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DEATH IN THE WRITINGS OF INOUE YASUSHI
井上靖諸作品における「死」というテーマ

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抄　録

1960年代半ばより70年代にかけて，井上靖はいくつかの作品において死と対面している中年男の姿を描いた。「化石」には，不治の癌に罹った主人公が自分の死を徐々に認めるようになり，何か自分の人生に意味づけるものを探求する。「星と祭」には，若い娘を失い，その子供の生と死を考え，自分の悲しみに耐える父親の姿を描いている。「花壇」では，事故に遭って奇跡的に死を免れた人が天に授けられたこれからの人生をどうやって生きるべきかを追求している。この長編小説3篇のそれぞれの主題を，このエッセイの基本テーマとする。

The novels that Inoue Yasushi (井上靖； 1907-1991) published during the decade of the 1950's, when he was striving to establish himself as a professional fiction writer, include a large number whose plots are set in the Japan of that era and focus on the lives of ordinary people. The protagonists of these novels tend to be active and dynamic individuals who are bent on great achievements, usually in the form of some business venture. From around the mid-1960's, however, Inoue began to produce a further series of novels, still set in contemporary Japan, but with heroes who seem to be more sober and mature incarnations of the earlier protagonists. Previously mature but still young men of action, the central characters have now turned into middle-aged and increasingly vulnerable individuals. The great works to which they had once aspired have largely been achieved, and the rewards found wanting. Some crisis in these men's lives has forced upon them a consciousness of their own mortality, together with an awareness that there are more important things than the worldly success they had spent their younger days striving for.

One such novel is *Kaseki* 化石 (Fossils； written 1965-66), which concerns a successful businessman who, informed that he is suffering from an inoperable cancer, becomes preoccupied with reaching an acceptance of his approaching death, and with finding something that will give meaning to the fact that he has lived. In *Hoshi to matsuri* 星と祭(Stars and Worship； written 1971-72) as well, the protagonist is striving to come to terms with death, although not his own in this case but that of his daughter. And

in *Kadan* 花壇 (The Flower Bed ; written 1975-76), a miraculous escape from death has shocked the hero into examining the life he has lived, and pondering the manner in which he should spend the years that remain. It is the themes dealt with in these three novels that will form the basis of this essay.

In *Kaseki* the hero, Itsuki Tajihei by name, takes a break from managing his Tokyo-based construction firm to make an extended visit to Europe. Becoming ill while in Paris, he seeks medical attention and is told that his condition is hopeless. Shocked, he goes through a long night of despair. In the morning he finds that he has a new companion : Death. Death has come as an invisible personage to be constantly at his side, never leaving him, not even for a moment. Of course this personification of death is a figment of Itsuki's imagination, and yet Death becomes, in effect, an additional character in the novel, one who serves as a sort of escort, guide, and mentor for Itsuki in his process toward understanding and acceptance. It is largely through Itsuki's "conversations" with this invisible companion that the author presents his protagonist's own musings about his situation. Thus, at one point early in their association, Itsuki observes the crowds of people going to and fro on the streets of Paris and asks his comrade, "Where are they all trying to go?" Death replies :

> --It isn't a question of where they are going. What you see is what we call living. The condition where all such movement has ceased is the state we call death. That state will come upon you in due course.
>
> Now Itsuki did indeed arise from his chair on the terrace. His companion arose also.
>
> --There is a saying, isn't there, "All life is in constant change"?
>
> --There is indeed.
>
> --What does it mean?
>
> --That people are born, and that they die. However many may die, others will be born after them. However many are born, they too will all die.
>
> Turning back to face his companion, Itsuki spoke.
>
> --So it's simply that I will die a little sooner than the others, is it not?
>
> --Yes. Haven't you known that from the beginning? It's nothing more than that. (*Kaseki*, pp. 220-221)[1]

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1. All quotations from the three novels dealt with in this article are taken from the following editions :
   -*Kaseki*. Tokyo : Kadokawa Bunko, 1969
   -*Hoshi to matsuri*. Tokyo : Kadokawa Bunko, 1975
   -*Kadan*. Tokyo : Kadokawa Bunko, 1980
   All translations from these novels are my own.

