

The Chrysanthemum Letters: II

Pseudo-Tiresias

1 The Palace, Paved with a Hundred Stones

花の色は うつりにけりな いづらに
わが身世にふる ながめせしに

“The hues of the flowers do fade while in vain
I have passed through this world gazing long at the rain.”

– Ono no Komachi

15. *Our love is the becoming of the Divine.* As our world is the product of divine love, so too is the Divine the product of ours. By decreasing ourselves, we make space for it. We beckon, and it enters the world.

16. *The world is both causal and acausal.* The conventional world is clearly causally-determined, yet the absolute (or divine) world is acausal. Ultimate reality is beyond understanding in this regard.

17. *Becoming is the self-creation of the Divine.* The process of our becoming is the constant self-realization of the Divine, the Absolute, the Ground of Being.

18. *Our sanctity is contained within our ability to share in this creation.* Only sentient beings, and especially humanity, can appreciate the two truths of reality and their inseparability. We alone are able to (de)create ourselves, able to love.

18.A. *No one is above another.* Each person is imbued with an incomparable sanctity which cannot be weighed or measured against another.

18.B. *Killing violates the sacred.* To kill a sentient being is to deprive them of their contribution to creation.

18.C. *Their freedom to love is sacred.* To love is to decrease the self. It cannot involve imposing yourself upon others, though it may involve keeping them from limiting themselves (ie, harming themselves in a state of confusion or illness). It involves only the supporting of others' self-realization.

19. *To kill one is to kill all of humanity. To save one is to save all of humanity.* To wrong another is to wrong one's self; to wrong one's self, to wrong another. To violate the sanctity of a few, even just one, is not preferable to the violation of the many. In other words, you can develop no utilitarian equation for sanctity.

2 The Cloudy Ways to Heaven

これやこの 行くも帰るも 別れては
知るも知らぬも 逢坂の関

“This is the place, those going, those returning, joining, separating,
those you know and those you do not, at the gate of meeting.”¹

– Semimaru

20. *The Divine is actualized in compassion.* We bridge the unbridgeable gap between the conventional and the divine via acts of radical compassion.

21. *Charity is inadequate.* Charity is to radical compassion as retributive justice is to restorative justice. That is, charity does nothing to address the root causes of the issues plaguing our societies. Charity is not wrong, per se, but it is symptomatic of a limp, ineffectual Liberalism that upholds the status quo.

22. *We must act immediately.* We are all willing to subject others to suffering because they are remote from us, in time or space. We exploit workers in distant countries because, to the consuming mind, they are not really people. We sit on our hands with regard to climate change because the children displaced by it are not real children; they are abstractions. It is for this same reason that most do not reconsider their meat-eating—it does not really come from a living thing to them. We strip the fur and the skin and the hooves so that we can maintain the illusion that it sprung up from the earth ready for our plate. Or we say “I’ll get to that soon,” “I’ll get around to it,” “I’ll make the change when my situation is better” and then it never gets done. The right time is always tomorrow. We are always just about to become good people. Do it now.

23. *Radical compassion requires sacrifice.* We will not achieve a more equal society without sacrificing certain comforts, certain luxuries, so that we can honestly grapple with the networks of production and exploitation that provide us with our material goods. How many hands did your clothes pass through to reach you? How many lives do you tighten the vice on when you purchase a new phone or fast food? We must let go of things. We must de-center things.

24. *Source as many of your things locally as you can.* It is best if you can be in community with the people who produce your goods and for whom you produce goods. As much as you are able, find goods locally, produce them yourself, or simply go without them. To eat at the expense of another is far lesser a sin than to feast.

25. *You can do more. You must do more.* It is precisely the ways in which we convince ourselves that we cannot do more, that we are doing enough—by these, we perpetuate the current state of affairs. You tell yourself that your vegetarianism or your preference for biking or your disdain for fast fashion or your purchasing organic or your attending protests is all you can do. If you did what you must, your life would fall so outside the norms of society that you would be considered strange, deranged, perhaps even a little

1. This last line is a very loose translation, perhaps really a creative reinterpretation. 逢坂の関 (Osaka no Seki), or Osaka Pass, is an actual historical place—a checkpoint between Yamashiro and Omi provinces—but it carries a liminal, transformative implication which I thought to convey to Anglophone readers with a less literal translation.

mad. You choose social acceptance over justice. You choose convenience over human lives. You pick the easy over the right. Do more.

