

# **THE SPIRIT OF JAPANESE POETRY**

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The spirit of Japanese poetry by Yoné Noguchi

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**YONÉ NOGUCHI**

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JAPANESE POETRY**



WISDOM OF THE EAST

THE SPIRIT OF  
JAPANESE POETRY

BY YONE NOGUCHI



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### THE POET

Out of the deep and the dark,  
A sparkling mystery, a shape,  
Something perfect,  
Comes like the stir of the day ;  
One whose breath is an odour,  
Whose eyes show the road to stars,  
The breeze on his face,  
The glory of Heaven on his back,  
He steps like a vision hung in air  
Diffusing the passion of eternity ;  
His abode is the sunlight of morn,  
The music of eve his speech ;  
In his sight  
One shall turn from the dust of the grave  
And move upward to the woodland.

YONE NOBUCHI.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

THE object of the Editors of this series is a very definite one. They desire above all things that, in their humble way, these books shall be the ambassadors of good-will and understanding between East and West—the old world of Thought and the new of Action. In this endeavour, and in their own sphere, they are but followers of the highest example in the land. They are confident that a deeper knowledge of the great ideals and lofty philosophy of Oriental thought may help to a revival of that true spirit of Charity which neither despises nor fears the nations of another creed and colour.

L. CRANMER-BYNG.  
S. A. KAPADIA.

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## INTRODUCTION

THERE are beauties and characteristics of poetry of any country which cannot be plainly seen by those who are born with them ; it is often a foreigner's privilege to see them and use them, without a moment's hesitation, to his best advantage as he conceives it. I have seen examples of it in the work of Western artists in adopting our Japanese traits of art, the traits which turned meaningless for us a long time ago, and whose beauties were lost in time's dust ; but what a force and peculiarity of art Utamaro or Hiroshige, to believe the general supposition, inspired in Monet, Whistler and others ! It may seem strange to think how the Japanese art of the Ukiyoye school, nearly dead, commonplace at its best, could work such a wonder when it was adopted by the Western hand ; but after all that is not strange at all. And is it not the same case with poetry ? Not only the English poetry, but any poetry of any country, is bound to become stale and stupid if it shuts itself up for too long a time ; it must sooner or later be

rejuvenated and enlivened with some new force. To shake off classicism, or to put it more abruptly, to forget everything of history or usage, often means to make a fresh start ; such a start often begins being suggested by the poetry of some foreign country, and gains a strength and beauty. That is why even we Japanese, I dare say, can make some contribution to English poetry. The English poem, as it seems to me, is governed too greatly by old history and too-respectable prosody ; just compare it with the English prose, which has made such a stride in the recent age, to see and be amazed at its unchanging gait. Perhaps it is my destitution of musical sense (a Western critic declared that Japanese are for the most part unmusical) to find myself more often unmoved by the English rhymes and metres ; let me confess that, before perceiving the silver sound of a poet like Tennyson or Swinburne, born under the golden clime, my own Japanese mind already revolts and rebels against something in English poems or verses which, for lack of a proper expression, we might call physical or external. As my attention is never held by the harmony of language, I go straightforward to the writer's inner soul to speculate on it, and talk with it ; briefly, I am sound-blind or tone-deaf—that is my honest confession. It is not only my own confession, but the general confession of nearly all Japanese ;

our Japanese minds always turn, let me dare say, to something imaginative.

It is my own opinion that the appearance of Basho, our beloved Hokku master, was the greatest happening of our Japanese annals ; the Japanese poetry, which had been degenerating for centuries, received a sudden salvation through his own pain and imagination. His greatest hope, to become a poet without words, was finally realised ; he was, as I once wrote on the Buddha priest in meditation :

“ He feels a touch beyond word,  
He reads the silence's sigh,  
And prays before his own soul and destiny :  
He is a pseudonym of the universal Consciousness,  
A person lonesome from concentration.”

When the Japanese poetry joined its hand with the stage, we have the *No* drama, in which the characters sway in music, soft but vivid, as if a web in the air of perfume ; we Japanese find our own joy and sorrow in it. Oh, what a tragedy and beauty in the *No* stage ! I always think that it would be certainly a great thing if the *No* drama could be properly introduced into the West ; the result would be no small protest against the Western stage, it would mean a real revelation for those people who are well tired of their own plays with a certain pantomimic spirit underneath.