

Akira Kasai
THE AWARENESS OF THE *DIVINE*
IN TATSUMI HIJIKATA¹

A quiet beast's caution
a maiden's deliberate truthfulness
a king's arrogance
a sigh putting on make up.
He has the clear vitality of a Japanese boy
and an old lady's soft muscles,
without weight like a dog's fleeting shadow,
he uses words like striking lighting,
his voice sounds like a storyteller's,
even if he drinks till he collapses the light in his eyes stays bright
in one instant the colour in his eyes imperceptibly moves and changes,
to generate a second of thought his pupils twitch in all directions,
and when nobody's there he sings at the top of his voice.
In the shadow of his body he keeps a hidden art
he skilfully steals the word of animals,
he smiles in mockery of the gods,
but in front of the *fish in the front* he bows his head.
So long ago did the feeling of hate evaporate...

...and in the end, whatever words I may use, it will always be impossible for me to describe Tatsumi Hijikata.

I saw Hijikata for the first time in 1963 at Sōgetsu Hall in the *Kōreikan shigaku* recital by Masaki Dōmoto. At the time I was

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focusing on the study of modern dance under the guidance of Takaya Eguchi; I went to see the performance because I was told that Jean Neveau, who was my pantomime teacher, would be on stage with Hijikata.

On stage there was a bare-chested man with black trousers, short hair shaved on the sides; the only sound in the hall was the sticky noise his body produced every time he fell on the synthetic floor.

What I was seeing was something I had never seen in the twenty years before then. Something that I could only define as *pure movement*, even extraneous to any kind of dance movement, something from which all meaning and every image had been cancelled. The moment he entered my visual field this *pure movement* like sharp blade pierced my body which until then had been impregnated by the word. This manifestation of purity went beyond the expressions I later learned from Hijikata himself: *rose colored dance, darkness, dream of an embryo, step of the person sentenced to death, Tōhoku, heresy of heresy, corpse who stays standing with all its strength*.

The *instantaneousness* of the movement was such that it didn't allow imitations, reproductions, revisions: it couldn't even be made a subject of study because later, despite my long association with Hijikata, he never showed me again what he did during that first performance. In that *pure movement* life and death, assertion and denial kept their precarious balance on the sides of the same scale.

In *Anma*, performed again in Sōgetsu Hall in the autumn of that same year, the solemnity of *pure movement* found its solid base in the structure; dissected and crystallised images of fragments of Japan materialised on the tatamis placed directly on the stage: the Tōhoku, hens, men wearing *juban* [traditional undergarments] inside out, improvised baseball matches among friends, a musician playing incredibly long violin strings, old women playing shamisen...

Until his last theatre play, *Hijikata Tatsumi to nihonjin: nikutai no hanran* (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Rebellion of the body) performed in 1968 at Nihon Seinenkan, the original image of Japan continued to flow in Hijikata like a karstic stream. We could define it as a struggle between the image of the word in the Japanese language and Hijikata's body. We find here Hijikata's dandyism in his ambiguous relationship with the word – something that allowed him to communicate in daily life but that he avoided using as a simple tool to

convey meanings. The result of this struggle manifested clearly in the shape of dance but was also crystallised in a book published in 1983, *Yameru maihime* (The Ailing Dancer): essentially it is a butoh space realised through the word.

«See, insects live even without breathing. Look at that lopsided insect coming this way. It must be some being trapped in one of his reincarnations».

There is no doubt that the book beginning with these words was written in Japanese, yet the text ends up excluding every meaning attributed to the language to this day; if we add the fact that it is written in the language of peasants we'll see that the reader can end up in a peculiar dimension. It is Hijikata's *pure movement* that seems to infuse new life into the Japanese language.

I danced in *La maison de Monsieur Shibusawa* performed in 1965 at Sennichidani Kōkaidō and the following year in *Tomato* at Kinokuniya Hall: that's when I danced for the first time on Hijikata's choreography. Later his method became the basis of my choreography work: it was about cutting «the air drenched in blood» with one's body made blade. Every slightest movement was defined and definitive: it was the precision of somebody dissecting a fish that's still alive. That was the first pure movement I received from the outside. Hijikata said: «when that *person* appears in the village, the blacksmith goes back to being a blacksmith, the priest goes back to being a priest, the cook goes back to being a cook: there is no other choice».

The *person* in question must be the dancer. Besides, Hijikata's imagery contains the pair *craftsman – god*. The *god* that Hijikata met in this world was almost a *craftsman*. When the dancer appears, the *gods* can do nothing else than regain their original form. It is the gods who sacrifice the existing to the form. I remember that one evening Hijikata and myself were alone in Meguro's studio when suddenly the phone rang. He said to me: «Shibusawa is coming...». Accidentally at that moment there was nothing to drink, it was past midnight. Hijikata quickly washed his face and grabbed a 10.000 yen note saying: «Shibusawa is God, Shibusawa is God...». «What?» I replied, but the conversation ended there. Half an hour later Hijikata made the wine seller who lived nearby get out of bed and came back with a bottle of Johnnie Walker black label.

Somewhere Hijikata has written: «the refined savagery of a teenage craftsman named Shibusawa». The phrase «teenage craftsman» can also become «teenage emperor» or «teenage god». Later, while spending time at Meguro's studio, I couldn't help letting this thought rise inside of me: the thought that sooner or later the pure movement flowing out of Hijikata would transform into form and method inside of me.