THE CLASSIC DANCE OF JAPAN

By NATALIE CURTIS

PATRIOTISM, loyalty, courage, the stoic virtues of Japan, and even the suicidal act of *hara-kiri* find graphic expression in a form of art comparatively little known to the Western world: the classic dance, an art as dignified as oratory, which forms part of the accomplishment of Japanese youth and belongs to the culture of the nation.

"The classic dance is noble" say the Japanese, and indeed it is frequently performed by young men of rank. "We call the classic dances 'sword-dances' because of their heroic themes. The dancer illustrates through action a poem which is sung or declaimed at one side by a musician. These poems belong to the best literature of Japan. Our students often sing them when walking alone in their gardens of a moonlight night."

Such poems are usually composed in what is known in Japanese literature as the "Chinese form." As Japan to-day is absorbing western civilization, so with the same zeal did she in the past absorb the civilization of China, even adopting the Chinese written characters as the basis of her script. Thus, there are forms in Japanese literature directly derived from the Chinese, and a knowledge of the Chinese language was until recently a background in Japanese culture, even as that of Greek and Latin is in our own.

The so-called Chinese form of verse consists of four columns of Chinese characters with seven characters in each column; but though the script is Chinese, the language is of course Japanese. Part of the beauty of these poems is the form, unfortunately lost in a translation which can only give with approximate symmetry the meaning of the words. However, the two poems quoted in this article, the old and classic poem of Michezane, dating from the ninth century, and the modern verse of Saigo, written in 1869, are here given in the original Japanese language inscribed in European characters as well as in Chinese, so that the reader may see and feel their rhythmic beauty; for the Chinese form is as clearly defined in Japanese literature as is the sonnet form in our own. These poems reflect one of the Japanese ideals in poetry: to express in the fewest possible words a single beautiful thought.

In declaiming or chanting the poem for the Classic Dance a musical intonation is used, a western analogy to which might

perhaps be approximated by the *recitative* of Italian opera or the free musical declamation of Wagner, with the difference that in the Japanese recitative the same musical outline is used for many different poems and for every poem in the Chinese form, and is sung without accompaniment. The idea of a definite, though flexible melody, free in rhythm, for the intoning of poetry corresponds more nearly to the conception of the medieval plain-song of the Roman church and to the chanting of many different verses of a psalm to the same musical phrase.

The classic dance, like the classic drama, of Japan, is wholly symbolic. It is suggestive rather than realistic. Some of the popular dances are more in the character of many of our own stage-dances—moving lines of color with hardly a greater purpose than to please the eye. But the classic dance, with its union of musical declamation, lofty poetry and symbolic action, is a form of art that appeals to the highest intellectuality and to the deepest emotion. Each dance lasts but a few moments, yet it seems a complete drama. As in Japanese painting a few sure sweeps of the brush may awaken a train of suggested imagery, so in the classic dance a phrase of chanted poetry and the rhythmic movement of swift gestures stir the imagination in response to the poet's vision of valor and patriotism.

The sword-dances are not confined to the aristocracy and to students; they may also be performed in the theatres by professional dancers, geisha girls clad in the warrior costume of old Japan. One of these dances given publicly evokes the greatest enthusiasm as it portrays through the combat of two dancers and through the poem declaimed at the side the conflict between Japan and Russia and the victory for Dai Nippon. This poem is of course modern.

An older and very famous verse forms the basis of one of the best known sword dances, and has for its theme the cardinal virtue of Japan—loyalty to the Mikado, "the Son of Heaven." The poem is by Sugawara Michezane, a famous scholar and statesman of the ninth century, whom Japan has deified as god of calligraphy, consecrating the twenty-fifth day of the month to the memory of the great author whose written works comprise no less than two hundred volumes of history and some twelve volumes of poetry. The tribulations and the loyalty of Michezane form the theme of several Japanese dramas, the most famous of which is the "Sugawara Senju Tanarai Kagami," written by Takeda Izumo in 1746. Thus the figure of the great calligraphist has been kept vividly before the mind of Japan, while Lafcadio Hearn has made

known to the western world one of the beautiful and poetic legends that cluster around the memory of Michizane.

A tutor at Kioto, and later the governor of Sanuki, the great scholar was at one time dearly loved by his emperor, Daigo Tenno, who made him minister. But powerful nobles, the Fujiwara, whose hatred Michizane incurred, intrigued against him, till the Emperor, incensed, condemned his former favorite to banishment at Kiu Shiu, a lonely island. But Michizane in his exile, even though sentenced to unjust punishment, thought only with reverent, passionate and tender longing of his Emperor. Daily, in loyal homage, he lifted to his brow the gift of the Mikado, an embroidered Chinese robe, the fragrance of whose perfumed folds brought vividly before him the memory of his sovereign. Thus consecrated ever to his master, he wrote the poem famous throughout the centuries, which forms the subject of one of the dances. A virtue of Japanese poetry is to impress through the effect of contrast, and thus the profound feeling underlying this verse of Michizane is created by the very delicacy of that subtlest thing—a haunting perfume, so potent to recall a vanished presence. The word "autumn," often found in Japanese poetry, is a symbol of melancholy.

MICHEZANE'S POEM

去年今夜侍清涼
愁思詩篇獨斷腸
恩賜御衣猶在
棒持每日拜餘香

菅原道真作

TRANSLITERATION OF MICHEZANE'S POEM

(Vowels are given the continental sound)

- 1st column: Kyo nen no konya Sei Ryo ni jishi
2nd column: Shū shi no shihen hitori dan cho.
3rd column: Onshi no gyoi nawo kokoni ari
4th column: Hoji shite mayenichi yokō wo haisu

(The Chinese characters are read downward, from right to left.)