Inoue's view of life as a process of constant change, with one generation continuously giving way to the next, becomes even more apparent when Itsuki is taken on a trip to the Burgundy countryside to view the old Romanesque cathedrals at Vezelay, Autun, and Tournus. To Itsuki, with an awareness of his own mortality now uppermost in his mind, the churches and the works of art that adorn them seem to have grown directly out of the surrounding soil. They are a direct expression of the spirit of the local inhabitants, who with their ancestors have lived here and tilled the land, one generation after another, for centuries. He sees the features of these simple country folk reflected in the sculptured faces of Christ, Mary, and other religious figures. A relief carving of Eve, her face unmistakably that of a village maiden, moves him especially ; to Itsuki her image seems to embody the suffering borne by every woman who has ever lived. In the same sculpture he sees also a reflection of his own youth, and realizes with a pang of remorse that that part of his life is now irrevocably gone.

At a later point in the novel, back in Tokyo, Itsuki and an old friend meet in the lobby of one of the city's older buildings. The friend, who is a geologist by profession, points out to him the coral fossils visible in the marble of the surrounding pillars. The creatures that these fossils represent lived eons ago, and yet they have left this record, which has endured for tens of millions of years, as a witness that they had actually lived. Soon to be a thing of the past himself, Itsuki feels a bond between himself and these relics of antiquity. It is an emotion much like the one he had experienced in the cathedrals of Burgundy--an awareness that he, along with every other person or thing that is living or that has lived, is part of the flow of eternity. Just as creatures millions of years ago lived, died, and left their fossilized remains as an enduring testimony of their brief existence, so too the people who built the cathedrals, sculptured their pillars, and stained the glass of their windows are all long dead, and yet the works of their hands have not only endured through the centuries but have become part and parcel of the lives of the present-day inhabitants. These "fossils" that the people of old left behind remain as proof that they did indeed live, and as an enduring link between themselves and later generations.

Despite the religious atmosphere of the cathedrals, it is not from religion per se that Itsuki derives the feeling of peace that comes to him, but rather from his heightened perception of himself as a part of eternity, and from his growing acceptance of that role. Touring the eighth-century cathedral at Tournus, he finds the atmosphere inside the

imposing stone edifice so solemn that he and the other visitors involuntarily speak in hushed tones. He feels that he would like to remain here forever, that this is where he belongs. He confides this state of mind to his constant companion.

> --For the first time in my life I've found a place where I can feel at rest. As long as I'm walking here in this quiet, serene space surrounded by these ancient stones, I can't feel that death is all that terrifying. Until I entered this building, I was constantly intimidated by death.... Always I was afraid, in pain, distressed.
> --That is true, his companion replied. I can understand how you feel, not having any fear of death. The stillness in this place is death itself. This is how death is, silent and serene. Neither sorrow nor joy, neither love nor hate. Only stillness. This building has taught the men and women from the farming villages of Burgundy, those who have set foot herein, what death is. For 1200 years, millions, perhaps tens of millions, have knelt here, offered their prayers, and then made their way back to the soil of the great plain of Burgundy. Death is to become nothing. To be extinguished. To become earth. To melt into the stillness of this cathedral. (*Kaseki*, p. 291)

It should not be supposed, however, that such an acceptance of death must entail any rejection or negation of life. Indeed, even though Itsuki is inclined while inside the cathedral to regard death as something almost desirable, the moment he steps outside and finds the warmth of the sun a welcome change from the chill of the church's interior he feels equally drawn to life and equally willing to remain in this world forever.

> A mere ten minutes earlier, Itsuki had felt willing to die at any time. Now the feeling had changed to a desire to live forever. In one brief moment of time two diametrically opposed ideas had assailed him. And yet, Itsuki felt, they were not contradictory. (*Kaseki*, p. 294)

From the window of his hotel room that evening, Itsuki looks down on the scene in the town below. He sees a group of housewives doing their laundry beside a well, an old man smoking his pipe, two young lovers in the shade of a tree, children drawing pictures on the ground, an old woman watering her potted plants.

> Surely the townspeople were repeating such activities day in and day out. In a few years the young woman whispering her love to the youth would join the housewives gossiping at the wellside. She would give birth to many children, who would draw pictures on the ground. And having born a great number of children, she would turn into an old woman pouring water into flower pots.

