

Translation of and Commentary on Endo Shusaku's *Coleridge House*

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遠藤周作のコリッジ館の翻訳と解説

リチャード・ローガン

In this short story published in 1955, Endo Shusaku explored the ambivalence he felt as one of the first foreign students from Japan to study in France after the Second World War. Endo's fictional student obsesses over his inability to connect with the other students, and blames it on the fact that he, as a Japanese cannot deal with people as fellow human beings, but sees them as members of another race different from his own.

I

Paulhan, I don't know where to send this letter to you. I do not know whether you are still in Lyon or whether you have returned to your home in Africa. Except for our time together at Coleridge House, we would not likely ever meet again. Coleridge House was at one time an inn of dubious reputation, but a charitable widowed woman bought it and turned the gloomy three-story building into a dormitory for students. It was for Catholic students and it was good for foreign students who had come to France to study who were without friends or family.

On the first floor were the caretaker's quarters and a small recreation room, and students lived on the floors above. During the day no one was about in the dusty corridors and only the constant sound of the leaky toilet and the sweet-sour smell of cooking oil could be noticed. As it had been formerly an inn, there were about twelve or thirteen rooms but every room bore traces of squashed mosquitoes on the wall paper, water stains from rain, and the straw-filled beds were damp and sagged in the middle.

I moved into Coleridge House the day before summer vacation started for university students. I moved out of my previous rooming house and chose to live here in a cheaper place because the rent was only 4,000 francs a month. Most of the students had returned home for the holidays so the house was deserted. While unpacking my luggage in the early evening, I heard the low voices of some boarding students in the corridor.

"This time we've got an Oriental."

"The toilet will turn yellow next term!"

Then they gathered in a corner, whispering and I had a feeling of their murmuring, as I held my breath.

However, when I woke up the next morning, Coleridge House was as quiet as an empty barn. Two or three students who had still been in the house the day before had apparently gone home early this morning. I had some dry bread from the night before and dipping it in some water I ate it. I thought about how I would live here during the three months of summer vacation. Out the window of my room I could see a streetcar running along the stone surface of the road.

Across the way was a butcher shop, with a bloody ox neck hanging in its window. Next to the butchers was a shop where students bought milk and cakes from a little old woman whom they called "rat lady". On sleepless nights I could see a woman with red hair wearing only a brassiere and pantjes enjoying the cool air from the open window of the butcher shop.

According to the caretaker of my house, the butcher was renting one room in his building to a woman of the streets. On the corner was a moving company where men in sweaty undershirts moved boxes to and from trucks all day.

That summer vacation, I was very tired for some reason. In the afternoon a slight fever would hit me, and the next morning my feet and joints would be numb to the core. I wondered if it was my chest and shook with fright. (Oh no, it must be bronchitis!)

To make my mornings even more gloomy, I was regularly woken up about 6:00 by a high metallic shrieking sound under my window. When I closed my eyes and listened, it sounded like an old chanson song, but one filled with curses, spite and hatred. It was an old crazy woman who would come to buy bread and milk at the shop of the "rat lady".

Speaking of crazy women, another odd woman lived in this street. When the summer days gave way to evening, I could see out my window a woman wearing baggy brown clothes always crouched down like an animal. Whenever a streetcar came, she would come to the tram stop, but when the streetcar stopped, she would retreat to the house again and crouch down.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked the old caretaker.

"That stupid woman?" he replied, while spitting out his chewing tobacco on the ground and narrowed his shoulders. "Her husband was captured by the Germans during the war, but she believes even now that he didn't die. She waits at the tram stop to meet him when he gets off work."

One sultry afternoon about a week later, I was walking along the bank of the Saone River chewing on my lips. The town of Lyon in summer was a desert for a foreign student without either a Japanese or French friend. The sun in the west beat down on the walls of the houses along the bank of the river. Naked children yelled and played on the dry and dark brown riverbank.

