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Father and Son: A Conversation with Isamu Noguchi*

"ISAMU NOGUCHI AND THE AIRPLANE," Buckminster Fuller writes, "were both born in the United States of America in the first decade of the twentieth century."¹ Noguchi was born in Los Angeles to the Japanese immigrant poet Yone Noguchi and the American literary enthusiast Leonie Gilmour, a Bryn Mawr graduate, but the place where the future sculptor spent his early years, curiously enough, was a small town in northern Indiana. By 1918, when Noguchi was taken to Indiana, it was a notable center of literary production that had reared many popular as well as serious writers, including Lew Wallace of *Ben Hur*, James Whitcomb Riley, George Ade, Booth Tarkington, Edward Eggleston, and Theodore Dreiser (son of a German immigrant).

Few would question Isamu Noguchi's artistic accomplishments over half a century. The collection of his work at his Long Island studio-museum, only part of his life work, presents an awesome sight. Some critics say that he is one of a small group of artists who have shaped the course of modern American sculpture. Yet while his work is well known the world over, his fascinating background is much less familiar. Equally

* Isamu Noguchi died of heart failure at 84 on December 30, 1988, in New York. It is my great regret that he died before the publication of this article.

I wish to thank the Kent State University Research Council for a grant-in-aid which enabled me to conduct an interview with him in New York on December 28, 1986. I am also grateful for the useful comments and suggestions made by my colleagues and friends, among them Keiichi Harada, Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, and John M. Reilly.

¹ R. Buckminster Fuller, "Foreword" in Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (Harper & Row, 1968), p. 7.



intriguing is his relationship to his father, whose life and work both in America and in Japan, despite their significance, remain unheralded.

Yone Noguchi was born in a small town near Nagoya in 1875. In the late 1880s, the young Noguchi, taking great interest in English texts used in a public school, read Samuel Smiles's writings on self-help. Perhaps inspired by Smiles, but in any case dissatisfied with his public school instruction, he withdrew from a middle school in Nagoya and went to Tokyo in 1890. A year of preparatory school enabled him to enter Keio University, one of the oldest colleges in Japan, at which he studied Spenser and Carlyle and devoured works by Washington Irving, Oliver Goldsmith, and Thomas Gray. He even tried his hand at translating into Japanese such poems as "The Deserted Village" and "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

Although two years of college provided him with substantial reading in English, the young aspiring poet was not content with his education, for he had been dreaming of living and writing in an English-speaking country. In December 1893, with little money in his pocket, he arrived in San Francisco. For the next two years, he lived mainly among the Japanese immigrants in California and, for almost a year, was employed by a Japanese-language newspaper in San Francisco—primarily translating news of the Sino-Japanese War sent from Japan. However, his industry and interests led him to walk from San Francisco as far as Palo Alto, and for several months he lived near Stanford University, reading, among other writings, Edgar Allan Poe's poems.² His re-reading of *The Sketch Book*, particularly Irving's portrayal of England, inspired him to plan to travel some day across the Atlantic.

The turning point of Noguchi's life in America came in 1896, when he paid homage to the Western poet Joaquin Miller. Miller, in turn, admired Noguchi's youth and enthusiasm. Except for a few occasions when Noguchi had to travel to Los Angeles, partly on foot, or to walk down the hills to see his publishers in San Francisco, he led a hermit's life for three years, living in Miller's mountain hut in Oakland. Through Miller, he became acquainted with Edwin Markham, Charles Warren Stoddard, Gelett Burgess (a noted humorist), and Porter Garnett, Burgess's publisher associate.

² That Poe's poems made a great impact upon the aspiring poet from Japan is indicated by a close similarity in a certain part of "Lines" [*The Pilgrimage* (Kamakura: Valley Press, 1909), II, p. 79], one of Noguchi's early poems in English, and Poe's "Eulalie." When Noguchi's poems, including "Lines," appeared in *The Lark*, *The Chap Book*, and *The Philistine*, in 1896, he was accused of plagiarism by some critics while he was defended by his friends. Noguchi later refuted the charge in his autobiography, *The Story of Yone Noguchi Told by Himself* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914), pp. 18-19). Hereafter cited as *Story*. About this controversy, see Don B. Graham, "Yone Noguchi's 'Poe Mania,'" *Markham Review*, 4 (1974), 58-60.

Within a year after meeting Miller, Noguchi published his earliest poems in *The Lark*, *The Chap Book*, and *The Philistine*. These poems attracted critical attention, and in the following year Burgess and Garnett brought out his first collections of poetry, *Seen and Unseen* and *The Voice of the Valley*. These, too, received praise. Willa Cather, for example, wrote, "While Noguchi is by no means a great poet in the large, complicated modern sense of the word, he has more true inspiration, more melody from within than many a greater man."³ But his literary production became erratic, and his fragile reputation was not sustained for long.