> To live was just this sort of thing, Itsuki reflected. In all likelihood his own daughters, Ayako and Kiyoko, would end their lives in the same manner. His granddaughter Reiko also. (*Kaseki*, p. 300)

A similar scene takes place near the end of the novel when Itsuki journeys to Takato in Nagano Prefecture to view the cherry blossoms. It is a trip he had been planning to take with Mme. Marcelin, a Japanese woman whom he had met in France, but she has been forced to postpone her return to Japan, and Itsuki , his health now visibly failing, makes the trip without her. The scene is like a tableau, contrasting the ephemeral with the eternal. Like Itsuki, the cherry blossoms, have passed their peak; like them, he will shortly fall to the earth. And yet, overlooking the scene are the same mountains that Mme. Marcelin had seen twenty years before while living there during the war. She had gone down the same road that Itsuki is travelling, to view the blossoms on the same trees. Itsuki speculates that one day his granddaughter Reiko may come down this same road to view the same scene. As he reaches his destination his eyes fall on three elderly women seated beneath the tree bearing the most profuse blossoms of all. Here is a kind of fulfillment of the life cycle. The women are old, clearly they have few years left to live, and yet they appear serene and unperturbed. "They had lived out their long lives, and now they were taking their repose beneath the flowers." (*Kaseki*, p. 672)

Thus, what Itsuki learns as his own death draws near is that dying is an integral part of living, and as such presents no cause for sorrow or despair. One evening during the trip to Burgundy, after standing on the bank of the Saone River and watching its constant flow, he had reflected :

> As the river's flow goes on every minute, every hour, never ceasing, so also goes the flow of humanity, never stopping to rest. Those who are born and those who die are like brief flashes on the river's waves. Viewed as part of the great flow of mankind, even his own life was a momentary phenomenon, of no great importance. In the same way, his own death too was of no great importance. (*Kaseki*, p. 307)

To be born, to grow, to flourish, to decline, and to die are what it means to live. One generation makes way for the next. Itsuki is making his way out of the world while his infant granddaughter is making her way in ; he will die while she will flourish, but in time she too will grow old and die, as countless millions have done before either of

them. And although death is seen as a process of extinction, as the end of existence, there is no suggestion made that life is futile. One lives, and, in the natural course of events, one dies. Nevertheless, in some way impossible to define, it is good, proper, and meaningful to have lived.

In *Hoshi to Matsuri* the nature of life and death is not probed to nearly the same extent as in *Kaseki*, but neither is it by any means ignored. This novel's plot focuses on the protagonist's relationship with his deceased daughter and the process by which he comes to accept her death. Kayama Kōtarō, like Itsuki a successful Tokyo businessman, had divorced his first wife when their daughter Miharu was two years old. A year later he had remarried, and a year after that, when his new wife had given birth to a daughter, the four-year-old Miharu had been sent to live with Kayama's mother in the Izu countryside. At the age of eleven, following her grandmother's death, Miharu had been transferred to her mother's family register and had gone to Kyoto to live with her. During the ensuing years Kayama had seen his daughter on only four very brief occasions, all of them at her instigation, not his, until her death in a boating accident at the age of seventeen. Notwithstanding their estrangement, Kayama was nonetheless devastated by her loss, and although seven years have gone by since the tragedy, he is only now beginning to come to terms with it.

Equally devastated was Ōmiura, the father of the young man who died with Miharu in the accident, and like Kayama, he too has carried his unresolved grief for the past seven years. Closure has been especially difficult for both men to achieve because their children's bodies have never been discovered, but still lie in the depths of the lake, suspended, in the minds of both parents, in a state midway between life and death. Ōmiura's response has been to entrust his son to the protection of the numerous images of Kannon, a Buddhist goddess of mercy, that are enshrined in temples on the shores of Lake Biwa, where the accident had occurred, and has made it his special project to go and worship each and every one of them. Happening to encounter Ōmiura when he ventures to the scene of the accident seven years later, Kayama is drawn into the project, and does find some measure of comfort in worshipping the Kannon images himself. However, the opportunity having presented itself, he embarks upon a more ambitious quest to overcome his sense of bereavement.

A group of mountain climbers with whom Kayama is acquainted invite him to

accompany them on an excursion to the foot of Mt. Everest to view the October full moon. In a narrative device very similar to Itsuki's conversations with Death in *Kaseki*, Kayama has recently begun carrying on conversations in his mind with his deceased daughter. Anticipating that deep in the Himalayas, under the light of the full moon, he will truly be able to commune with her, to consider with her the nature of the bond between parents and children, the essence of the human being, and the questions of what life and death really are, he decides to accept his friends' invitation. But when, after a long and arduous trek, he actually finds himself at the foot of Mt. Everest looking at the moon, he finds, quite contrary to his expectations, that his daughter seems extremely remote, and he is left to ponder why. Has his mind been dulled by fatigue from the journey, he wonders, or have concerns about his business affairs in Tokyo perhaps intruded to drive his daughter from his mind? No, his daughter seems to tell him, the "problem" is simply that he has been given a glimpse of eternity.

