans, including the Israelis, suffered from a shortage of water, and as a result, dew played the role of a fountain in the desert.

Notes
2) The largest Japanese language dictionary since 1972, ed. by Ichiko Teiji et. al. (Tokyo: Shogakukan).
3) Poems are all translated by the writer unless annotated otherwise.
5) An historical narrative, orally composed in the thirteenth century, relating to the struggle for power between two warrior clans, the Genji and the Heike in the last half of the preceding century.
7) Ibid., p. 436.
8) Ibid., p. 453. “Yesterday” and “Today” in parentheses are literal translations.
11) Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce T. Tsuchida, op. cit., p. 188.
12) “we” can be identified as Chômei and a 16-year-old son of the keeper of the hills.
13) Kamo no Chōmei, op. cit., p. 16.
14) A temple of the Shingon sect by the Seta River at the outlet of Lake Biwa, built by the priest Rōben in 762.
15) A lake shore at Ōtsu. The pine wood there is one of the best scenic spots around Lake Biwa.
16) The supreme Buddha in the Pure Land Paradise in the West, worshipped by the Jōdo sect.
17) An acronym from Genji and Heike.
18) A place in Kobe where Yoshitsune of the Genji defeated the Heike army in 1184.
21) Ibid., p. 346.
22) Ibid., p. 488.
24) Donald Keene, op. cit., p. 8.
27) Quotations from the Old Testament are all based on The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments, translated out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations diligently compared Authorized (King James) Version, made for the Gideons (Philadelphia: the National Bible Press, 1954).
28) Quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are all based on The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (London: Methuen & Co Ltd).