26. *Maintain the human connection.* A politics which deals only with abstractions is not really politics; it is a game. That is why so many are easily able to treat politics as sport. It is fundamentally performative. This is a primary function of representative democracy, of bureaucracy, of colonialism, of capitalism: making remote and abstract all elements of governance and consumption. The State is a great machine, and in order to function it must render all things in machine language: waivers, appeals, contracts, endless abstractions. The goal of the truly just society would be to minimize these: to operate on consensus, to use as its medium genuine, human connection. The mechanisms of organization remain accountable so long as they remain grounded. Abstract a system and it becomes capable of wielding terrible power to destroy the lives of those it operates upon.

3 Short as the Cut Reeds

玉のをよ 絶えなば絶えね ながらへば
しのぶることの よはりもぞする

“Oh, jeweled lace, if you must break, then break, but if you will survive,
this love I have hidden will threaten to show.”²

– Princess Shokushi

27. *Free association is the only pillar.* Each individual ought to be free to associate and disassociate from each other, and each individual or collective ought to be able to freely act in so far as their actions do not restrict the freedom of others.

28. *We ought to provide mutual aid.* Cooperation with one another towards our collective liberation is the only means by which we can create a freer world.

29. *We ought to decide by consensus.* The majority has no right to violate the freedom of the minority, and a minority no right to violate the freedom of the majority. Decisions ought to be made always by consensus.

30. *Unjust hierarchies ought to be abolished.* Hierarchies which are not based in free association and consensus ought to be abolished.

31. *All institutions ought to be dispensable.* Any institution which threatens to become entrenched, fossilized, ought to be dismantled.

32. *The State ought to be abolished.* The State is a tool for some segment of the population to impose itself upon the rest, whether it is a minority upon the majority or vice versa. It is, by nature, not based in free association and instead upon the use of force. It is an affront to the sanctity of human freedom.

2. You could just as well translate the last two lines as: “my ability to hide my love will no doubt weaken.”

33. *Capitalism ought to be abolished.* Capitalism is the notion that creation is a competition and that those arbitrarily selected as its “winners” ought to have the right to impose their vision upon it. It is an affront to the incomparable sanctity of each person.

34. *Prisons ought to be abolished.* Retributive or punitive justice is does nothing to address root causes. Restorative justice is the only practical solution to the problems plaguing society.

35. *Organization ought to be achieved via assemblies.* In order to organize production or transport or education on a mass scale, there ought to be a high level of federation. Workers or teachers or students and so on ought to form local assemblies which send representatives to regional councils which perhaps send their own representatives to yet larger councils, and so on, until the necessary level of coordination is reached. Never do these councils gain any ability to dictate what a local assembly must do, and never do these assemblies gain the ability to dictate what an individual must do, but each individual understands that it is in their common interest to listen to their resolutions.

4 The Field of Heaven

田子の浦に うち出でてみれば 白妙の
富士の高嶺に 雪は降りつつ

“In Tago Bay, witnessing its appearance, white,
distant peaks of Mt Fuji snow falling, falling.”³

– Yamabe no Akahito

36. *Freedom is all that matters.* I don’t care if you agree or not with all my silly woo-woo wumbo-jumbo. Whether you are Hindu, Buddhist, Bahá’í, Jewish, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Daoist, Jain, Sufi, Wiccan—whatever, all that matters is that you believe in the inherent and incalculable value of a human life.

37. *You cannot build anarchism from the ashes.* Billions of people are going to suffer and die in the ecological catastrophes of the coming centuries. The world as you know it will break and burn. And the only things which we can do right now are research to minimize the looming tragedy and sabotage the machine which propels us towards it. Anything less is cowardice. Anything less is collaboration. Every day that we content ourselves with trivial pursuits, we are holding the weapon of their murder in our hands. We excuse ourselves as artists and academics. We tell ourselves that we are baby-stepping towards a better future while ignoring the fact that the historical circumstances for that potentiality are eroding under our feet. A better world is contingent upon there being a world.

3. The phrase, 白妙の (shirotaeno), is a “pillow-word” or a sort of decorative, aesthetic phrase meant to beautify the following noun, “distant peaks of Mt Fuji.” It calls to mind a white cloth, so that the image of this poem is one of a pristine fabric laid over the slopes.