In other words, far from the complex world of Tokyo, surrounded by towering mountains that have stood as silent witnesses to the passage of countless ages, beneath the same moon that has shone down on these same mountains from time immemorial, Kayama has sensed his own, as well as his daughter's, relative insignificance in the vast flow of unending time.

> It was cold, but Kayama found it hard to leave. The reason he had come to this kind of place had been to hold a private conversation with Miharu, but now he could find no inclination to do so. No conversation between the father who had survived and the daughter who had died was going to occur so long as he remained standing on this tableland. Man is born, and man dies. That was all. Just as to be born seemed to have no meaning, so to die also seemed meaningless. Such, in essence, was what the moon, now suspended directly above the plateau, seemed to be telling him. (*Hoshi to matsuri*, p. 466)

> Japan seemed small and far away. It was a little island lying in the ocean, a string of islands extending from the north to the south. On one of them was a small puddle of water. Lake Biwa. (*Hoshi to matsuri*, p. 483)

In the face of eternity, human beings become too insignificant to have any real importance. They simply are born and die and are absorbed into the eternal flow of time. So it has ever been, and so it will ever be. In this context, any meaning that we might

attach either to living or to dying fades away, but even so, the moon continues to shine, and time continues its onward flow. On the return journey Kayama's party stops at the home village of their Sherpa guides. A youthful member of the group pays a brief visit to his home to find that a funeral is in progress for his elder brother, and yet the lad does not appear particularly sad or upset. The Japanese members of the party assume that he will want to remain in the village, and they tell the Sherpa leader to let him do so, but the boy himself insists on continuing the journey. It would appear that the Sherpas, living in this harsh and forbidding land like their ancestors for generations before them, eking out their meager existence and praying for divine assistance, recognize their place in the flow of time.

Ironically, although Kayama goes to the Himalayas in hopes of communing with his daughter, what he actually gains from the excursion is quite the opposite--he is able to diminish his personal tragedy by coming to see it in eternal perspective. He comes to realize that his daughter's existence, now that she is dead, has lost its meaning, having no function but to cause pain to those whom she has left behind. It is only the grief of those who mourn her loss that imparts any significance to her death.

Kadan, the third novel to be considered in this study, has little to say about the actual nature of life and death, but much to say about another, not unrelated, question : How ought one to live? In what manner ought one to conduct one's life? *Kaseki* also grapples with this problem, but largely from a different perspective. Itsuki is dying, and like many people facing death, feels that he has spent his life striving for the wrong things while neglecting more important matters. His dilemma, then, becomes to identify something he can do during his few remaining months to impart meaning to the life he has lived. Enami Tōichirō, the protagonist of *Kadan*, has been shocked through a narrow brush with death into making a searching examination of his own life. He has come to much the same conclusions as Itsuki, but for him the dilemma is not what he should do before he dies, but what he should do since it has been ordained that he will live. *Kaseki*, we might say, portrays its hero's confrontation with death, while *Kadan* portrays its hero's confrontation with life.

Returning to Tokyo from Paris, Itsuki decides to tell no one about his illness. Having been assured that his condition is hopeless, he prefers to go on living normally for as long as possible, rather than to be immediately consigned to a hospital, an object of pity

and of no relevance to the living. But how, he agonizes, should he spend the time that he has left? In the manner in which he most wants to live, Death, still his constant companion, replies. But how does he want to live? In the past he had lived for his work. He had founded a construction company and built it up to the point that it now employs a staff of nearly two thousand persons--no mean accomplishment, but was that what he really wanted to do? With his life now drawing to an end, he thinks not. His life has been a constant quest for material gain that now seems hollow. Surely there must be something more.