Like the wandering bard traditional in Japan, the young Noguchi spent much of his time walking and reading in the high mountains and in the fields. Of one of these experiences he wrote in his journal: "I thank the rain, the most gentle rain of the Californian May, that drove me into a barn at San Miguel for two days and made me study 'Hamlet' line after line; whatever I know about it today is from my reading in that haystack."⁴

Later he travelled to Chicago, Boston, and New York, where he published a novella about a Japanese parlormaid. After the start of the century, he journeyed to England, where he published his third volume of poetry in English, *From the Eastern Sea*. This collection created some interest among English readers, especially Thomas Hardy and George Meredith. "Your poems," Meredith wrote, "are another instance of the energy, mysteriousness, and poetical feeling of the Japanese, from whom we are receiving much instruction."⁵

Yone Noguchi's wanderings came to an end when he returned to Japan in 1904, shortly before Isamu Noguchi was born and left behind in America with his mother. The elder Noguchi became a professor of English at Keio University in Tokyo, the same college from which he had withdrawn eleven years earlier. Among the well over ninety books which he wrote in Japan, many of them in English, only two are genuine collections of English poetry. The rest range from books of literary and art criticism to travelogues. In the midst of his burgeoning literary career in Japan, he occasionally returned to America, and once he visited England to deliver a lecture at Oxford's Magdalen College.

His role in East-West literary relations can scarcely be overestimated.⁶ Although the standard explanation for the influences of

³ See Willa Cather, *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902* (University of Nebraska Press, 1970), II, p. 579.

⁴ Yone Noguchi, Preface, *Japan and America* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 1921).

⁵ *Japan and America*, p. 111.

⁶ While it is well known that Noguchi's work had a considerable impact upon such major poets in Japan as Toson Shimazaki (1872-1943), Sakutaro Hagiwara (1886-1942), and Kotaro Takamura (1883-1956), it is quite possible that Noguchi also had noteworthy influence upon such poets as Yeats, Pound,

Japanese poetry, especially haiku, on T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound is that they studied Japanese poetics through Ernest Fenollosa, the Harvard Sinologist had a poor command of the Japanese language; and since Noguchi's later poetry collected in *The Pilgrimage* and his literary criticism, *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* in particular, were widely circulated, the standard explanation seems questionable. It is much more likely that the Imagists responded directly to their fellow poet Noguchi's example. Pound, for instance, wrote to Noguchi:

c/o Elkin Mathews
Vigo St. London
Sep. 2, 1911

Dear Yone Noguchi:

I want to thank you very much for your lovely books & for your kindness in sending them to me.

I had, of course, known of you, but I am much occupied with my mediaeval studies & had neglected to read your books altho' they lie with my own in Mathews shop & I am very familiar with the appearance of their covers.

I am reading those you sent me but I do not yet know what to say of them except that they have delighted me You are giving us the spirit of Japan, is it not? very much as I am trying to deliver from obscurity certain forgotten odours of Provence & Tuscany

You ask about my "criticism." There is some criticism in the "Spirit of Romance" & there will be some in the prefaces to the "Guido" and the "Arnaut." But I might be more to the point if we who are artists should discuss the matters of technique & motive between ourselves. Also if you should write about these matters I would discuss your letters with Mr. Yeats and likewise my answers.

I have not answered before because your letter & your books have followed me through America, France, Italy, Germany and have reached me but lately.

Let me thank you again for sending them, and believe me.

Yours very sincerely
Ezra Pound⁷

and Tagore, and above all upon the Imagist poets of the day.

⁷ Yone Noguchi, *Collected English Letters*, ed. Ikuko Atsumi (Tokyo: Yone Noguchi Society, 1975), pp. 210-211. Hereafter cited as *English Letters*.

In the 1920s and 1930s Noguchi was also the most well-known interpreter of Japanese visual arts in the West, especially in England. Beginning with *The Spirit of Japanese Art*, he published, in English, ten volumes with colorful illustrations dealing with traditionally celebrated painters such as Hiroshige, Korin, Utamoro, Hokusai, and Harunobu. Yeats, whose interest in the Noh play is well known, wrote to Noguchi⁸:

4 Broad St., Oxford

June 27 [1921?]