Just then, the crazy woman leaned on the stone handrail of the riverbank and stared desperately at the blue streetcar which was coming from the Fontenue Factory area. The old broken-down tram arrived at its terminal and discharged workers in clothes that were black with sweat and oil. The tired men did not look at the sour-faced woman as they walked towards the bars and cafes along the riverbank.

As for the crazy woman, in the old days she would meet her husband on Saturday at the riverbank. I guess she thought that she could encounter her man if she came here. Standing under a plane tree, I watched the woman as she was exposed directly to the hot sun. Her figure seemed to be baked in flame, which gave her an image of ash in human form. I realized that it was pointless to stare at her. However, during that summer, for a student in a foreign land there was nothing else to do.

II

The new school term began, and students came back to Coleridge House little by little. When students carrying trunks passed me on the stairs or in the corridor, their bodies stiffened suddenly and they avoided my eyes. When I entered the recreation room the students reading newspapers and magazines and those talking together would suddenly stop. It was not only awkward for a new student like me, but also painful.

The boarding students were almost all from Ardeche province and the scholarship students from Savoie province near Lyon. The features of the people from these regions were jutting cheekbones and deep-set eyes like that of old men. The village office or church would collect money from the village and remit 10,000 or 15,000 francs to the student who had been chosen from the village. These students would of course never be absent from school. They would never do anything but study in class.

Becoming a notary public or a clerk in a government office in some town, and buying a motorcycle were the dreams of these students.

When the stipend was received at the beginning of the month, they would go see a Western film and a newsreel in Republique Street and then talk about it forever. The widow that owned Coleridge House would invite an old retired Catholic priest with rheumatism to come over every Saturday night to give the students spiritual guidance. Then we gathered in the recreation room, carrying our prayer books under our arms, eyes lowered and backs stooped.

(Just like Charles in the novel *Mrs. Bovary*?)

I looked down on the boarding students, but I secretly hoped that the students would at least talk to me a little. But “good morning. Did you sleep well?” or “well, how are you doing?” was all they said to me in greeting. Such ordinary conversation was painful to me. Only because I was an Oriental, I seemed to have a feeling of futility and irritation when I passed the students on the stairs or in the corridors and wondered what kind of man I was to have such an ashamed and feeble feeling. In such a way, whenever our eyes met, and I was on the point of speaking, I remembered their whispered words in the corridor at dusk on the day when I first came to Coleridge House, and I could never open my mouth.

For a month, such a heavy, painful condition continued. When everybody went to school, I stayed in bed until the house fell silent. From summer on, my fatigue and weakness continued and I would fall into a painful silence whenever I met someone in the kitchen.

One morning in the kitchen, I was going to throw away my coffee grounds after drinking one cup of coffee. Since childhood I had always hated to drink more than one cup of coffee using the same grounds and always made coffee with new coffee beans.

“You throwing it away?”

I turned around to see at the door of the kitchen a student with dark red hair and deep-set eyes wearing dirty pajamas. His eyes looked at me like the meat of a white grape and I understood that I was hearing the dialect of a country boy from the mountains.

Since coming to Coleridge House, these were the first real words addressed to me by a white student. These were words, even in a

French dialect, that I had been waiting for over the days and weeks. Even such rude language was like water to my dry soul and moved me.

"If you are going to throw it away, will you give it to me?"

"Wait a minute!" I answered. "Wait a minute and I'll get some new coffee beans."

"No kidding! That's great!"

Paulhan, do you remember this young guy?

Pierre Sauterre was his name and he came from a remote village of Savoie province called Chamonix. He had an idiotic smirk on his face as he brought his coffee cup to my room. Pierre came to my bait, which I dangled before him, with a face like a mouse which inserts its neck into rat poison little by little. He had lost his parents early, but an uncle who ran a cheap hotel provided Pierre with a small sum of money to attend a business college. Pierre lived in the cheapest room on the north side of Coleridge House.

"Indochinese often come to Chamonix, but this is the first time I've ever met a Japanese."

