

The Fiction of Endo Shusaku in Recent English Translation

by
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Summary

Many foreign observers were surprised that Oe Kenzaburo and not the more well known Endo Shusaku won the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature. An examination of the three most recently issued English translations of Endo's works, with their various Christian themes, may help account for the particularly affinity that Western readers have for his work. The earliest of these works, the novel *The Sea and Poison* (1958) represents Endo's attempt to assess the problem of individual responsibility, especially as it relates to the acts of Japanese medical personnel during World War II. In *The Girl I Left Behind* (1964), Endo took a distinctly Christian direction, and treated the virtues of compassion and self-abnegation as Christian values. Finally, in his latest collection of short stories, *The Final Martyrs* (1993), Endo analyzes what he takes to be the uncongeniality of the Christian religion.

Key Words: Endo Shusaku, Christianity, *The Sea and Poison*, *The Girl I Left Behind*, *The Final Martyrs*

Many foreign observers were no doubt surprised when the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature went to Oe Kenzaburo, instead of to the more widely-known — at least to Western readers — Endo Shusaku. In fact, Richard Lloyd Parry, writing in England's *The Independent*, described Oe's winning the Nobel as "a surprise," because, he added, "To Western critics, Endo has always been the front runner."¹

Over the years several critics have come to consider Endo as "the Japanese Graham Greene." Because Endo, who as a young schoolboy became a convert to Catholicism with his mother, after her divorce, has frequently written on a variety of Christian themes, the facile comparison with the more diverse Greene has persisted. Endo's own Christianity has made him a cultural anomaly in Japan and it is this fact that has done much to bring him to the attention of Western readers. Indeed, this Christian sensibility has in no small measure struck a positive chord with critics outside Japan, as has been his focus on guilt-ridden, brooding main characters.

Yet, as the author and psychologist Robert Coles has recently observed, it is notable that Endo himself, in the epigraph to *Deep River*, his latest novel, "by implication dismisses those critics who have made much of his relatively unusual situation as a Christian intellectual" in Japan. According to Coles, Endo is suggesting that "his story will tell of a universal vulnerability, and the yearning that goes with it — the desire for a

redemptive journey, a passage into more promising, secure terrain.”²

Endo’s earliest international recognition came with the publication of *The Sea and Poison*, a novel that had also brought him to national prominence in 1958 at the age of 35, following the early success of his novella, *Shiroi hito* (“White Men”), which won the Akutagawa Prize in 1955. *The Sea and Poison* earned him both the Mainichi and Shincho prizes. The 1995 Peter Owen edition of Michael Gallagher’s 1972 translation of *The Sea and Poison* allows us to consider this early novel, which many include among Endo’s major works.

Endo’s task in *The Sea and Poison* was nothing less daunting than an attempt to examine the problem of individual responsibility of the Japanese involved in World War II. Fifty years after the war, this is still a sensitive issue that many are trying to address. How much more radical, even sensational, would this subject have been, then, just thirteen years after the war ended?

The novel’s subject is the vivisections that were performed at the medical school of Fukuoka University on American prisoners of war. Medical experimentation on live humans on the order of what was done by the Nazi’s Dr. Josef Mengele is indeed sensational material, yet Endo does not indulge in sensationalism. Instead, he concentrates on the varying responses to this atrocity by three participants: two young interns and a nurse, as he seeks to assess the Japanese capacity for bearing individual guilt.

The Sea and Poison opens several years after the war, with a new patient wondering why his physician, Suguro, is so oddly taciturn. Furthermore, Suguro’s touch had “a cold metallic chillness”³ to it, making the man feel more like a laboratory specimen than a patient.

Clearly, Suguro is plagued by his war crimes, and Endo goes back to the war years to examine this young intern’s life. Suguro is characterized as not so much evil or sinister but, simply, numb. When he first sees the captured U. S. airmen he “felt neither pity and sympathy nor hostility and hatred.”⁴ Rather, his “mental sluggishness,”⁵ that is, war-induced weariness, Endo seems to infer, at first serves to block any sense of concern.