Dear Noguchi:

Though I have been so long in writing, your "Hiroshige" has given me the greatest pleasure. I take more and more pleasure from oriental art; find more and more that it accords with what I aim at in my own work. The European painter of the last two or three hundred years grows strange to me as I grow older, begins to speak as if in a foreign tongue. When a Japanese, or Mogul, or Chinese painter seems to say, "Have I not drawn a beautiful scene," one agrees at once, but when a modern European painter says so one does not agree so quickly, if at all. All your painters are simple, like the writers of Scottish ballads or the inventors of Irish stories, but one feels that Orpen and John have relatives in the patent office who are conscious of being at the fore-front of time. The old French poets were simple as the modern are not, & I find in François Villon the same thoughts, with more intellectual power, that I find in the Gaelic poet Raftery. I would be simple myself but I do not know how. I am always turning over pages like those you have sent me, hoping that in my old age I may discover how. . . . It might make it more easy to understand their simplicity. A form of beauty scarcely lasts a generation with us, but it lasts with you for centuries. You no more want to change it than a pious man wants to change the Lord's Prayer, or the Crucifix on the wall [words blurred] at least not unless we have infected you with our egotism. . . .

⁸ Yone Noguchi had earlier met Yeats in London, where *From the Eastern Sea* was published in 1903. In a letter of February 24, 1903, to his wife Leonie Gilmour he wrote: "I made many a nice young, lovely, kind friend among literary geniuses (attention!). W. B. Yeats or Laurence Binyon, Moore and Bridges. They are so good; they invite me almost everyday. They are jolly companions. Their hairs are not long, I tell you" (*English Letters*, p. 106).

Yours sincerely
W.B. Yeats⁹

Noguchi's reputation as poet and critic grew in the West through the early 1930s, but World War II severed his ties to the West just as his relationship to his son, Isamu, had been strained ever since the latter's birth. "I am getting old," Yone Noguchi wrote to his son after the war, "and feel so sad and awful with what happened in Japan."¹⁰ In 1947, in the midst of the chaos and devastation brought about by the war, without quite accomplishing his mission as a poet and interpreter of the divergent cultures of the East and the West as he had wished, Yone Noguchi died in Japan.

The only published memoir discussing his son at any length appears in his autobiography, *The Story of Yone Noguchi Told by Himself*, which relates a story from 1906 when Isamu Noguchi was barely two years old, and father and son met by the cabin door of the steamer that had carried Noguchi's American wife and child across the Pacific:

This Mr. Courageous landed in Yokohama on a certain Sunday afternoon of early March . . . Now and then he opened a pair of large brown eyes. "See papa"; Léonie tried to make Isamu's face turn to me; however, he shut his eyes immediately without looking at me, as if he were born with no thought of a father . . . I felt in my heart a secret pride in being his father; but a moment later, I was really despising myself, thinking that I had no right whatever to claim him, when I did not pay any attention to him at all for the last three years. "Man is selfish," I said in my heart; and again I despised myself.¹¹

The childhood which Isamu Noguchi spent in Japan until he returned to America at thirteen was understandably unhappy. Not only was his father married to an American woman, but the young Noguchi, a child of mixed blood growing up in a race-conscious society, was considered a stranger. His piece of sculptural landscape called *Play Mountain* (1933) betrays the child's yearning to belong to America, his motherland. He created such a work, he seems to tell us, out of his genuine sympathy for all the lonely childhoods represented by his own. His youth in Japan had, indeed, made an indelible mark upon his personality and work.

By the mid 1920s, Isamu Noguchi had immersed himself in New York's art world. He often visited Alfred Stieglitz's gallery and began

⁹ *English Letters*, pp. 220-221.

¹⁰ *A Sculptor's World*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Story*, pp. 185-187.

attending various exhibitions of modern art, including the Brancusi exhibit at the Brummer Gallery, which attracted him powerfully. It was about the same time that Harry Guggenheim, seeing one of Noguchi's earliest pieces shown at the Roman Bronze Exhibit, suggested that Noguchi apply for the newly founded Guggenheim Fellowship. One of the recommenders was his friend, Stieglitz, and Noguchi won the award, which enabled him to study in Paris—eventually under Brancusi's tutelage—although his original plans had included travel and work in India, China, and Japan.

By 1930 he already had to his credit several exhibits both in America and in Europe, and about this time he made long-lasting friendships with Martha Graham and Buckminster Fuller, the latter whom he called "a great teacher." Because of these friendships, perhaps, Noguchi became known not only as a sculptor but as a stage designer and landscapist. He designed stage sets for the Balanchine-Stravinsky ballet *Orpheus* (1948) and for John Gielgud's *King Lear* (1955) with success.¹² But he achieved greater fame with such works as the 2 *Peace Bridges* (1951-52) for Hiroshima, the *Gardens for Unesco* in Paris (1956-58), the *Sculpture Gardens for the National Museum* of Israel (1960-65), the *Playground in Piedmont Park* in Atlanta (1975-76), and the *Philip A. Hart Plaza* in Detroit (1973-78). As a sculptor, the 1960s were Noguchi's most productive period. His reputation soared, as the celebrated sculptural gardens he created for Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza in New York attest.