He was always complaining about wanting to quit the business college. He didn't feel he was suited for study, but wished that the village association would loan him the money to build a small restaurant or inn.

Before long, Pierre was coming to my room every morning. He came to drink my coffee and eat my bread and jam. "Sorry. Is there anything I can do to contribute?" He would say this sometimes in a perfunctory manner. But I knew how to measure the balance of his

comical country boy manner.

Among the students, he was the only one who associated with me, an Oriental. I felt guilty and decided to try harder to make friends among the other students.

"Let's invite Joseph and Andre to have some of this liquor," Pierre said as his pale blue eyes sparkled when I brought out a bottle of Cointreau from the depths of a closet after breakfast.

"Sure, invite them over." This was just what I wanted. Just as poor as Pierre, Joseph was a student at a pharmacy school and Andre attended a teacher's college. The three of them were coming to my room to eat and drink with me almost every evening.

Among the candy wrappers and empty bottles strewn around my room, the silly conversation revolved around comparisons of their stipends and the new train lines coming through their villages, and went on for hours. As they handled my Japanese vases and dolls night after night, I began to feel angry with them.

(Are these the typical young men of France? Is it only because my face is yellow that I must associate with such fools?)

"I live with these guys." I would sometimes say this to myself with hatred when I remembered that first evening in the corridor when I heard those whispered words.

"If I touch something which he touched, won't I turn yellow?"

A heavy silence came suddenly. Pierre, Joseph, and Andre looked at each other painfully. One of them answered before long. "Chiba is not so different from us because Japan is a civilized country. He is different from other yellow people."

Now I can think about that ridiculous answer and accept it. But at the time, I could not accept it at all.

To cover themselves with their other friends, I thought they used these words to gloss over their guilty consciences. If that was not so, I assumed it was pity for me, which would be unbearable. The thing which I wanted most was to associate with white people as equal human beings, and not to be the object of their pity and sympathy.

When I left off thinking about them, I stared at my face in a mirror. My room was strewn with tobacco and cigarette butts and dirty bowls were scattered everywhere. My face was without clarity or depth, just yellowed and tired.

III

One Saturday at the end of October, as always, the old Catholic priest with the eyes that seemed to be sleepy, and with rheumatism in his legs came to Coleridge House to hear confession from the students and I could hear the low murmur in the recreation room of his hoarse voice giving his talk on spiritual guidance.

"My children. A new foreign student will be coming to Coleridge House the day after tomorrow. As you have made friends with the Oriental named Chiba, please make friends with the African student this time." Then he gave us all a blessing and left the recreation room. The students kept strangely silent. However, I closed my eyes in the silence and understood that it meant the painful whispering would be different.

"This time it's a black."

"The toilet will become black from the day after tomorrow."

I turned on the switch of the radio in the recreation room to break the heavy silence. A young man with a saccharine voice delivered the news at half past nine.

"According to a report, a Japanese volunteer seems to be participating in the American armed forces on the Korean war front. If this is true...).

My hands were shaking in shock as I wondered if I should turn off the radio.

"Bravo! Isn't that great?" Andre raised his face from a newspaper and turned toward the radio. "A Japanese is fighting. Your country defeated China many times, right?"

"That's right. Those guys." I answered with a dry mouth.

"Never beaten at all."

"If the Japanese fight in Indochina, it's good. Those Orientals..." came out of Andre's mouth, but his words stopped suddenly.

"Of course, the Japanese are different. The Japanese are different from other Orientals and blacks. As for me, I like associating with you. But I don't want anything to do with the new black student." Said Andre, pointing his finger at me. The golden fuzz glistened, and the rosy nails looked like shellfish on the hand of this white man.

I looked up at his face and smiled feebly. As if I was swallowing poison in one breathless gulp, I grasped his hand and acceded to this act of treachery.

IV

Paulhan. You arrived at Coleridge House the same way that I did in the quiet dusk of evening. I still remember it. I leaned over the banister of the third floor, and I watched the big blue autumn sky from the window. You carried a trunk with both hands and climbed the stairs breathlessly. Your luggage, which your grandfather and father probably used over and over, was flecked with white spots and had torn places in the leather. The broken safety catch was secured with a rope.