When he is asked to participate in the vivisections, he agrees, only to wonder shortly afterward, “Why did I have to get involved. . . ? If it had only occurred to me to refuse. . . I would have refused.”⁶

Dr. Toda, another intern, had been raised as the spoiled son of the town doctor, and, after learning how readily people would cater to him, developed a cold cynicism that excluded any possibility of compassion. A revealing moment in his youth was when he stole his teacher’s prize, rare butterfly. Toda desired it with “something very much like lust. I wanted to have the pleasure of inserting a hypodermic needle into that soft, silver gleaming body.”⁷

As a physician he was immune to his patients’ cries for painkillers, which he would refuse as being dangerous. In reality, he says to himself, “what I was actually thinking was how troublesome and inconsiderate these patients and their families could be.”⁸

The third figure in this drama is the least fully realized, Nurse Ueda. She plays a minor role in the experiments and seems to be Endo's representative of the less-educated, common person. Typical of her observations, she asks a senior doctor, with whom she is having an affair, "Is a white person's skin hard to cut, I wonder?"⁹

The actual medical experiments were done to answer such insane questions as: how much saline solution could be injected into the bloodstream before death occurs; and, if one's lung is excised, what is the limit "to which the bronchial tubes may be cut before death occurs."¹⁰ Endo details one of the vivisections done to investigate the latter question, for which the unwitting prisoner, with "his gentle blue eyes and. . . friendly smile" readily got on the operating table: "It seems that the confidence that men have in doctors as a profession was enough to put the prisoner at ease."¹¹ After eighty minutes, he was dead.

The interns and the nurse later feel uneasy, and Suguro even says that one day they will have to answer for what they have done. Toda, however, dismisses this and asks, if these people to whom they would answer "had been put in the same situation, would they have done anything different? So much for the punishments of society."¹²

This short but powerful novel addresses the fundamental issues of guilt and personal responsibility and succeeds in adding some dimension to the individuals who hid behind both their surgical masks and their membership in their otherwise faceless group.

Endo's novel, *The Girl I Left Behind*, originally published as *Watashi ga suteta onna* in 1964, was translated into English in 1994 by Mark Williams. This novel provides yet another vantage for non-Japanese readers to assess Endo's achievement.

Set in Tokyo, "some three years after the end of the war,"¹³ *The Girl I Left Behind* begins with a convincing depiction of the hand-to-mouth existence of the narrator, a university student named Yoshioka. The odd jobs that he would take to earn enough money to live on are a far cry from the sort of "arbeits" available today, and say much about the quality of daily life during the Occupation. One of the oddest part-time jobs Yoshioka undertakes is as a "motesaseya," which involves his helping "weak-willed old men. . . win the approval of the women employees in the bars."¹⁴ As Endo explains, in those financially hard times there existed "a whole series of trades being plied that defy all attempts at rationalization."¹⁵

If Yoshioka isn't the sort of young man to have scruples about how he earns money, neither is he overly concerned about what he is willing to do to get a woman to go to bed with him. Thus, he responds to a girl's letter (printed in the "Readers' Corner" of a magazine devoted to popular film stars) asking to meet other fans of a certain star. Yoshioka cynically arranges to meet the girl, nineteen-year-old Mitsu, in order to seduce and then discard her "like a puppy."¹⁶

While Yoshioka's coming upon the letter in the magazine may have been by mere chance, Endo asks, "but which encounters in our lives do not stem from chance?"¹⁷

Yoshioka would later realize that in events of chance perhaps God chooses “such insignificant and routine incidents in our everyday lives to reveal His existence.”¹⁸ This also seems to be one of the main points of Endo’s novel.

Although Mitsu proves to be rather unattractive, and even naive, she is quite willing to please people. “She had this habit of empathizing with anyone who appeared wretched or bitter,” and “would do her utmost to comfort the person in need.”¹⁹ Realizing that, Yoshioka plays up the fact that he had polio as a child, and before long they are in a futon in a cheap Shibuya inn, though “it was all over within seconds.”²⁰

Not only does Mitsu’s empathy prove portentous, but so do the facts that she wears a crucifix around her neck and that she has “a weird and unseemly dark patch on her white arm.”²¹ It takes a while for Endo to get to the implications of the dark patch, but it eventually leads local doctors to suspect that she has nothing less than leprosy.

Meanwhile, Yoshioka has dropped Mitsu, graduated, and found work with a small company where he falls in love with a woman who, by a Dickensian coincidence, turns out to have once worked with Mitsu. Yoshioka later feels some guilt over his treatment of Mitsu and tries to locate her, if only to make amends before getting on with his life.

