



OSAMU DAZAI

NO LONGER  
HUMAN



**NO LONGER HUMAN**

***BY OSAMU DAZAI***

**TRANSLATED BY DONALD KEENE**

**A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK**

*This translation is dedicated with affection  
to Nancy and Edmundo Lassalle*

# **TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION**

I think that Osamu Dazai would have been gratified by the reviews his novel *The Setting Sun* received when the English translation was published in the United States. Even though some of the critics were distressed by the picture the book drew of contemporary Japan, they one and all discussed it in the terms reserved for works of importance. There was no trace of the condescension often bestowed on writings emanating from remote parts of the world, and for once nobody thought to use the damning adjective “exquisite” about an unquestionably Japanese product. It was judged among its peers, the moving and beautiful books of the present generation.

One aspect of *The Setting Sun* puzzled many readers, however, and may puzzle others in Dazai’s second novel *No Longer Human*:<sup>1</sup> the role of Western culture in Japanese life today. Like Yozo, the chief figure of *No Longer Human*, Dazai grew up in a small town in the remote north of Japan, and we might have expected his novels to be marked by the simplicity, love of nature and purity of sentiments of the inhabitants of such a place. However, Dazai’s family was rich and educated, and from his childhood days he was familiar with European literature, American movies, reproductions of modern paintings and sculpture and much else of our civilization. These became such important parts of his own experience that he could not help being influenced by them, and he mentioned them quite as freely as might any author in Europe or America. In reading his works, however, we are sometimes made aware that Dazai’s understanding or use of these elements of the West is not always the same as ours. It is easy to conclude from this that Dazai had only half digested them, or even that the Japanese as a whole have somehow misappropriated our culture.

I confess that I find this parochialism curious in the United States. Here where our suburbs are jammed with a variety of architecture which bears no relation to the antecedents of either the builders or the dwellers; where white people sing Negro spirituals and a Negro soprano sings Lucia di Lammermoor at the Metropolitan Opera; where our celebrated national dishes, the frankfurter, the hamburger and chow mein betray by their very names non-American origins: can we with honesty rebuke the Japanese for a lack of purity in their modern culture? And can we criticize them for borrowing from us, when we are almost as conspicuously in their debt? We find it normal that we drink tea, their beverage, but curious that they should

drink whiskey, ours. Our professional decorators, without thinking to impart to us an adequate background in Japanese aesthetics, decree that we should brighten our rooms with Buddhist statuary or with lamps in the shapes of paper-lanterns. Yet we are apt to find it incongruous if a Japanese ornaments his room with examples of Christian religious art or a lamp of Venetian glass. Why does it seem so strange that another country should have a culture as conglomerate as our own?

There are, it is true, works of recent Japanese literature which are relatively untouched by Western influence. Some of them are splendidly written, and convince us that we are getting from them what is most typically Japanese in modern fiction. If, however, we do not wish to resemble the Frenchman who finds the detective story the only worthwhile part of American literature, we must also be willing to read Japanese novels in which a modern (by modern I mean Western) intelligence is at work.

A writer with such an intelligence—Dazai was one—may also be attracted to the Japanese traditional culture, but it will virtually be with the eyes of a foreigner who finds it appealing but remote. Dostoievski and Proust are much closer to him than any Japanese writer of, say, the eighteenth century. Yet we should be unfair to consider such a writer a cultural *déraciné*; he is not much farther removed from his eighteenth century, after all, than we are from ours. In his case, to be sure, a foreign culture has intervened, but that culture is now in its third generation in Japan. No Japanese thinks of his business suit as an outlandish or affected garb; it is not only what he normally wears, but was probably also the costume of his father and grandfather before him. To wear Japanese garments would actually be strange and uncomfortable for most men. The majority of Japanese of today wear modern Western culture also as they wear their clothes, and to keep reminding them that their ancestors originally attired themselves otherwise is at once bad manners and foolish.

It may be wondered at the same time if the Japanese knowledge of the West is more than a set of clothes, however long worn or well tailored. Only a psychologist could properly attempt to answer so complex a question, although innumerable casual visitors to Japan have readily opined that under the foreign exterior the Japanese remain entirely unlike ourselves. I find this view hard to accept. It is true that the Japanese of today differ from Americans—perhaps not more, however, than do Greeks or Portuguese—but

they are certainly much more like Americans than they are like their ancestors of one hundred years ago. As far as literature is concerned, the break with the Japanese past is almost complete.