You were dressed like a clown. You walked in loose trousers with green vertical stripes and red faux leather shoes. I could see that your too-long trousers were rolled up as you carried your trunk up the stairs. You wore a big red tie over a pink dress shirt as well. I assumed that any French person would laugh at the color of your clothes and your sad efforts at fashion. I avoided meeting you, and I went back to my room.

The caretaker gave you the room next to mine. I heard the sound of a key and the turning of the doorknob through my wall. I lay in bed and thought about how it was just as quiet now as the day I came here three months ago. You did not make even the slightest sound. From time to time came the sound of the tram outside on the quiet street. As usual the moving men down on the corner were busy loading and unloading wooden boxes from trucks.

Out in the darkness, that woman crouched down and stupidly waited for her husband to come back from work. Suddenly, I was seized with a desire to run to your room and shake your hand to welcome you

and say hello. Why did this dusky ordinary evening give me such a feeling? However, I did not get up from my bed. I closed my eyes with a feeling that resembled resignation rather than fatigue.

It was night, and I still lay in bed feeling heavy and hot and had not gone out to eat supper. Somebody knocked on my door. I thought that it was Pierre and remained silent.

"Excuse me, Monsieur," came an excited voice and you opened the door quietly. And you found a student, not with a white face but with a yellow face.

"What's this? Who are you?"

Unexpectedly, you had an expression of both disillusionment and relief. In silence, without even one word, I took out a cigarette and lit it with a lighter from my desk. I was not going to get up but the sight of the wiry hair slicked down with oil on your head left me with a feeling of vacillation.

"Where do you come from, you?"

I had heard this same arrogant tone that you used somewhere before. That's right. It was the tone in which a French immigration official shouted at an Arab while examining his passport on the day when I went ashore in Djibouti.

You walked around my room, handling the Japanese picture which I had hung on the wall, as well as a vase on a bookcase and clicked your tongue over and over.

"There is a photo collection of your people's sculpture on that bookshelf over there," I said because I disliked him clicking his tongue.

"Heh? You think Africa is the same as a Tarzan movie," you shouted

in a furious tone. "Casablanca is the same as any town in France. They are building a subway now. It won't look like any subway you've ever seen in Japan." You said this while waving your hands in front of my face. Your palm was a dark red color like a pomegranate and only the inside looked like faded white leather or light brown miso soup.

"Tokyo has a subway!"

"I don't believe it. Yeah, I learned about Japan at school."

You then left my room. Even now, I still cannot understand why I quarreled with you like a seven year-old child. But both you and I were earnest at that time. The problem was not about subways by any means. It certainly wasn't. Behind this too childish quarrel was hidden an ugly feeling of mean jealousy. When I was alone, I could see the last feeble autumn light of dusk from my window. Paulhan, it was not you, but I who was becoming a bit white inside as my true yellow nature was becoming coarse and lifeless.

The next morning I went to the shop of the "Rat lady" to buy some Nescafe, because I had run out of coffee. Three or four merchant's wives were already in line, holding one-liter milk bottles. At the back of the line, I saw you in your red necktie. "Good morning."

I lowered my head, however, and stood beside you with a bored feeling as yesterday's awkward feelings still remained. But I would have immediately responded to you if you had said "Morning, Chiba!" But you did not turn your head toward me nor wave your hand at me. We both fell silent and faced in opposite directions with an unconcerned air.

Andre came, of course holding a milk bottle. He lifted one hand and

said hello to me, and then having ignored you, said "aren't they open yet?" He laughed and held up his bottle in a salute.

"Hello, friend." You said to the back of his shoulder. "Do you guys always get up so early?"

Andre fell silent sullenly. But you then said something which really embarrassed me.

"Hand over your bottle. I'll buy it all at one time."