Itsuki goes to visit Suwa Kota, a former business associate, who is dying of cancer. Aware of his condition and fully resigned to it, Suwa is able to converse frankly. Since becoming ill, he says, the work that he had devoted his life to has come to seem so unimportant that he feels he erred by immersing himself in it while he was in good health. In effect, he says, his life has been a failure. He should have lived in some other manner, with some other goal in mind. Indeed, he suspects that everyone, if only they had time to reflect, would come to the same conclusion about their own lives. What, then, Itsuki inquires, would Suwa do if he could live his life over? Although much closer to death that Itsuki, Suwa is no less baffled by the question. Previously he had said that if he could live for just one more year he would like to engage in Zen meditation and contemplate his own coming extinction and merging with the universe. To have lived is of no major significance, he has come to believe, but at the same time it is of no minor significance. But all Suwa is able to say, after some reflection, is that if he could live his own life over he would like to do it in an unsullied way, to have more consideration for others, not to push others aside in order to advance his own fortunes, not to be so concerned about material gain. But although he feels certain that a demonstrably "right" way to live does exist, he cannot express it in any more concrete terms.

> "...To live and keep myself pure, to live and be considerate of others. I can't put it any other way. To live in such a way that when you hear the song of a bird, you think, 'Ah, a bird is singing,' or when you see the flowers blooming, you think, 'Ah, the flowers are in bloom.' That would be a good way to live." (*Kaseki*, p. 391)

Even on the verge of death, Suwa can think of no better words than these to express what he feels was missing from his life. It is not that he is advocating a life of idleness. He recognizes that one needs to work, but working in order to live is not the same as

living for the sake of one's work. There are more important things in life that people too often lose sight of.

However, Itsuki's immediate decision is to disregard both what Suwa has said and what he himself has been vaguely sensing since Paris, and to spend his last remaining months working harder than ever before in his life. Zen contemplation may be appropriate for Suwa, but not for a man of action like himself. But it takes only a single day at the office for his resolution to falter. Work does not interest him. If he were healthy he would be immersed in it, but he quickly comes to realize that in his present condition he bears a greater resemblance to Suwa than to his former self.

Itsuki never does find a truly satisfying answer to the question. What he does find, ultimately, is such a complete acceptance of his own impending death that the prospect of dying becomes almost attractive. When he is carried to the hospital after collapsing at the office, the attending physician orders him to remain at rest, and asks whether there is anyone that he absolutely must see. Itsuki replies,

> "No, it's quite all right. I don't have any appointments at this time."
> And it was true, he had no appointments at all. Before he was carried into the hospital he had had all manner of appointments, but now he had none whatsoever. He felt consigned to a kind of special zone midway between life and death. He had been taken away from his company, from his home, from his family. He had cast all his tasks aside leaving them half done, but, be that as it may, he had been taken away from them. (*Kaseki*, p. 704)

Later, he lies in his bed and reflects :

> Death plays in some way the role of cleansing human society. Love and hate, resentment and envy all disappear. The human relations surrounding the person who dies are purified. As one lives on year after year, something akin to slime builds up around him. No matter how circumspect one may be, we are all the same. And when the person is covered with slime or overgrown with moss, death comes and takes him away. Which is quite as it should be. Before long the person finds that his life is becoming a burden, that he is becoming distasteful to himself. (*Kaseki*, p. 707)

As Itsuki comes to understand that for him this is indeed the end, his acceptance

becomes total. Things he had wanted to do, things he had been asked to do, things it had seemed he must do are all left undone, and strangely they no longer matter. Indeed, to Itsuki, isolated from the outside world in a small room with white walls, it seems as if those things no longer even exist. The novel could have ended on this note quite appropriately, and arguably should have. Everything that has happened thus far has led the reader to expect Itsuki's death to be the climactic event that will bring the plot to its final resolution. However, in what some readers may regard as a significant flaw in the novel, the plot takes an unexpected turn. The Tokyo specialists who now examine Itsuki differ in their judgement from the doctors in Paris who originally diagnosed his condition. The cancer turns out to be operable after all, and so the novel ends not with the protagonist's expected death, but with his unexpected return to the world of the living. Itsuki is not overjoyed, at least not at first. After coming to a thorough acceptance of his impending death, to go on living seems like a burden. It is only when he leaves the hospital and actually enters once more into the stream of life that he regains his gratitude for being alive. But although he is convinced anew that it is a blessing to live, the question of how one ought to live remains unresolved. Thus the novel ends with its hero pondering what he must do with the extra years of life that he has unexpectedly been granted.