In Japanese universities today the Japanese literature department is invariably one of the smallest and least supported. The bright young men generally devote themselves to a study of Western institutions or literature, and the academic journals are filled with learned articles on the symbolism of Leconte de Lisle or on the correspondence of James Knox Polk. The fact that these articles will never be read abroad, not even by specialists in Leconte de Lisle or James Knox Polk, inevitably creates a sense of isolation and even loneliness among intellectuals. Some Japanese of late have taken to referring to themselves as “the orphans of Asia,” indicating (and perhaps lamenting) the fact that although Japan has become isolated from the rest of Asia, the Western nations do not accept her literature or learning as part of their own. The Japanese writers of today are cut off from Asian literature as completely as the United States is from Latin American literature, by the conviction that there is nothing to learn. This attitude may be mistaken, but I remember how shocked a Japanese novelist, a friend of mine, was to see his own name included on a list of Lebanese, Iraqi, Burmese and miscellaneous other Asian writers who had been sponsored by an American foundation. He would undoubtedly have preferred to figure at the tail end of a list of Western writers or of world writers in general than to be classed with such obscure exotics.

We might like to reprimand the Japanese for the neglect of their own traditional culture, or to insist that Japanese writers should be proud to be associated with other Asians, but such advice comes too late: as the result of our repeated and forcible intrusions in the past, Western tastes are coming to dominate letters everywhere. The most we have reason to expect in the future are world variants of a single literature, of the kind which already exist nationally in Europe.

*No Longer Human* is almost symbolic of the predicament of the Japanese writers today. It is the story of a man who is orphaned from his fellows by their refusal to take him seriously. He is denied the love of his father, taken advantage of by his friends, and finally in turn is cruel to the women who love him. He does not insist because of his experiences that the others are all wrong and he alone right. On the contrary, he records with devastating

honesty his every transgression of a code of human conduct which he cannot fathom. Yet, as Dazai realized (if the “I” of the novel did not), the cowardly acts and moments of abject collapse do not tell the whole story. In a superb epilogue the only objective witness testifies, “He was an angel,” and we are suddenly made to realize the incompleteness of Yozo’s portrait of himself. In the way that most men fail to see their own cruelty, Yozo had not noticed his gentleness and his capacity for love.

Yozo’s experiences are certainly not typical of all Japanese intellectuals, but the sense of isolation which they feel between themselves and the rest of the world is perhaps akin to Yozo’s conviction that he alone is not “human.” Again, his frustrations at the university, his unhappy involvement with the Communist Party, his disastrous love affairs, all belong to the past of many writers of today. At the same time, detail after detail clearly is derived from the individual experience of Osamu Dazai himself. The temptation is strong to consider the book as a barely fictionalized autobiography, but this would be a mistake, I am sure. Dazai had the creative artistry of a great cameraman. His lens is often trained on moments of his own past, but thanks to his brilliant skill in composition and selection his photographs are not what we expect to find cluttering an album. There is nothing of the meandering reminiscer about Dazai; with him all is sharp, brief and evocative. Even if each scene of *No Longer Human* were the exact reproduction of an incident from Dazai’s life—of course this is not the case—his technique would qualify the whole of the work as one of original fiction.

*No Longer Human* is not a cheerful book, yet its effect is far from that of a painful wound gratuitously inflicted on the reader. As a reviewer (Richard Gilman in *Jubilee*) wrote of Dazai’s earlier novel, “Such is the power of art to transfigure what is objectively ignoble or depraved that *The Setting Sun* is actually deeply moving and even inspiring. . . . To know the nature of despair and to triumph over it in the ways that are possible to oneself—imagination was Dazai’s only weapon—is surely a sort of grace.”

**Donald Keene**



# **PROLOGUE**

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I have seen three pictures of the man.