Back in 1930, however, his illustrious career had barely begun, as his Guggenheim application indicates:

I have selected the Orient as the location for my productive activities for the reason that I feel a great attachment for it, having spent half my life there. My father, Yone Noguchi, is Japanese and has long been known as an interpreter of the East to the West, through poetry. I wish to do the same with sculpture.

May I, therefore, request your assistance in enabling me to fulfill my heritage?¹³

Noguchi's journey into the Orient as a young artist led to self-discovery but also generated in him great enthusiasm for America. In the early 1930s, many museums in New York and Chicago were eager to

¹² His project goes back to 1926, when Isamu Noguchi designed (in England) papier-mâché masks for the Japanese dancer, Michio Itoh, in the production of Yeats's Noh drama entitled *At the Hawk's Well*. At that time, Isamu Noguchi was virtually unknown in England except as the son of Yone Noguchi, the most well-known living Japanese poet and critic among English writers.

¹³ *A Sculptor's World*, p. 17.

exhibit the terra cottas and drawings that he had done in the Far East. His new work was shown even in England, and yet these times were as hard for artists as for everyone else. What was worse, art critics often catered to city administrators and politicians, who were not likely to see beyond traditional modes of artistic expression, and Noguchi's lifelong zeal for new horizons and self-identity often ran counter to his economic well-being. After his proposed design for a city park, *Play Mountain* [1933], was rejected by the New York Park commissioner, Noguchi fled to Mexico, a country more congenial to his work. There he no longer felt estranged as an artist and considered himself useful to the community, completing his first major work, a high relief mural in colored cement on carved bricks for the Rodriguez market, called *History Mexico*, in 1936.

After Mexico, Noguchi found America depressing, despite his successful exhibits. Then came Pearl Harbor, an unmitigated shock to him, suspending his work entirely. Even though he was only half-Japanese, he was considered a *Nisei*. To counteract the racial hysteria that soon appeared in the press, he organized an association, the Nisei Writers and Artists for Democracy, but to no avail. Unlike the Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast who had no choice, Noguchi—a New Yorker—voluntarily entered an internment camp in Arizona, where he gained a feeling of identity with the internees. At first, the fantastic landscape of the desert and the blessings of the administrator in charge inspired him to create designs for parks and recreation areas, work that often led him deep into the desert to collect ironwood roots for sculpting. But then the War Relocation Authority, at odds with the camp administrator, forced Noguchi to abandon such activities. Fortunately, he was released on a temporary basis after seven months of internment, and he never returned to the camp. Fortunately as well, such influential individuals as Frank Lloyd Wright and Langdon Warner helped to rescue him, and he was able to resume his work.

By the time the war ended, Noguchi had achieved the kind of recognition few other young sculptors could equal. And yet for all those years he was considered a Japanese artist in America, while in Japan he was regarded as an American, a foreigner. He became victimized by such prejudice in Japan when he was not given the authority to design the *Memorial to the Dead* (1952), a sequel to his own *2 Peace Bridges* in Hiroshima. After rejecting Noguchi's proposed design, a Japanese architect forced Kenzo Tange, the architect's disciple, to take over the project in place of Noguchi and to redesign the *Memorial*.

However, this prejudice was not universal. When he had returned to Japan in the spring of 1950, Noguchi had been welcomed by his relatives and friends as a native son. The war seemed to have changed the attitudes of some of the Japanese people toward Western things in general and American in particular. He was asked to design the faculty building *Shin Banraisha* (1951-52) on the Keio University campus, at which his father had taught; he did so not only as a memorial but as his own act of reconciliation with his father and the Japanese people. In the garden

adjacent to the building, he placed two sculptures: one, an iron welding, called *Student*, and the other, in stone, *Mu*, the Zen term meaning "nothingness."

"It is my desire," Noguchi stated at the beginning of his career, "to view nature through nature's eyes, and to ignore man as an object for special veneration." This intention reveals not only Noguchi's attitude toward nature but also the profound influence which Zen had upon him as an artist. To him, man has extended the horizon of knowledge through science but has overlooked the unthinkable heights of beauty that sculpture can reach. Only by denying one's self-consciousness can one enter the world of natural beauty. "Trees grow in vigor," he still says forty years later, "flowers hang evanescent, and mountains lie somnolent—with meaning."¹⁴ His aim in sculpture was to bring home the spirit of nature rather than impose the will of man upon her. Zen teaches one to annihilate the illusion of mind so that one can achieve nirvana, the extinction of all that is called self. The Zen metaphysician would argue that self is blindness, that it must be destroyed, and that reality will be revealed as infinite vision and infinite peace.

