

Eternity

Four Anonymous Poems

MYS 16, the last chapter of the anthology as originally planned, consists of odds and ends. Some are attributed to individuals (including Yakamochi), some are ascribed to various otherwise unknown or emblematic personages, and some are simply anonymous. They include jokes, ridicule of shortcomings (Yakamochi's two make fun of a thin man), intentionally meaningless poems (for one, composed on demand, the composer received a large cash reward). The chapter ends with "hateful things," and the overall tone, whether playful or serious, is negative.

The extreme of negativity is probably reached with these four poems, in groups of two (the heading for the second group has been lost), on weariness of the world, and the longing to escape from it. We may take them as our sample of this part of the Manyōshū.

1-2

Says the Chinese preface, “Two poems of weariness at the inconstancy of life in this world.” The content of all four owes much to Chinese tradition, especially its Buddhist aspect, which was of great interest to Nara Japan. The “two oceans,” the realms of life and death, are an image from the Kegon Sutra.

16/64 *Living and dying:*
3849 *of both of these two oceans*
I am now weary.
The mountain where the tide ebbs –
I have come to long for it!

16/65 *In the present world's*
3850 *temporary dwelling-house,*
I have been living.
The land which I want to reach –
I know not the way to it.

–Anonymous

3-4

The third poem evokes the “Land of Nothing at All” 无何有之鄉 of Jwāngdǔ 7:3, and also the Mwògūshvè Mountain 藐姑射之山 of Jwāngdǔ 1:2. Both are places beyond the realm of life and death, where people live forever.

The last of these poems is in the older sedōka form, with its distinctive two-part rhetorical structure, 5-7-7, 5-7-7. Though also used by Hitomaro, it usually has a simple, sub-elite tone. Here, also a tone of childlike hope.

16/66
3851 *Oh, this heart of mine:
 in the Land of Nothingness
if I should leave it,
 then the Mwògūshvè Mountain
I might sooner come to see.*

16/67
3852 *Where they catch great fish,
 the ocean: can it then die?
 the mountain, can it then die?
And yet they do die:
 the ocean has its ebb-tide,
 the mountain, its withering.*

– Anonymous