The first, a childhood photograph you might call it, shows him about the age of ten, a small boy surrounded by a great many women (his sisters and cousins, no doubt). He stands in brightly checked trousers by the edge of a garden pond. His head is tilted at an angle thirty degrees to the left, and his teeth are bared in an ugly smirk. Ugly? You may well question the word, for insensitive people (that is to say, those indifferent to matters of beauty and ugliness) would mechanically comment with a bland, vacuous expression, “What an adorable little boy!” It is quite true that what commonly passes for “adorable” is sufficiently present in this child’s face to give a modicum of meaning to the compliment. But I think that anyone who had ever been subjected to the least exposure to what makes for beauty would most likely toss the photograph to one side with the gesture employed in brushing away a caterpillar, and mutter in profound revulsion, “What a dreadful child!”

Indeed, the more carefully you examine the child’s smiling face the more you feel an indescribable, unspeakable horror creeping over you. You see that it is actually not a smiling face at all. The boy has not a suggestion of a smile. Look at his tightly clenched fists if you want proof. No human being can smile with his fists doubled like that. It is a monkey. A grinning monkey-face. The smile is nothing more than a puckering of ugly wrinkles. The photograph reproduces an expression so freakish, and at the same time so unclean and even nauseating, that your impulse is to say, “What a wizened, hideous little boy!” I have never seen a child with such an unaccountable

expression.

The face in the second snapshot is startlingly unlike the first. He is a student in this picture, although it is not clear whether it dates from high school or college days. At any rate, he is now extraordinarily handsome. But here again the face fails inexplicably to give the impression of belonging to a living human being. He wears a student's uniform and a white handkerchief peeps from his breast pocket. He sits in a wicker chair with his legs crossed. Again he is smiling, this time not the wizened monkey's grin but a rather adroit little smile. And yet somehow it is not the smile of a human being: it utterly lacks substance, all of what we might call the "heaviness of blood" or perhaps the "solidity of human life"—it has not even a bird's weight. It is merely a blank sheet of paper, light as a feather, and it is smiling. The picture produces, in short, a sensation of complete artificiality. Pretense, insincerity, fatuousness—none of these words quite covers it. And of course you couldn't dismiss it simply as dandyism. In fact, if you look carefully you will begin to feel that there is something strangely unpleasant about this handsome young man. I have never seen a young man whose good looks were so baffling.

The remaining photograph is the most monstrous of all. It is quite impossible in this one even to guess the age, though the hair seems to be streaked somewhat with grey. It was taken in a corner of an extraordinarily dirty room (you can plainly see in the picture how the wall is crumbling in three places). His small hands are held in front of him. This time he is not smiling. There is no expression whatsoever. The picture has a genuinely chilling, foreboding quality, as if it caught him in the act of dying as he sat before the camera, his hands held over a heater. That is not the only shocking thing about it. The head is shown quite large, and you can examine the features in detail: the forehead is average, the wrinkles on the forehead average, the eyebrows also average, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the chin . . . the face is not merely devoid of expression, it fails even to leave a memory. It has no individuality. I have only to shut my eyes after looking at it to forget the face. I can remember the wall of the room, the little heater, but all impression of the face of the principal figure in the room is blotted out; I am unable to recall a single thing about it. This face could never be made the subject of a painting, not even of a cartoon. I open my eyes. There is not even the pleasure of recollecting: of course, that's the kind of face it was! To state the matter in the most extreme terms: when I open my eyes and look at the

photograph a second time I still cannot remember it. Besides, it rubs against me the wrong way, and makes me feel so uncomfortable that in the end I want to avert my eyes.

I think that even a death mask would hold more of an expression, leave more of a memory. That effigy suggests nothing so much as a human body to which a horse's head has been attached. Something ineffable makes the beholder shudder in distaste. I have never seen such an inscrutable face on a man.

# **THE FIRST NOTEBOOK**

# 第一の手記

Mine has been a life of much shame.

I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being. I was born in a village in the Northeast, and it wasn't until I was quite big that I saw my first train. I climbed up and down the station bridge, quite unaware that its function was to permit people to cross from one track to another. I was convinced that the bridge had been provided to lend an exotic touch and to make the station premises a place of pleasant diversity, like some foreign playground. I remained under this delusion for quite a long time, and it was for me a very refined amusement indeed to climb up and down the bridge. I thought that it was one of the most elegant services provided by the railways. When later I discovered that the bridge was nothing more than a utilitarian device, I lost all interest in it.