I had used the same words two months before when I had first met Pierre Sauterre in the kitchen of Coleridge House. I had a feeling that I had just been shown a picture of my own miserable image. I felt intense hatred for you.

I have reread what I have written so far and now I'll return to writing. From that day on, we two colored men were neglected by the white students of Coleridge House, and you and I seemed to be like two women who scrambled for the same man. I talked with Andre and Joseph and Pierre in the recreation room. Then you entered the room. I spoke to Joseph and Andre intimately on purpose while pretending to ignore you.

"Moroccan blacks are all communists," Andre explained to me while you were standing there. "Those guys forget the favors white people do for them. The schools and hospitals were all built by Frenchmen." I affirm everything with a nod, but only to drive you away. But I was also forgetting that I am an Oriental.

When November comes, even in Lyon, the sunny days disappear. From morning till evening, the sky is filled with clouds that look like old cotton, and by about 4:00 p.m. it is dark enough to turn on the

lights. The evening is filled with a yellow fog which comes off the Saone River, and crawls around the town. You shut yourself up in your room without going out because you couldn't take the cold weather, and in fact had caught a cold. A black student like yourself sometimes came to visit you with a parcel wrapped in paper.

On one such cold morning, I was heating up my coffee in the kitchen of Coleridge House, as always after everybody had gone out. On the other side of the kitchen was an inner courtyard where a sad looking paulownia tree with withered leaves stood. Across the courtyard, I could see the window of the room of Andre and Joseph. From time to time a cloud passed, revealing feeble sunlight in the courtyard and a flock of pigeons swooped down from the roof to sunny places where they sat still shaking their chest feathers.

I watched the shadow of somebody moving across the window of Andre's room. I could see the face and deep-set eyes of Pierre Sauterre through the opaque window glass. He disappeared like a ghost in the dark shadows of the room without so much as acknowledging my wave to him. (Hey you, what are you doing?)

This is what I thought as I returned to my room. Strangely, Pierre did not come to drink coffee with me on that day. In the afternoon as I lay on my bed, Andre's voice was audible. "My remittance came yesterday. I put it in a drawer of my desk. Did anyone come in from the recreation room?"

The sound of students running down the stairs noisily echoed. I remembered Pierre and then thought about you. "Did Chiba go into the recreation room?" called out Joseph from the bottom of the stairs.

I as an Oriental was suspected! This is what I thought as I got up from my bed. An excited Andre sat astride a chair with crossed arms, and the other students who sat there turned around as I came in.

"I'm certain. I checked it this morning as I was leaving"

"Who was still in Coleridge House at that time?" They all fell silent in an instant because the students knew that I never went to school.

Among them, I looked around for Pierre like a man looking for water in the desert. When our eyes locked, he stared at me with his gloomy deep-set eyes. Then, an idiotic grin passed across his face. (Even if you say my name, it won't be me that is suspected) said his eyes. (Since you are an Oriental, you won't be believed...).

Your name suddenly came into my head like foam in a marsh.

"A Negro came into the room this morning," cried Pierre in an excited voice. "Isn't that so, Chiba." I nodded feebly, and smiled at that moment in the same way that I had done when I shook hands with Andre a month before.

"Search the guy's room! He went out a little while ago."

The students set up a loud cry like a mob and ran out of the recreation room. Only I remained in the room. I pushed my face to the window, and I stared at the skyline of the town of Lyon under a November sky clogged with clouds that looked like old cotton.

In the evening you returned to your room. In my bed, I could hear you turn the knob, and then I listened as you stopped in your doorway. You did not make a sound. However, as for me, I saw you clearly sitting with a vacant expression on your face in your ransacked room.

I hardly slept, but finally after dawn I went to sleep. Meanwhile,

your room was deadly quiet. Then from outside my window came the high metallic cry of the old woman as usual. I vomited a thin red string of saliva into some paper.