The genuine interest which Noguchi acquired in the Zen garden when he returned to Japan after the war bears out his unique vision of earth and space. It can scarcely be coincidental that many of his father's early poems, written on the high Sierras in the 1890s, or in Japan well into the twentieth century, contain a characteristic mark of Zen Buddhism. In 1908, two years after Isamu Noguchi's arrival in Japan, the elder Noguchi maintained a study on the premises of the Engakuji Temple in Kamakura. In order to demonstrate a state of Zen, Yone Noguchi composed a poem:

Through the breath of perfume,
(O music of musics!)
Down creeps the moon
To fill my cup of song
With memory's wine

Across the song of night and moon,
(O perfume of perfumes!)
My soul, as a wind
whose heart's too full to sing,
Only roams astray . . .¹⁵

¹⁴ *A Sculptor's World*, pp. 16, 40.

¹⁵ Yone Noguchi, "By the Engakuji Temple: Moon Night," *The Pilgrimage*, I, p. 5. The Engakuji Temple in Kamakura, an ancient capital of Japan, was founded in the thirteenth century by Tokimune Hojo, hero of the feudal government, who was a great believer in Zen Buddhism.

The poet's motivation for the union with nature, represented by the fragrance of the atmosphere and the moonlight, stems not from his knowledge or desire. It is not the poet who is filling his "cup of song" but the moon that is creeping down. He accomplishes a state of Zen in which, giving of himself, he enters wholly into his actions—"the song of night and moon." Zen calls for the austerity of the human mind; one must not allow one's individuality to control one's actions. Observing the silent rites of a Zen priest, Yone Noguchi once wrote: "Let the pine tree be green, and the roses red The language of silence can not be understood by the way of reason, but by the power of impulse, which is abstraction."¹⁶

To call Isamu Noguchi a Zen sculptor, however, tells only part of his story. His work is enlightened by his affinity for nature, and as Isamu Noguchi tells us, he returns recurrently to the earth in search of the meaning of sculpture. Wood and stone, the primeval elements of the earth that existed long before man, have the greater capacity to comfort man. And yet what Noguchi contributes to the relationship of man and nature is man's participation in it. Noguchi would chide the traditional Japanese gardener whose sole interest is in finding natural stones, ready-made sculptures, that satisfy the eyes of connoisseurs. "This," says Isamu Noguchi, "is not quite correct; it is the point of view that sanctifies; it is selection and placement that will make of anything a sculpture, even an old shoe." Sculpture is a means by which one can participate in the creation and make one's own life more meaningful. Sculpture is equated with what Noguchi calls "the definition of form in space, visible to the mobile spectator as participant. Sculptures move because we move."¹⁷

Such participation in sculpture is reminiscent of Kikaku, one of the innovative Japanese poets of the seventeenth century, whose haiku Yone Noguchi discusses at length in *Through the Torii*. Yone Noguchi regards Kikaku's haiku on the autumn moon as a slight departure from Zen doctrine:

Autumn's full moon;
Lo, the shadows of a pine tree
Upon the mats!

This poem expresses the fusion of man and nature, and the intensity of love and beauty with which it occurs. The beauty of the moonlight is not only humanized but intensified by the shadows of a pine tree that fall upon the *tatami* mats. "The beauty of the shadow," Yone Noguchi observes, [is] "far more luminous than the light itself, with such

¹⁶ *Story*, pp. 231-32.

¹⁷ *A Sculptor's World*, p. 39.

decorativeness, particularly when it stamp[s] the dustless mats as a dragon-shaped ageless pine tree."¹⁸

"If we insist on his Eastern identity," a recent art critic has written about Isamu Noguchi, "he grows abstract and Western before our eyes; his rationalism in the use of modern materials and constructivist design only conceals an equally convincing irrational and playful invention."¹⁹ The 1986 Venice Biennale exhibited Isamu Noguchi's new work, *Slide Mantra*, as a representative sculpture from the United States. Isamu Noguchi is regarded today as an American artist, and his influence has felicitously synthesized Modernist sculptural forms with Zen notions of form and space. It is more than coincidence that his father was as much a Zen poet as he was an American poet. If Isamu Noguchi is a Zen artist, he is also a Modernist in the tradition of Western art. His father as a poet attempted to bridge the East and West in his time; Isamu Noguchi as a sculptor has amply fulfilled his mission in ours.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ISAMU NOGUCHI

The streets outside his residence near Central Park are bustling with cars and pedestrians. Having just come out of a literary conference, I meet Michiko Hakutani for a quick lunch, and we hurry to Isamu Noguchi's address for a two o'clock appointment. Inside the small building in which he has an apartment, it is comfortably quiet. We arrive a few minutes late, and the two attendants at the door swiftly direct us to his modest penthouse apartment. The door is ajar. At once he invites us inside and introduces us to Shoji Sadao, an architect and associate who is leaving momentarily after a visit. "*Dozo kochirae* [Please, this way]," Noguchi says in Japanese, very politely, but warmly. He is in his eighty-second year, but his voice is firm; he speaks like a middle-aged man.