Again, when as a child I saw photographs of subway trains in picture books, it never occurred to me that they had been invented out of practical necessity; I could only suppose that riding underground instead of on the surface must be a novel and delightful pastime.

I have been sickly ever since I was a child and have frequently been confined to bed. How often as I lay there I used to think what uninspired decorations sheets and pillow cases make. It wasn't until I was about twenty that I realized that they actually served a practical purpose, and this revelation of human dullness stirred dark depression in me.

Again, I have never known what it means to be hungry. I don't mean by

this statement that I was raised in a well-to-do family—I have no such banal intent. I mean that I have had not the remotest idea of the nature of the sensation of “hunger.” It sounds peculiar to say it, but I have never been aware that my stomach was empty. When as a boy I returned home from school the people at home would make a great fuss over me. “You must be hungry. We remember what it’s like, how terribly hungry you feel by the time you get home from school. How about some jelly beans? There’s cake and biscuits too.” Seeking to please, as I invariably did, I would mumble that I was hungry, and stuff a dozen jelly beans in my mouth, but what they meant by feeling hungry completely escaped me.

Of course I do eat a great deal all the same, but I have almost no recollection of ever having done so out of hunger. Unusual or extravagant things tempt me, and when I go to the house of somebody else I eat almost everything put before me, even if it takes some effort. As a child the most painful part of the day was unquestionably mealtime, especially in my own home.

At my house in the country the whole family—we were about ten in number—ate together, lined up in two facing rows at table. Being the youngest child I naturally sat at the end. The dining room was dark, and the sight of the ten or more members of the household eating their lunch, or whatever the meal was, in gloomy silence was enough to send chills through me. Besides, this was an old-fashioned country household where the food was more or less prescribed, and it was useless even to hope for unusual or extravagant dishes. I dreaded mealtime more each day. I would sit there at the end of the table in the dimly lit room and, trembling all over as with the cold, I would lift a few morsels of food to my mouth and push them in. “Why must human beings eat three meals every single day? What extraordinarily solemn faces they all make as they eat! It seems to be some kind of ritual. Three times every day at the regulated hour the family gathers in this gloomy room. The places are all laid out in the proper order and, regardless of whether we’re hungry or not, we munch our food in silence, with lowered eyes. Who knows? It may be an act of prayer to propitiate whatever spirits may be lurking around the house. . . .” At times I went so far as to think in such terms.

Eat or die, the saying goes, but to my ears it sounded like just one more unpleasant threat. Nevertheless this superstition (I could only think of it as

such) always aroused doubt and fear in me. Nothing was so hard for me to understand, so baffling, and at the same time so filled with menacing overtones as the commonplace remark, “Human beings work to earn their bread, for if they don’t eat, they die.”

In other words, you might say that I still have no understanding of what makes human beings tick. My apprehension on discovering that my concept of happiness seemed to be completely at variance with that of everyone else was so great as to make me toss sleeplessly and groan night after night in my bed. It drove me indeed to the brink of lunacy. I wonder if I have actually been happy. People have told me, really more times than I can remember, ever since I was a small boy, how lucky I was, but I have always felt as if I were suffering in hell. It has seemed to me in fact that those who called me lucky were incomparably more fortunate than I.

I have sometimes thought that I have been burdened with a pack of ten misfortunes, any one of which if borne by my neighbor would be enough to make a murderer of him.

I simply don’t understand. I have not the remotest clue what the nature or extent of my neighbor’s woes can be. Practical troubles, griefs that can be assuaged if only there is enough to eat—these may be the most intense of all burning hells, horrible enough to blast to smithereens my ten misfortunes, but that is precisely what I don’t understand: if my neighbors manage to survive without killing themselves, without going mad, maintaining an interest in political parties, not yielding to despair, resolutely pursuing the fight for existence, can their griefs really be genuine? Am I wrong in thinking that these people have become such complete egoists and are so convinced of the normality of their way of life that they have never once doubted themselves? If that is the case, their sufferings should be easy to bear: they are the common lot of human beings and perhaps the best one can hope for. I don’t know ... If you’ve slept soundly at night the morning is exhilarating, I suppose. What kind of dreams do they have? What do they think about when they walk along the street? Money? Hardly—it couldn’t only be that. I seem to have heard the theory advanced that human beings live in order to eat, but I’ve never heard anyone say that they lived in order to make money. No. And yet, in some instances. . . . No, I don’t even know that. . . . The more I think of it, the less I understand. All I feel are the assaults of apprehension and terror at the thought that I am the only one who is entirely unlike the rest. It is



almost impossible for me to converse with other people. What should I talk about, how should I say it?—I don't know.