In *Kadan* the hero's encounter with death takes the form of a sudden traffic accident in which everyone but him is killed, while he alone escapes with only minor injuries. Thus, unlike Itsuki, Tōichirō goes through no process of reflecting upon life while preparing for death. Rather, he emerges from the experience with a feeling that he has died and been reborn, and that in living his new life he must avoid the mistakes he made in his former existence. But how ought he to live? This question, which Itsuki was pondering as *Kaseki* came to an end, is the same one that Tōichirō is pondering as *Kadan* begins. In this sense, the latter novel can be seen as a continuation of the former. Tōichirō is not Itsuki, but the two men are similar enough in terms of age, status, values, and occupation (like Itsuki, Tōichirō is a "self-made" man, the president of a large construction firm that he founded and developed) that one can easily be seen as an extension of the other.

Tōichirō's accident occurred while he was travelling by car in Central Asia. A day's journey from Tehran, Tōichirō's driver had taken ill, and an elderly European gentleman staying at the same hotel had graciously offered to let him ride in his own car. The

accident occurred on a sharp curve on the road through the Elburz Mountains on the way to Tehran.

According to his conversations with Tōichirō prior to the accident, the elderly gentleman had spent most of his life working for the sole purpose of making money, and with considerable success, until at the age of seventy he had suddenly come to feel that his life was devoid of meaning. Resolving to devote the remaining years of his life to something that he truly wanted to do, he had turned to philanthropic pursuits. When Tōichirō met him, he was travelling in northern Iran searching for suitable places to establish medical clinics for the local inhabitants. But right up to the moment of his death he had harbored regrets that he had not begun sooner, when there would have been enough time to accomplish something truly meaningful.

Even so, as far as the old gentleman was concerned, it is not necessarily by doing some kind of good to others that we give value to our lives ; the important thing is simply to live for oneself, to live as one wants to live and not as outside forces would compel one to. That, he maintains, is what it truly means to live, and that is what Tōichirō concludes he must do. His work suddenly fails to interest him, almost as if, having died, he has no further connection with it. What life he has remaining amounts to a bonus that belongs to him, not to his company. He makes up his mind to retire, and ten months after returning home to Tokyo he does so.

However, Tōichirō does not give up his work with any particular plan in mind. The question of how to spend his "bonus" is not so easily answered. All that is clear to him is that, as the old gentleman said, he must live for himself, according to his own desires. The specifics can be taken care of later ; the matter of immediate importance is to take the initial step. And so Tōichirō leaves his firm, and then spends the next three months doing little but sit in his study at home, contemplating his garden, watching the seasons change, and pondering how he should spend the rest of his life, but he feels no sense of urgency. Which is not to say that his mind is as idle as his body. He has time to think and time to remember, and what he remembers are his relationships with other persons--with friends, former teachers, family members, associates--that were given short shrift because of the constant pressures of work. Work, he realizes now, has exacted a heavy toll in terms of interpersonal relationships.

In the ensuing months, Tōichirō acts, although with little in the way of a conscious plan, in order to make amends for neglected relationships and unfulfilled obligations. He travels to Kyoto to pay his respects at the grave of one of his former university professors and to call on the man's widow. Although he had felt greatly indebted to his teacher, he had neglected to attend the funeral and had never visited the grave. Realizing that he scarcely knows his youngest daughter, who is now grown up and making preparations to be married, he takes her with him on the Kyoto trip and manages to make some progress toward rebuilding the relationship that the pressures of work had suppressed. When her school physician expresses fears that Tōichirō's granddaughter may be in danger of losing her eyesight, he shares the family concern and even visits a Shinto shrine--for the first time in thirty years--to pray for her. He assists the daughter of a former sweetheart, who had married another man rather than wait for him to return from the war, in finding employment. Although he has declined numerous invitations to lavish wedding receptions and other formal events that he felt little obligation and no desire to attend, he accepts one to a simple reception in honor of the newly married daughter of the neighborhood barber. Their stations in life are vastly different, but the invitation is an unmistakably sincere one and he has a genuine liking for the family. By chance he meets an old friend from university who is in the midst of personal bankruptcy proceedings, and convinces him that there are still things worth living for.

Perhaps most important of all, Tōichirō's thoughts turn to his second daughter, who some thirty years before had been born prematurely, died only seven days after her birth, and was laid to rest in the family grave of a distant relative without even being given a name. In much the same way that Itsuki converses with Death in *Kaseki*, or Kayama with Miharu in *Hoshi to matsuri*, Tōichirō converses in his mind with this deceased infant daughter that he had virtually forgotten, and manages to establish a kind of relationship with her in his mind. Yet even so, after holding services at the grave on the anniversary of her death, he reflects with keen regret that he has ended up showing more love to this child who lived just seven days than to his other children who are still living. That he has erred greatly as a parent, he concludes, is the most important lesson he has learned since retiring from work.