In one corner of a room decidedly not his living room, we face one another across a small round table.²⁰ Would he mind our recording the conversation? Not in the least. By way of introducing myself, I present him with two of my books, both on Dreiser.

¹⁸ Yone Noguchi, *Through the Torii* (Four Seas, 1922), p. 132.

¹⁹ Sam Hunter, Preface, *Isamu Noguchi*, (Andre Emmerich Gallery & Pace Gallery, 1980).

²⁰ It occurred to us later that his apartment has only this one room; thus the living room is also his bedroom. The furnishings consist of a self-made bed on a tatami mattress with very few pieces of furniture around as in a Japanese room, and there were two or three sculptures placed nearby.

Noguchi: I used to know Dreiser very well when he was in New York in his later years.²¹

Hakutani: In the late 1890s, before he wrote *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser made a living by writing many magazine articles, some about artists such as Alfred Stieglitz.

Noguchi: Stieglitz was my friend. It was when I was sixteen that I first read Dreiser's writing, *The "Genius,"* in Indiana. I would like to read the novel again. My mother, who was teaching English in Yokohama, read in a magazine something about a prep school in Indiana. She bought a ticket for me to travel to a small town in northern Indiana and attend a private school called Interlaken. But by the time fall came around it failed to open, and I was stuck there. There was no other place to go; I didn't have money to go back to Japan. Two caretakers were also there. I spent nearly a year at the school and in Rolling Prairie, the village nearby.

Hakutani: Where was your father then?

Noguchi: He was in Japan, but I had nothing to do with him. Actually I had little to do with my mother either. All these relationships I had difficulty understanding at that time. You would perhaps understand them better. My father and I never corresponded with each other. My mother wrote me from time to time, however. Dr. Edward A. Rumley, founder of the Interlaken School, heard about my plight and came to my rescue. He put me to board with the minister of the New Church in La Porte, Indiana, which follows the teachings of Swedenborg. I stayed with his family for three years and got through high school, doing all kinds of things to pay for part of my expenses.²² (It's easier for me to speak in English.) Anyway, it was Dr. Rumley who thought it wiser for me to study medicine as he himself had done. He knew people like Henry Ford and former President Teddy Roosevelt; he was instrumental in building factories in northern Indiana to make tractors. I told him I wanted to become an artist. It was then, when I was fifteen or sixteen, that he, a great admirer of Dreiser, gave me *The "Genius"* to read. He said it would be foolish for me to survive as an artist, but agreed to send me as an apprentice to his friend, the sculptor Gutzon Borglum, who was carving Presidents' faces in South Dakota. Mr. Borglum asked me to tutor his son. So I really grew up in the Midwest, though I am a mixture of the extreme differences in heritage. Please don't forget I am a real product of Midwestern America. [Noguchi rises from his chair for a few minutes to leaf through a heap of memorabilia on certain Midwestern personages.] See, this is a bust of Buckminster Fuller.

Hakutani: Many a distinguished American writer in our times came from the Midwest, like Dreiser and Hemingway. Dreiser came from a poor

²¹ The initial conversation, which was conducted in Japanese, I have translated into English.

²² This is the last statement Noguchi made in Japanese.

family, while Hemingway was from a well-to-do family—his father was a physician. I might say your father was a distinguished poet and art critic.

Noguchi: That was incidental. So, you see, my growing up in this country had nothing to do with art; it had to do with the Middle West and the American idealism that flourished in the twenties and thirties. What was interesting about my father is that he was not an immigrant but a person eager to know this energy of the American frontier; the image of the frontier—space, you see—energized him.

Hakutani: Earlier in his career as a poet, Yone Noguchi, as you know, was very much influenced by Walt Whitman, who was perhaps in the same spirit.

Noguchi: Yes, Whitman was energized by the same spirit. So was my own upbringing. As you can see, I was under the influence of people like Dr. Rumley and Buckminster Fuller. Those were my friends. Through them I saw something that was totally unknown in the art world—an American phenomenon. I saw this in Dreiser and also in Ezra Pound. Pound was an interesting man. When I went to Europe on a Guggenheim grant in 1927, I had a letter of introduction from Michio Itoh, a Japanese dancer, for me to meet Pound.²³ Itoh came to this country around 1925, perhaps earlier; he had been well acquainted with Pound and Yeats. A year before I went to Europe, I had made masks for Itoh to do Yeats's Noh drama, *At the Hawk's Well*. In any event, I met Pound in Europe, but not till much later—by which time he was not speaking to anybody—but I came to see him a good deal. Pound, I felt, also had this quality of the American frontier and kept it in all his poetry. I've felt that my father in his early years in America had tapped the same energy, the energy which motivated many of the American writers.