He also finds himself haunted by the lyrics of a popular song, from which Endo has drawn the novel’s title:

“That girl I left behind that day,

I wonder where she’s living now.”²²

He does learn in time that after a brief stint at the red-light section of Ikebukuro, in what used to be called a Turkish Bath, Mitsu is now living in a Catholic sanatorium near Mt. Fuji. Although it turns out that her condition was mistakenly diagnosed, compassionate soul that she is, Mitsu decides to stay on and work among the lepers for the rest of her life.

In an afterword to the novel Endo ingenuously expresses embarrassment for what he terms “the immature techniques revealed in certain places.”²³ More interestingly, he explains that during his own work at a leprosarium, while a student volunteer, he heard about a case of a young woman on whom he later modelled Mitsu.

The “girl” left behind is, on one level, Yoshioka’s abandoned Mitsu; but, inasmuch as Mitsu’s self-abnegation and compassion are to be considered (in Endo’s terms) as Christian values, the novel takes on a special didactic weight. Endo has acknowledged that what he really sought to depict was “the Jesus I left behind,” in that Mitsu embodies the values that Christians tend to abandon every day:

Mitsu can be seen as modelled on Jesus, abandoned by his own disciples; she is modelled on the Jesus whom all Christians are guilty of abandoning on a daily basis in their everyday lives.²⁴

Though a relatively short novel, *The Girl I Left Behind* certainly offers the reader a

striking example of Endo's Christian sensibility, complete with his usual guilt-ridden narrator. But, it should also be noted, certain of his observations do tend toward the banal. At one point, for example, Yoshioka views Tokyo from the roof of a department store and suddenly becomes "aware that each of these people [seen below] was involved in the process of living, just as I was. So many lives. A whole spectrum of lives."²⁵ Also, Mark Williams' translation is occasionally flat and, at times, clumsy: are people actually "licking the dried cuttlefish" they take into movie theatres?

Still, *The Girl I Left Behind* vividly rehearses a number of the themes that have made Endo Shusaku so widely known as Japan's least secular modern writer. For readers who have yet to explore Endo's work, this novel would not be a bad place to begin.

What may strike some prospective readers as an off-putting title for a collection of short fiction, may well seem likely to those others who have come to appreciate Endo Shusaku's fondness for Christian themes. *The Final Martyrs* (Saigo no junkyosha) is Endo's second collection of stories to be translated into English by the capable Van C. Gessel, and this 1993 edition provides the reader with a fresh opportunity to reassess this acclaimed author, now in his seventy-second year.

The title story is also the collection's earliest, dating back to 1959. It is also the book's only piece of historical fiction, set as it is early in the Meiji era in Urugami, near Nagasaki, and is concerned with the government persecution of Japanese Christians.

Endo provides graphic depiction of the "dodoi" torture the Japanese Christians endured, in which they were hoisted upon a cross and beaten while "their arms and legs, throat and chest were bound with ropes, which were all knotted together in one spot behind their backs."²⁶ But the story of the few resolute martyrs who refused to denounce their faith fades into flatness because of Endo's decision to focus on one character whose clumsiness and cowardice repeatedly get him into trouble. This character is also unable, ultimately, to face martyrdom as his friends do, though he gamely tries and fails, as we all well might, Endo seems to suggest.

In his preface to this edition Endo explained why he writes short stories as well as novels:

In my own case, I have found that the best way to give concrete embodiment to my themes is to continue alternating between the writing of short stories and novels. Still, a good deal of time passes between the point when I drive the chisel into the block of ice and the moment when I can sense that my characters have begun to move.

When those characters begin to move, I write a short story about them in a different locale. This allows me to breathe a fuller life into them. As a result, I can only assume that the characters who appear in the short stories must be living in some form or other in the longer works that I am composing even now.²⁷

This is certainly the case in "Shadows" (1968), one of his many crypto-autobiograph-

ical pieces, which takes as its form a long, unmailed letter written to a Catholic missionary priest, and which is reminiscent of Endo's 1956 novel, *Yellow Man*, in which a student writes a long letter to a French missionary. In "Shadows" the priest is Spanish and has left the priesthood, married and fathered a child. The narrator's disappointment with this man who played a formative if not always favorable role in his youth, and in the life of his divorced mother, is all the more affecting when Endo sums up the concept of influence: "We never realize what sort of marks we leave upon the lives of others. . . [which is] just as the wind twists the shape of a pine tree planted on a sandy beach. . ." ²⁸

Endo also includes in this collection two examples of what seems to be becoming virtually a once-a-decade practice: "A Fifty-year-old Man" (1976) and "A Sixty-year-old Man" (1983). "A Forty-year-old Man" (1964), in fact, appeared in his first collection of stories, and one can well imagine what Endo is currently working on, now that he has turned seventy. In both stories, the fifty and sixty year old protagonists may have different names but both are burdened by similar middle-aged ennui and the bitter-sweet ruminations on growing older and approaching death. They also share a curious sexual fetish: the love of the scent of a woman, to borrow the title of a recent movie.