This was how I happened to invent my clowning.

It was the last quest for love I was to direct at human beings. Although I had a mortal dread of human beings I seemed quite unable to renounce their society. I managed to maintain on the surface a smile which never deserted my lips; this was the accommodation I offered to others, a most precarious achievement performed by me only at the cost of excruciating efforts within.

As a child I had absolutely no notion of what others, even members of my own family, might be suffering or what they were thinking. I was aware only of my own unspeakable fears and embarrassments. Before anyone realized it, I had become an accomplished clown, a child who never spoke a single truthful word.

I have noticed that in photographs of me taken about that time together with my family, the others all have serious faces; only mine is invariably contorted into a peculiar smile. This was one more variety of my childish, pathetic antics.

Again, I never once answered back anything said to me by my family. The least word of reproof struck me with the force of a thunderbolt and drove me almost out of my head. Answer back! Far from it, I felt convinced that their reprimands were without doubt voices of human truth speaking to me from eternities past; I was obsessed with the idea that since I lacked the strength to act in accordance with this truth, I might already have been disqualified from living among human beings. This belief made me incapable of arguments or self-justification. Whenever anyone criticized me I felt certain that I had been living under the most dreadful misapprehension. I always accepted the attack in silence, though inwardly so terrified as almost to be out of my mind.

It is true, I suppose, that nobody finds it exactly pleasant to be criticized or shouted at, but I see in the face of the human being raging at me a wild animal in its true colors, one more horrible than any lion, crocodile or dragon. People normally seem to be hiding this true nature, but an occasion will arise (as when an ox sedately ensconced in a grassy meadow suddenly lashes out with its tail to kill the horsefly on its flank) when anger makes them reveal in a flash human nature in all its horror. Seeing this happen has always induced in me a fear great enough to make my hair stand on end, and at the thought

that this nature might be one of the prerequisites for survival as a human being, I have come close to despairing of myself.

I have always shook with fright before human beings. Unable as I was to feel the least particle of confidence in my ability to speak and act like a human being, I kept my solitary agonies locked in my breast. I kept my melancholy and my agitation hidden, careful lest any trace should be left exposed. I feigned an innocent optimism; I gradually perfected myself in the role of the farcical eccentric.

I thought, "As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn't matter how, I'll be all right. If I succeed in that, the human beings probably won't mind it too much if I remain outside their lives. The one thing I must avoid is becoming offensive in their eyes: I shall be nothing, the wind, the sky." My activities as jester, a role born of desperation, were extended even to the servants, whom I feared even more than my family because I found them incomprehensible.

In the summer I made everybody laugh by sauntering through the house wearing a red woolen sweater under my cotton kimono. Even my elder brother, who was rarely given to mirth, burst out laughing and commented in intolerably affectionate tones, "That doesn't look so good on you, Yozo." But for all my follies I was not so insensitive to heat and cold as to walk around in a woolen sweater at the height of summer. I had pulled my little sister's leggings over my arms, letting just enough stick out at the opening of the sleeves to give the impression that I was wearing a sweater.

My father frequently had business in Tokyo and maintained a town house for that reason. He spent two or three weeks of the month at a time in the city, always returning laden with a really staggering quantity of presents, not only for members of our immediate family, but even for our relatives. It was a kind of hobby on his part. Once, the night before he was to leave for Tokyo, he summoned all the children to the parlor and smilingly asked us what present we would like this time, carefully noting each child's reply in a little book. It was most unusual for Father to behave so affectionately with the children.

"How about you, Yozo?" he asked, but I could only stammer uncertainly.