Hakutani: Literary historians generally believe that the so-called Imagism advocated by Ezra Pound and T.E. Hulme derived from Japanese poetics through the Harvard Sinologist and Japanologist Ernest Fenollosa. But Fenollosa did not know the Japanese language well enough to inform them of Japanese poetry, and of haiku in particular. Your father's poetry and literary and art criticism were widely circulated in English-speaking countries in the mid-1910s. Don't you think it was your father rather than academicians like Fenollosa who made a greater contribution to the Imagist movement?

Noguchi: Of course, you know, the influence of Japanese art was prior to all that. I mean van Gogh, Monet, and all those French artists were deeply influenced by Japanese art. In the case of Pound, I don't know. I'm not contradicting you. It may be, may be, may be. I would say that certainly my father's influence was an additional one. The influences of Japanese art and literature on Yeats go back earlier than that on Pound. My father's influence on Yeats in the earlier 1910s was, as a

²³ Two of Itoh's younger brothers, Kinsaku Itoh and Koreya Senda (who also distinguished themselves in the theater in Japan after World War II) are both famous for their work as stage designers and as dancers.

matter of fact, even earlier than that on Pound. My relationship with Yeats began in 1925, when I designed masks for his *At the Hawk's Well*, through Michio Itoh, as I have mentioned. The Japanese influence on Yeats, I think, was before he wrote *At the Hawk's Well*. You know *The Iris*, a quarterly magazine my father edited in Japan in the mid-1900s, published poems by Yeats among other English and American writers.²⁴ I'm merely saying these were many, perhaps simultaneous, streams of influence.

Hakutani: Isn't it true that scholars such as Fenollosa are often cited but that Yone Noguchi, his work notwithstanding, is virtually unknown today?

Noguchi: That's the reason why I gave to the Keio University Library those letters Yeats, Pound, and other intellectuals in England had written to my father. Those show a great impact he made upon many of the British intellectuals at the time. He made a great success in England. The English had more earnest appreciation of Japanese art and literature than the Americans. The curators of the British Museum, for instance, took great interest in Japanese art. In the month of January, 1927-28, I was studying Japanese prints there, and I saw Laurence Binyon, the curator of prints at the British Museum quite often. Although I doubt that Pound actually knew my father, but still because of my father he was kind and warm to me over the years. I have books of his around here, which were dedicated to me. [Noguchi rises from his chair and leans toward the shelf.] If they aren't here, they must be in my studio. He had sent me all sorts of books; they must be at the studio. Do you know that couplet Pound wrote which reads something like "Yone Noguchi . . ."?

Hakutani: Do you own any of your father's letters other than those you donated to the Keio University Library?

Noguchi: Yes, I have some. I gave many of them to the Bancroft Library at Berkeley. It has a whole section of California writers, among whom is my father. You might take a look at the collection and see the man in charge of the rare book collection, a very nice man. Please give him my regards when you see him.

Hakutani: Does the Bancroft Library own your writings or work as well?

²⁴ *The Iris*, entitled *Ayame-gusa* in Japanese, was discontinued after the second issue, December 1906. The first issue, June 1906, had a twenty-one page introduction in Japanese and contained ninety-two pages of poems by Arthur Symons, Joaquin Miller, Josephine Reston Peabody, W.B. Yeats, and John B. Tabbs, besides Yone Noguchi. *The Iris*, No. 2, entitled *Toyohata-gumo* in Japanese, published in its English section poems by Arthur Symons, Madison Cowein, Laurence Housman, Mary MacNeil Fenollosa, Richard Hovey, Edith M. Thomas, Frank Putnam, and Duchess Sutherland, besides Yone Noguchi.

Noguchi: No. I haven't yet had many opportunities to give things. I also have many letters between Frank Putnam and my father.²⁵ Putnam was apparently a very radical publisher then, but later he became very conservative. You may come to my studio to look at those letters by Pound and Putnam.

Hakutani: Nobody doubts Yone Noguchi was your father because you resemble him very much.

Noguchi: Well, he resembles me! [We all laugh.]

Hakutani: Last December we went to the Art Institute of Chicago to look for your father's head done by Alfeo Faggi in 1920.²⁶ How well-known a sculptor is he?

Noguchi: He was well-known then, sure.

Hakutani: The relationship between you and your father has been regarded as less than harmonious. How would you respond to such a statement?

Noguchi: Oh, not actually. Well, let me relate something that happened after World War II. The *Japan Times* asked me to comment about the war, and my comments were published on the front page. When my father read them, he wrote me that he had made a terrible mistake in supporting his country during the war. An interesting letter. My papers have to be looked into; they are interesting, historically. I wish someone knowledgeable about such matters would examine them. My father apparently felt guilty about the role he had played in the rise of Japanese nationalism. That was his first contact with me after the war.

Hakutani: When did you see him for the last time before the war?