Endo Shusaku published this short story in 1955. Endo had traveled to France in 1950 by ship from Yokohama with a group of Japan's first post-war foreign students going to Europe. As a representative of one of the defeated nations in the Second World War, Endo felt small and weak around the larger and stronger white people he came in contact with as a student, first in Lyon and later in Paris.

In *Coleridge House*, the protagonist, Chiba feels sensitive to every perceived slight and insult that comes his way. Chiba's inferiority complex is only deepened when he realizes that the white students who live in the student residence with him are poor and ignorant country boys from the local mountain villages to the east of Lyon.

Chiba seems incapable of reaching out to his housemates in even the most mundane matters of daily greetings and small talk. When one student named Pierre asks Chiba if he can have his discarded coffee grounds to make more coffee, Chiba is absurdly pleased to be treated as a normal person. Chiba invites Pierre to have a freshly-brewed cup of coffee in his room, and from then on, Pierre and a couple more students come to his room everyday to drink his coffee and eat the cakes that Chiba buys each day.

Chiba is only happy to have these friends for a short while before he starts to brood about how these poor country bumpkins are just mooching off him. Chiba begins to think he is being taken advantage

of because he is Asian. He also seems to place the blame for his own timidity on his racial identity, rather than his own personality faults.

A new social dimension opens up when another foreign student, this time from Africa, comes to live at Coleridge House. Chiba is quite aware that the white students hold Africans in even lower esteem than they do Asians. When the students tell Chiba that he is different, and therefore presumably better, than other Asians because he is Japanese, Chiba feels both humiliated and grateful for their granting him honorary status as a member of one of the advanced races in the world.

Chiba's relations with the African student, Paulhan go from bad to worse from the very beginning. Paulhan walks right into Chiba's room and quizzes him impolitely. Chiba is of course irritated at Paulhan's boorishness. Chiba can't help remarking to himself on Paulhan's lack of sophistication in fashion sense and seeming arrogance toward all the students in the house. Later, Chiba realizes that Paulhan expresses his true feelings just as the white students do. It is only Chiba who goes through his daily social encounters, hypocritically saying what he thinks is expected of him. This realization leaves Chiba feeling even more wretched.

Things come to a head when money is stolen from a student's room. Chiba realizes that he had seen Pierre moving around in the room from an open window. But the students all seem to look at Chiba as the potential thief because he doesn't go out to school during the day. Chiba looks at Pierre, and Pierre returns a look that seems to say that nobody would believe an Asian blaming the theft on a white student.

Then Pierre suddenly remarks that Chiba had seen a black person in the area where the money was stolen. Pierre asks Chiba to confirm this and Chiba cravenly assents to the lie. The students set off like a lynch mob to search the room of the African student. The story ends with Chiba listening to the African student enter his own room to find it ransacked. Chiba does not have the courage to leave his own room to talk to Paulhan, never mind confess his betrayal of him.

This short story is written in the form of a letter to the African student some years after their time as students. Chiba obviously feels ashamed of himself and tries to analyze his own behavior. Although the letter is a confession, Chiba never quite admits that his behavior was due to his own personal shortcomings. Instead, he blames his behavior on his being an Asian student in a white world.

Christianity is only touched on this short story peripherally. An old Catholic priest comes to Coleridge House every Saturday to deliver a spiritual message and hear confession. Chiba seems to participate, but no details are presented in the narrative. One could see Chiba's betrayal of a fellow foreigner in terms of human weakness, like the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, but Chiba's attitude is presented purely as that of a timid and rather introspective person who feels constantly humiliated by his own inability to act positively in his social dealings.

Endo seems to take as his theme in this short story the inability of Japanese people, as represented by Chiba, to interact socially with outsiders, whether they be white Europeans or black Africans. Endo seems to be saying that Japanese are too different by cultural upbringing to ever truly connect with other people, and this is one

reason that Christianity, as a foreign religion, has not penetrated very deeply into Japanese society. As a Christian himself, Endo seems to be asking whether it is possible for a Japanese person to submerge himself in a universal religion like Christianity, which sees all human beings as essentially the same regardless of their national or racial culture.