In ways such as these Tōichirō's appreciation of human relationships is enhanced to a considerable degree, but the person who distills the essence of life into simple terms that he can understand is Sayama, an old friend with whom he has long been out of touch.

Sayama, who had worked for a newspaper until retirement age, and then as a consultant to two small publishing firms, both of which have gone bankrupt, now ekes out a bare living cultivating and selling bonsai plants, doing garden work, giving lectures on haiku poetry, and occasionally writing advertising copy. His life is hardly one of luxury, but he is quite contented and unconcerned about the future. One way or another a man can get enough to eat, he says, and that is enough. On the subject of life, he has this to say :

> "How long you're going to live is already predetermined, so things are hardly going to turn out the way you want them to. But still, if a person doesn't live out the life he's been given.... Most guys don't. They cut their lives short by working too hard, or die young worrying about things that don't matter. No good trying to become rich or famous either. Try that, and you'll to overreach yourself for sure. You'll cut your life short. Just live out the life God gave you, and spare a few thoughts for your dead parents as well." (*Kadan*, pp. 193-194)

No other character in any of the three novels sums things up as succinctly as this. Life is a good thing, a divine gift, and having been granted life, one has an obligation to live. But in living, one must not lose sight of what has true value, and highest on the list of such things are the relationships between persons, relationships that create bonds more enduring than the lives of the persons themselves. Aside from this it does not really matter what one does with one's life, provided one avoids causing pain or hardship to others. One should simply live and be thankful.

These are the things that Tōichirō comes to understand more clearly, but the feeling that he ought to be doing "something" during these latter years of his life persists. Some readers may find it ironic that, eight months after leaving his company, Tōichirō resolves his dilemma by returning to work. Without his capable leadership the company has not fared well during the current economic recession, and is on the verge of bankruptcy. Tōichirō's knowledge and expertise are needed, and he decides to step into the breach.

There is a similar episode in *Kaseki*. Like Tōichirō after his brush with death, Itsuki, upon learning that his days were numbered, had lost interest in his work and ended up turning over most of the actual running of the company to subordinates. Yet when he is informed that the company is in serious difficulty, Itsuki ignores his own failing health and returns to the helm with no other thought but to keep the firm afloat. The question, Why? is never really answered. Itsuki himself does not understand what motivates him ;

he only knows that it is something he has to do, even though whether the company stands or falls will soon be of no importance to him personally. But he knows also that this time he is not acting out of interest in the work itself, or from a desire for material gain.

In *Kaseki* Inoue's view appears to be simply that there is something in the life force, indefinable perhaps, but nonetheless real, that compels people to struggle no matter how futile or meaningless the fight may appear in rational terms. It is a baffling but wonderful aspect of the human spirit. As long as there is life, a person must continue to strive, and even though the struggle may defy all logic, it is neither foolish nor pointless. On the contrary, if the struggle is undertaken for its own sake and with no selfish ulterior motive, it is most admirable. In Kadan, however, the point is made that Toichiro's return to work in order to save his company from financial collapse is something that he genuinely wants to do, and given all that has been said about the virtue of living according to one's own desires, that is sufficient justification. To Tōichirō, it is noted, the company is very much like one of his children, something he had created and nurtured. Just as he would willingly do everything in his power if one of his children were in need, he chooses not to abandon the company in its time of crisis. Granted, it is a return to the work from which he had been striving to escape, the work that had robbed his life of so much, but his reasons for returning are quite different from the materialistic goals that had led him to found the company and devote his life to it. This time he is taking on a task for the sake of the task itself. His motives are pure, and with what he has learned about life's values in the recent past, he expects that he can retain sight of them during the difficult times ahead. The important thing is that at last he is doing something that he genuinely wants to do, and that is the essence of living for oneself.

The idea that interpersonal relations, especially but by no means solely those between family members, are what life is ultimately about, and that if these relations have gone amiss in any way they must be placed in order, can be found in all three novels to some extent, but most notably in *Hoshi to matsuri*. A related concept is that fate plays a prominent role in human life, and that life cannot proceed smoothly unless the workings of fate are accepted. Fate, as Inoue uses the term, does not appear to mean some all-powerful force that deprives people of any semblance of free will, shaping their lives according to some predestined pattern, so much as things that simply occur in the natural course of events, things over which people have no control. When such things happen,

they have happened ; they could not be avoided and they cannot be undone ; therefore the only thing to do is accept them and get on with living our lives.

