

MORGAN GIBSON

I-THOU POEM FOR KENNETH REXROTH'S CENTENARY

University of Chicago
Students let me be
With your *Collected Poems*
On a dim lit sofa in International House.
You haunt this Gothic campus
As you did in adolescence
Discovering your genius
In classics without matriculating.
You began a lifetime of rewriting
Japanese, Chinese, Greek,
Latin, and French poems
In American English
As if you were each poet
Living now in the now
That was their ancient now.
You read, wrote, lived poetry
Among your cubist paintings and
Anarchist polemics
Rousing Chicago rabbles
From Wobbly soapboxes
In Bughouse Square
In the Windy City on the Make
By the lake.

Reading your lyrics of love in Jackson Park
I remember cycling Saturdays
To its Japanese garden and folk village
To the cool barn of a temple where I first
Read your poems, sipping
My first green tea in the peaceful dark
My first taste of Japan
Before it visited Pearl Harbor.

Now you creep in the shadows
Of this classical library
Returning as you return
To me often since your death—
Not one of those “modest angels
...with never a question
Of the ‘ineluctable modality’
Of the invisible” but
Like a sage from Hades;
Or horny Einstein, wandering
Among “coal pockets
In the galaxy, dark nebulae,
And black broken windows into space”; (25)
Or Chuang Tzu floating in the Tao.
You are creeping towards me
Like an ancient turtle
From whose cracked shell
The Chinese told the future
Before you told it in poetry
Of prophetic vision
“of the fall of history
And waste of fact.” (240)

Your cloudy lids, heavy with dreams
Suffused by memories of lust,
Glow from art, poetry, philosophy,
Scarred by fact. Your body is
bloated with aches of lost love
And immortalized slaughter of
Revolutionaries.

You have come again
From *beyond the mountains*
Just when I need you, as always,
As a poem gnaws on my mind
Gradually, word by word,
In my aging mind.
You always return when I hear you in your poems.

Welcome back. Sit beside me.
(You grunt, sink into a cushion, sigh.)
I was remembering the temple in Jackson Park,
Your words, your mournful voice...

“Chill and abandoned, the pavilion
In Jackson Park stands like a sightless
Lighthouse beside the lake.” (68)
You croak like you had swallowed
Basho’s frog. You always growled and grumbled
Even when happy. You
Muttered when you weren’t shouting.
A friend who read every word of yours he could find
Switched off Pacifica
To choke your deathly voice.
It stopped forever before your death.
Helpless in bed, you looked, you saw,
You squeezed my hand
But could say nothing
Just as now, profoundly silent
Suffused by remembered speech.
You slouch like a clumsy Buddha.

I’m always glad you return, despite my gripes.
I never know if you know what I am thinking.
Your face is an enigma, like your cubist poems,
Your wrinkles like those fragments of mad passion.
One advantage of the living over the dead:
I glimpse your complex mind
whenever your poems pass through mine.
In mine are words from yours.
You have come very far
From your favorite constellation:

“There’s Orion!
The most beautiful object
Either of us will ever
Know in the world or in this life..” (537)

You said that to your daughter
Holding her hand, Christmas Eve,
San Francisco:
“A Sword in a Cloud of Light.”
I read it to my daughters every Christmas.
Your stars are now your home.
You must be colder up there
Than even on snowy mountains
And silently alone
Far from the warring world;
Are you beyond our foolishness?
Why do you return?
Did you stop in Santa Barbara
At your tomb above the Pacific?
Are you a fleeting thought in Buddha-mind,
Materializing in mine?

You sniff and smile, so I'll go on:
Why do you return?
When you were most alive,
Loved and hated by many
Why did you call and write
This provincial professor/poet
For twenty years, and tell me whenever we met
Your troubles, doubts, ideas
When I could only stare, helpless
Trying to make sense of
Everything you wrote and said
And the warring world you illumined?

I thought I had discovered
All of you cohering in one
Vision radiating in poetry
As “actual speech of person to person,”
“Communication raised to the highest power,”
“Communal sacrament”:
How craft is vision and vision craft;
How communication, communing, and community

Inseparably interdepend. (*Revolutionary Rexroth.*)
Unique among modern poets
You could be rational
As well as wise,
Toughly philosophical
As well as visionary.
You were not my guru,
Not on your life.
I never worshipped you
Or justified your faults.
You were my mentor, muse
As Yosano Akiko was yours
As Marichiko.
I merely wrote you into books of prose.
Mere prose.
Am I your Thou or you my I?
As years passed, coherence splintered,
Your life, your work fragmented
Into contradictions.
In visionary enigmas
Whatever happened to reason in Japan?
About philosophizing
(Yours? Mine? Any abstractions?)
You wrote reminded us,
“How comfortable, and how verbal.” (243)

“Trouble is,” you once told me,
“You never tell me I’m full of shit!”
I was afraid of losing you,
My closest friend, the deepest,
And most troublesome.
But now that you are
Just a thought in Buddhamind
I must confess
I’d rather read the phone book
Than your cubist poems.

And I thought it strange
That such an inspiring anarchist

Could be almost as patriarchal
As the Pope.
I never thought I'd say it.
But how could you be an anarchistic Catholic?
How can you smile like that?
Shall I go on being honest for a change?

You were the angriest Buddhist since Nichiren
Furiously lashing those opposing
Or ignoring you,
The most promiscuous advocate of
Feminism *and* "holy matrimony"—
Your home-brewed brands of them.
You, you egoistic advocate of
Christian self-sacrifice and Buddhist self-negation!

I thought that would get your goat
But you're laughing without a sound
Your distended belly
Bouncing on the sofa
—Full of shit?—
Is that what you wanted to hear?

So I'll go on.
During bloody clashes of
Your comrades and oppressors far below
The mountains you were climbing
How could you create elegies
Of idealistic destruction
Of the People, Art, and Nature
Between spasms of visionary love?

Just wondering, remembering
The greatest revolutionary poem I know
With the unpronounceable title
Never collected till after you died—
"Noretorp-Noretsyh." (18)
You envision anarchist martyrs

Charging against the Red Army
As it slaughters Hungarians
While in Golden Gate Park
You lust after glorious thighs
On the bicycle ahead of your own.
Why weren't you ever martyred?

You close your eyes,
Letting your poetry
Speak for itself in our memories,
Immortalizing those sacrificed
For liberty, the beauty of art and women,
Love of nature and one another,
Those struggles had to fail
Before you saw the light
The tragic light that Shakyamuni,
Sophocles, and Jesus saw.
You lived to tell the lives and deaths
In "The waste of history..."
To keep alive ideas and
In death to make us more alive
Than we have ever been.

"This is the minimum negative
Condition, the 'Condition humaine,'
The tragic loss of value into
Barren novelty, the condition
Of salvation, out of this alone
The person emerges as complete
Responsible act – this lost
And that conserved – the appalling
Decision of the verb 'to be.'" (269)

Making love in the mountains
In your tragic poems
Immortalized the heroes.
In your wHoly responsible act.

I remember you in Kyoto
(Where you wanted to die)
Before crossing the Pacific
To Santa Barbara.
You were sitting among the Buddhas
Far off from those you loved,
From your books and mountains—
In empty light within
The fulsome void.

Once when I read you you were wise.
Next when I read you you were mad.
And now when I read you you are dead.
And if I have no self what am I,
What are you?
You vanish, but your words remain
Distilled from the *Manyoshu*:

“Weary of the twin seas of
Being and Non-being, I
Long for the mountain of bliss
Untouched by the changing tides.” (664)