MICHEZANE'S POEM

(TRANSLATION)

(Each verse of this translation represents a column of Chinese characters.)

- 1st column:* A year ago,
A year ago to-night
In Sei Ryo I served my Emperor.
- 2nd column:* Verses we spake
Of autumn thought—
Now am I heartbroken
And alone.
- 3rd column:* Only the honored robe,
His honored gift
Is with me yet.
- 4th column:* Uplifting this
Now day by day
The lingering scent
I reverently breathe.

In the classic dance the poem is of course sung at one side, while the dancer suggests through pose and action the sentiment of the verse, which appeals to the loftiest ideals of Japanese character.

Another famous dance accompanies a more modern poem by Japan's great General Saigo (pronounced Sygo), who was the first to introduce into Japan the European method of warfare. Saigo's military genius conceived a plan to capture Korea, but the Emperor rejected this advice. The general therefore resigned his position at court and retired to his country seat, where he drew about him a number of military students, to whom he taught the modern art of war.

The Emperor suspected Saigo of a plot to capture Korea in spite of the government and sent spies to investigate. Saigo's students killed the spies without the master's knowledge and the general, himself guiltless of this offence, set out for Tokio to give an explanation to the government. On his way he was met by the Emperor's troops, surprised, surrounded and overcome. Saigo cut his way through the siege and escaped to his home. But his flight was not for life, it was for death, honorable death by his own hand in sight of his native mountain, the vindicating death of *hara-kiri*, which reveals the purity of a man's soul and the honor of his purpose.

Saigo was a true Samurai, and to-day the western world knows the meaning of the "Samurai spirit," which was said to have animated all Japan in the war with Russia. For the Samurai—in feudal times a class corresponding to the English gentry,

ranking between nobility and the people—were the loyal fighting men of greater lords, loyal unto death when only death, which in their stoic courage they held in contempt, could show their true allegiance. As in the western world a man proved his honor through the duel, so in Japan he justified himself by taking his own life. To die for the Emperor, or on the Emperor's demise to follow him, was true loyalty and highest virtue. Yet these stern warriors, of whom the ancient law proclaimed "A Samurai may not die in bed of peace," held poetry so high that they were depicted with sword in one hand and pen in the other; for poetry is the fluent and spontaneous utterance of Japan, and in the recent Russo-Japanese war, the generals frequently sent their war-despatches in verse. Japanese poetry does not rhyme like ours, but is governed by laws of form. The making of verses, contests and games of verse, are a pastime of the common people; even the chop-sticks are graced with little poems. Thus Saigo, before committing suicide to prove his loyalty, his honor and his devotion, penned a poem; and in the classic dance it is this death-poem that is sung while the dancer portrays the desperate sortie through the enemy and the final act of *hara-kiri*.

Reading downward, from right to left, the fifth column inscribes "Saigo's Poem," and the date, corresponding to 1869 of our calendar.

SAIGO'S POEM

孤軍奮闘歸國破
 壹百里程疊壁間
 我劒折既而我馬斃
 秋風埋骨故鄉山
 明後拾載秋西鄉隆盛作

TRANSLITERATION

(Vowels are given the continental sound)

- 1st column: Kogun funto kakomi wo yabutte kairu
 2nd column: Ipyaku no ritei ruiheki no kwan
 3rd column: Waga ken wa sudeni ore waga uma wa
 4th column: Taworu shufu hone wo uzumu kokyo no yama
 (The very descriptive word "shufu" means "Autumn-wind.")

SAIGO'S POEM

(TRANSLATION)

- 1st column:* The few men left to me
Fought with their might:
Now through the siege
Hewed I a path
- 2nd column:* Forth from my stronghold
An hundred leagues
To the home of my fathers
Fighting my way.
- 3rd column:* My sword is broken,
My horse is fallen.
- 4th column:* O wind of Autumn!
Here will I lay my bones
'Mid the bones of my fathers
Beholding the Mountain,
The place of my birth.

THE MUSIC FOR SAIGO'S POEM

The dance accompanying this poem is a graphic epitome of tragic art. A warrior enters, kneels, ties a scarf about his brow to hold the sweat, and binds up his sleeves. This symbolic action depicts preparation for battle, even as in Biblical days the hero "girded up his loins." With a few swift movements the warrior describes the siege, the cutting of his way through the surrounding soldiers, his broken sword, fallen horse and the hundred leagues of battle ground. Then he drops on his knees, lifts his sword from the ground, and with a face tense with purpose grasps the

blade with both hands, pierces himself and falls. But only to struggle up again as, thrusting his sword into the ground he leans upon its hilt and lifts himself, straining to his full height while with head thrown back he casts one last glance at his native mountain—and then falls prone. Rising again to his knees he clasps his hands before him on the ground and bows his head upon them.

The dance lasts but a moment. True to Japanese art there is here neither superfluity of thought nor of expression, and every movement has significance. The ivory-colored face with scarf-bound brow seems the living mask of tragedy and the dramatic postures have a dignity that is epic in power. Such dances, appealing to national aspiration, help to keep brightly burning the flame of that stern and heroic passion that we know as Japanese patriotism.

The western world has already borrowed much from Japan, even as Japan has taken from us, and European arts and crafts bear striking testimony to the influence of Japanese culture. As one of our greatest educational problems in the United States is to train a heterogeneous foreign population to standards of American citizenship, could we not perhaps receive in this effort a helpful suggestion from the art of Japan which is so closely related to the life of the people? Would a simple American adaptation of the principles of the Japanese classic dance (noble, patriotic poetry inculcating national ideals, linked with music and pantomime) be an educational addition to the folk-dancing already taught in most of our public schools?