Whenever I was asked what I wanted my first impulse was to answer "Nothing." The thought went through my mind that it didn't make any difference, that nothing was going to make me happy. At the same time I was congenitally unable to refuse anything offered to me by another person, no

matter how little it might suit my tastes. When I hated something, I could not pronounce the words, “I don’t like it.” When I liked something I tasted it hesitantly, furtively, as though it were extremely bitter. In either case I was torn by unspeakable fear. In other words, I hadn’t the strength even to choose between two alternatives. In this fact, I believe, lay one of the characteristics which in later years was to develop into a major cause of my “life of shame.”

I remained silent, fidgeting. My father lost a little of his good humor.

“Will it be a book for you? Or how about a mask for the New Year lion dance? They sell them now in children’s sizes. Wouldn’t you like one?”

The fatal words “wouldn’t you like one?” made it quite impossible for me to answer. I couldn’t even think of any suitably clownish response. The jester had completely failed.

“A book would be best, I suppose,” my brother said seriously.

“Oh?” The pleasure drained from my father’s face. He snapped his notebook shut without writing anything.

What a failure. Now I had angered my father and I could be sure that his revenge would be something fearful. That night as I lay shivering in bed I tried to think if there were still not some way of redressing the situation. I crept out of bed, tiptoed down to the parlor, and opened the drawer of the desk where my father had most likely put his notebook. I found the book and took it out. I riffled through the pages until I came to the place where he had jotted down our requests for presents. I licked the notebook pencil and wrote in big letters LION MASK. This accomplished I returned to my bed. I had not the faintest wish for a lion mask. In fact, I would actually have preferred a book. But it was obvious that Father wanted to buy me a mask, and my frantic desire to cater to his wishes and restore his good humor had emboldened me to sneak into the parlor in the dead of night.

This desperate expedient was rewarded by the great success I had hoped for. When, some days later, my father returned from Tokyo I overheard him say to Mother in his loud voice—I was in the children’s room at the time—“What do you think I found when I opened my notebook in the toy shop? See, somebody has written here ‘lion mask.’ It’s not my handwriting. For a minute I couldn’t figure it out, then it came to me. This was some of Yozo’s mischief. You know, I asked him what he wanted from Tokyo, but he just stood there grinning without saying a word. Later he must have got to wanting that lion mask so badly he couldn’t stand it. He’s certainly a funny

kid. Pretends not to know what he wants and then goes and writes it. If he wanted the mask so much all he had to do was tell me. I burst out laughing in front of everybody in the toy shop. Ask him to come here at once.”

On another occasion I assembled all our men and women servants in the foreign-style room. I got one of the menservants to bang at random on the keys of the piano (our house was well equipped with most amenities even though we were in the country), and I made everyone roar with laughter by cavorting in a wild Indian dance to his hit and miss tune. My brother took a flashbulb photograph of me performing my dance. When the picture was developed you could see my peepee through the opening between the two handkerchiefs which served for a loincloth, and this too occasioned much merriment. It was perhaps to be accounted a triumph which surpassed my own expectations.

I used to subscribe regularly to a dozen or more children’s magazines and for my private reading ordered books of all sorts from Tokyo. I became an adept in the exploits of Dr. Nonsentius and Dr. Knowitall, and was intimately acquainted with all manner of spooky stories, tales of adventure, collections of jokes, songs and the like. I was never short of material for the absurd stories I solemnly related to make the members of my family laugh.

But what of my schooling?

I was well on the way to winning respect. But the idea of being respected used to intimidate me excessively. My definition of a “respected” man was one who had succeeded almost completely in hoodwinking people, but who was finally seen through by some omniscient, omnipotent person who ruined him and made him suffer a shame worse than death. Even supposing I could deceive most human beings into respecting me, one of them would know the truth, and sooner or later other human beings would learn from him. What would be the wrath and vengeance of those who realized how they had been tricked! That was a hair-raising thought.

I acquired my reputation at school less because I was the son of a rich family than because, in the vulgar parlance, I had “brains.” Being a sickly child, I often missed school for a month or two or even a whole school year at a stretch. Nevertheless, when I returned to school, still convalescent and in a rickshaw, and took the examinations at the end of the year, I was always first in my class, thanks to my “brains.” I never studied, even when I was well. During recitation time at school I would draw cartoons and in the recess