In the younger character's case, he enjoys taking dancing lessons as a way to "tone up his legs," ²⁹ or so he tells his wife. What he enjoys more is holding his nineteen-year-old dance partner, Mimi-chan, so that he can "savour the smell of sweat emitted by the body of this woman young enough to be his daughter." ³⁰ Inhaling this scent "thrilled" him "to a momentary sensation not unlike vertigo." ³¹ In the story of the sixty-year-old man, the main character is a writer struggling to rewrite his *Life of Jesus*, but who also likes to visit a coffee shop on breaks in order to stare at the high school girls there. When these girls walk by he picks up the "pristine smell" of their bodies. This "aroma of sweat" that he savors is part of his desperate effort "to suck in the smells of life at its zenith," ³² as he approaches its nadir. It also makes for a neatly contrived irony that the narrator cannot escape: how it is possible for the author of such a religious work to want to seduce a high school girl, all the while appearing to the world as half of a placidly married elderly couple.

The only light moments in this collection can be found in "Japanese in Warsaw" (1979), inasmuch as Endo depicts a group of risible Japanese male tourists in Europe who have detoured to Poland because they had heard that many tall, blonde women could be found there. A local Japanese expatriate is hired as the tour guide and when he instructs the men on how to pick up prostitutes, "he knew that this was the only time they would listen to him carefully, staring into his face like obedient school children." ³³ The story takes a serious turn when Imamiya, one of the would-be Romeos, and the girl he has paid for, discover, by a remarkable coincidence, their mutual awareness of a Polish missionary priest who sacrificed himself in Auschwitz. At the end Imamiya regrets his having missed the opportunity to know the priest whom he had

once encountered as a child in Nagasaki.

Other stories use similar surprise endings and coincidences, accompanied by religious allusions, such as “The Last Supper” (1984) that takes Jesus’ sublime injunction to eat His body literally into modern-day cannibalism. Throughout *The Final Martyrs* a number of more obvious elements recur: the melancholy middle-aged man haunted by guilt and saddened by his childhood spent in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, who, because of his mother, converted to Catholicism yet does not always feel comfortable with this religion, which in turn causes another round of guilt.

Endo has written elsewhere that he has sought throughout his writing career “To take the Christian religion which was so uncongenial to me as a Japanese, analyze why it was so uncongenial, and in some way to make it something more compatible.”³⁴ To that end he appears to have written the majority of the stories in *The Final Martyrs*.

Ultimately, it is well to consider Robert Coles’ observation of the literary career of Endo Shusaku:

If Christianity holds up to us the lonely individual challenged by a God who entered history, Buddhism gives us people who are ready to surrender, finally, a measure of their human and spiritual particularity and who, with acceptance, join their fellow creatures as part of the great tide of humanity. Mr. Endo manages to merge both of these streams of faith, bringing together in a flow that is, indeed, deep. His work is a soulful gift to a world he keeps rendering as unrelievedly parched.³⁵

NOTES

1. Richard Lloyd Parry, *The Independent*, qtd. in Endo Shusaku, *The Sea and Poison*. Translated by Michael Gallagher. London: Peter Owen, 1995.
2. Robert Coles, “The Great Tide of Humanity.” *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 May 1995, p. 1.
3. Endo, *The Sea and Poison*, p. 20.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
13. Endo, *The Girl I Left Behind*. Translated by Mark Williams. London: Peter Owen, 1994, p. 7.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

20. Ibid., p. 53.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 51.
23. Ibid., p. 195.
24. Ibid., p. 196.
25. Ibid., p. 75.
26. Endo, *The Final Martyrs*. Translated by Van C. Gessel. London: Peter Owen, 1993, p. 17.
27. Ibid., p. [5].
28. Ibid., p. 54.
29. Ibid., p. 59.
30. Ibid., p. 67.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 132.
33. Ibid., p. 101.
34. Endo, qtd. in, John Lewell, *Modern Japanese Novelists* (New York: Kodansha, 1993), p. 85.
35. Coles, p. 21.

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