

**My love**

**Counterpoint of Bei Dao's poems**

**Susumu NAKANISHI**

(Selection Committee Chairperson)

Japanese translations of Bei Dao's poems are in the "Bei Dao Anthology," edited and translated by Shun Korenaga and published by Shoshi Yamada in January 2009. The benefits from this great work of 402 pages are enormous. However, looking back on it today, it is a pity that we cannot have access to the poems composed during the two decades after that.

At least for now, let us take a look at an insight into Bei Dao's superb poems, citing the last poem from this anthology.

**PASSING WINTER**

waking: forest in the north  
urgent drumbeats on the earth  
sunlight's hard liquor in the tree trunks  
agitates the ice of darkness  
the heart cries out with a pack of wolves

what the wind steals is wind  
winter with a deficit of snow  
is bigger than its metaphor  
the homesick like a king who's lost his country  
seek what is gone forever

the ocean mourns for all the living  
the stars take turns illuminating love  
Who is the witness of the panorama  
leading a river from the brass horns  
and the riots of an orchard?

Have you heard? my love  
let's get old together holding hands  
hibernating with words  
in the reweaving of time some knots remain  
or an unfinished poem

Source:

Translated by Eliot Weinberger

Bei Dao, *The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems* (New Directions, 2010)

First of all, what is poetry generally considered to be? For example, in this poem, winter is represented as the snow's deficit. Is it how poetry is considered, like the representation of winter in prose as the snow's deficit? Indeed metaphor is always associated with poetry. The power of linguistic expression to take flight is what poetry demands the most from metaphors. In this poem, there is also an abundance of metaphors, from the "winter" in the title, to the forest, drums, liquor and the howl of a pack of wolves.

It goes without saying that Bei Dao is an expert user of metaphors. Be that as it may, however, I do believe he is an expert at commanding language on a larger scale.

That is to say, as also has been pointed out as a characteristic of his poems, there are many examples of him calling out to someone, as in this poem:

Have you heard? my love

Simply put, there is always an interlocutor in his poems. "I" and "you," ego and another ego, the subject and the object, or the flesh and poetic sentiment: such two entities are always included in "I."

At this moment, we should also recall the intertwining of "I" that is seen in "Soul Mountain" written by Gao Xingjian, another Chinese writer who is highly praised together with Bei Dao. In Japan, our memory of Takehiko Fukunaga's "Kaishi (a mirage)," written using the interchangeability of time, is still fresh.

Bei Dao must also be gauging self-dichotomization and its interconnectedness in this way in order to observe human beings with more accuracy. Moreover, dichotomization is not as simple as observing oneself from inside and outside or making clear contrasts between light and darkness. Always dichotomized, the "I" continues to exist in its respective contexts. He seems to insist, however, that what looks to be a singular outward appearance is actually "I."

"The poet has a particular medium,"\* as advocated by T. S. Eliot, may indicate the same situation. Likewise, in Bei Dao's poems, dichotomized entities are intertwined and weave their respective stories.

Now let us summarize some messages from “PASSING WINTER” through dichotomy.

The first stanza describes the season announcing the coming of winter and the fight against a pack of wolves in the mind.

The second stanza focuses on the conflict between snow and wind in winter and the homesick. What has been lost appearing from within eternal uncertainty could be somewhat connected to Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*.

However, in the third stanza, the poet seeks the witness of the panorama embracing the conflicting ideas of death and love. Who is this witness? The verifier is none other than the “poet.”

And finally the last stanza. The poet calls out “my love,” to come hibernate together. This is because hibernation is a means to eternalize poetry. Moreover, an eternally unfinished poem dwells in the luminescent knots of the brilliance of time, as concludes the poem.

“My love” is nothing but the sentiment of poetry.

Actually, Bei Dao’s construction of epic poetry linking poems dichotomizing the self into, if anything, the flesh and the splendid poetic sentiment, this poetic technique could be called counterpoint, in the musical sense.

In music, counterpoint is a method that combines independent melodies.

Bei Dao has been majestically performing poems weaving the melody born from history, situations, and landscapes through the passing of time as his flesh and blood with the progress of the other soul - the very entity he calls his love.

Above all, I am pleased with Bei Dao’s fully-developed poetry in which he calls the sentiment of poetry “my love.” The ultimate terminus of a poet who began with violent indignation in the past is clearly expressed here.

I am now dazzled by the brilliance in the eyes of a poet who has set unfinished poems at an infinitely distant goal.

\*Eliot, T. S., “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Egoist*, No.5, vol.6, 1919, pp72-73.