What this means in the case of *Hoshi to matsuri* is that not only must grief be assuaged and the bonds between the living and the dead attended to, but that ill feelings between living persons must be purged as well. For Kayama the vital matter of accepting his daughter's death, thus putting her to rest in his mind, is hampered by the fact that he considers her boyfriend, who took her out on the lake in a boat, to be responsible for her death. The young man himself being dead, he transfers his resentment to the father, and thus cannot free himself from the conviction that Ōmiura is the perpetrator of the crime and he the victim. Although intellectually Kayama understands that the accident was no more than the workings of fate, he feels that he cannot accept this emotionally unless Ōmiura will acknowledge that everything was the fault of his son. He expects that his resentment toward Ōmiura and his son will prove to be as long-lasting as his grief over the death of his own daughter. Ironically, Ōmiura later admits to holding similar feelings of resentment toward Kayama's daughter.

When they meet again seven years after the accident, however, a kind of bond between Kayama and Ōmiura begins to form. Both men have experienced a tragedy, the memory of which remains acute. Kayama's reaction has been to repress his grief ; for seven years he has even done his utmost not just to stay away from Lake Biwa but from any lake at all lest unbearable memories be aroused. Only now has he become able to confront his feelings directly. Ōmiura, meanwhile, has managed to achieve a measure of comfort from his pilgrimages to the Kannon images, but he too in his own way has gone on nurturing his grief for seven long years, making no real recovery, but simply growing accustomed to it.

The first time Kayama goes to worship a Kannon image, he has no real interest in doing so ; he goes simply because Ōmiura has extended the invitation and he can find no graceful way to refuse. Contrary to his expectations, however, he finds that the images do indeed bring him a degree of comfort, and he continues to make visits to other temples in the area whenever an opportunity arises. What makes the images comforting to Kayama appears to be partly the aura of divine mercy that surrounds them, partly because there is something about each one of them that reminds him of Miharu, and partly because the images, being hundreds of years old, make him aware of the flow of

time and of his daughter's and his own places within it. This latter aspect is probably the most important factor ; it is a manifestation of the eternity that he later glimpses more clearly while watching the full moon deep in the Himalayas. It is only after his trip to the mountains, having placed his daughter's death in eternal perspective, that Kayama finds himself becoming kindly disposed towards Ōmiura. He also finds himself beginning to think of his daughter and Ōmiura's son as two persons who died together (an idea that previously had made him angry every time Ōmiura mentioned it) rather than as two unrelated persons who coincidentally died in the same accident.

After returning to Japan, Kayama continues to seek comfort by making his rounds of the Kannon images around Lake Biwa. There is one that he and Ōmiura have agreed to go and see together, however, and this one he deliberately avoids, waiting until the following spring when finally Ōmiura is able to make the pilgrimage with him. Noting that it will be the night of the full moon, the two fathers arrange to take a boat out on Lake Biwa, where they can conduct a kind of funeral service that will purge their grief, heal any lingering resentment between themselves, and send their children's spirits home to their empty graves. So they make their way to the scene of the tragedy. Ōmiura invokes all the assorted Kannons of the lakeshore, inviting them to attend. In this religiously toned atmosphere the two fathers cast flowers into the lake -- at which moment the light of the full moon obligingly breaks through the clouds.

I have called this essay "Death in the Writings of Inoue Yasushi", but "Life in the Writings of Inoue Yasushi" might have been equally appropriate, for in Inoue's view life and death are not the antithesis of one another, but complementary aspects of the phenomenon of existence. Dying is a natural consequence of living, and as such it is no calamity. Considered within the vastness of time and space, the life of one person is of no great moment, nor is that person's death. Life is a current in the flow of eternity ; individual lives are like ephemeral ripples on the surface of the stream, each one arising from the one that preceded it, and giving rise to the one that follows. The fact that life lasts but a moment and must inevitably end in death and extinction is no reason for cynicism or despair. To live is a blessing, and inasmuch as we have been granted life, it is our duty to live, recognizing that to die having lived well is nothing to fear or regret. But how does one live well? That is the eternal question, and if there is a tragedy attached to death, it is to die without ever seeking the answer.