Noguchi: I only saw him in 1931; I didn't see him after that. I went back to Japan in the spring of 1950 and visited his tomb at a temple in Fujisawa whose priest was his brother.²⁷ So the temple was run by the priest's adopted son, also named Noguchi, when I visited there. The priest, my father's brother, was very, very friendly to my mother. As a matter of fact, all my father's relatives were very fond of my mother. They were all against my father; they were very critical of him.

Hakutani: I wonder what caused all this, and the disharmony between you and your father in particular.

²⁵ More than twenty letters between Frank Putnam and Yone Noguchi from 1901 to 1920 survive. Isamu Noguchi obtained them from Putnam's daughter, who lives in Houston, Texas; a xerox copy of these letters is available in the Keio University Library Rare Book and Manuscript Room.

²⁶ This sculpture, in bronze (size 18 1/4 inches, base 4 3/4 by 4 1/4 inches) is a gift (dated 1921) of the Arts Club of Chicago to the Art Institute of Chicago.

²⁷ Yone Noguchi visited other Zen temples in the Kamakura-Fujisawa area during his writing career in Japan. One of his best poems is entitled "By the Engakuji Temple: Moon Night" (*The Pilgrimage*, I, p. 5).

Noguchi: Something to do with my mother. I did not think he treated her fairly. That was all. When I became a bit older, in 1931 or so, I came to know him better and was less sort of bitter about it.

Hakutani: What was your first impression of him when you were young, say when you were six, seven, or eight?

Noguchi: I didn't know him then. I saw him when I left Japan in the spring of 1918; I was thirteen years old then. He came to the boat. I was then living with my mother. I used her name Gilmour and only changed it to Noguchi when I was nineteen years old and decided to be a sculptor, for I thought Gilmour was not an appropriate name. When my father came into the boat to see me, he was of course a stranger to me in the sense that I hadn't seen him for a long while. I remember seeing him when I was about eight years old.

Hakutani: Did you feel any affinity for him when you were a boy, an eight-year old or a thirteen-year old? Did you regret that your father was not close to you?

Noguchi: My mother was very pleased when he came to visit when I was eight years old. I had the measles, had to stay home, and he came to visit me and my mother. I felt happy at the time. When he came to see me on the bridge to the *America* and tried to say, "You are to stay in Japan," I didn't know what to say. My mother said, "No," so I said, "No." I was on my way outside to a tremendous adventure. Did I grow to regret this? Who knows? I don't know. It was very difficult to know in the past what was right or wrong. My mother stayed on in Japan, and I didn't see her until 1924, when she returned to New York, her home. In 1930, I waited for three months to get a transit visa to travel across Russia. I finally headed toward Japan by way of Siberia, but before I left Paris I had received a letter from my father which said, "Don't come. Don't use the name Noguchi." So I went to Peking. I stayed there for eight months. After that I thought I'd better go and see Japan, and that I wouldn't use my name; I'd just go see it. On the boat there was a man I was talking to. I didn't know he was a newspaper reporter, so that when I got to Japan his article about me appeared in the *Asahi Newspaper*.²⁸

Hakutani: What was your father's reaction?

Noguchi: He didn't say anything when I did see him. My contact with him after all those years was not exactly pleasant; however, I had no quarrels with him at all. When I saw him in 1931, I understood him; before I didn't. He was a hen-pecked man. So he said to me. *Nazeka to yu* [The reason why]. *Saigo no kodomo ga dekiru koto ni nattetan de* [As his last child was to be born], his wife told him that I could not come, using his name, because I'm the oldest, you see].

Hakutani: You did not meet your stepmother?

²⁸ The *Asahi Newspaper* has been one of the most influential dailies in Japan, much like the *New York Times* in the United States and the *London Times* in England.

Noguchi: Oh, yes, years later, not then. At that time I didn't. When I went back in 1950, I stayed there with her and her children. She was very nice then. She was the mother of Hifumi, Michio, and others.²⁹

Hakutani: Did your father marry twice, then, your mother and then . . . ?

Noguchi: Maybe he didn't marry either of them; I don't know. Anyway, 1931 was the last time I saw him . . . (I forgot to make you some tea. Good idea!)³⁰

Hakutani: As you know, Yone Noguchi wrote a great deal about Japanese art—Hiroshige, Harunobu, and other eminent painters. Did your father as an art critic have any influence upon you? Do you have any affinity for Japanese art?

Noguchi: Not consciously. For instance, the Japanese dancer Michio Itoh, whom I've mentioned earlier, got interested in the frontier spirit in America and finally became a kind of choreographer for Hollywood. He always urged me to do the impossible. He came from a family of artists; one of his brothers also was here. I learned a great deal from them.

Hakutani: Your father came here as a young poet, and, as you say, he became enchanted with the free spirit of America. But upon his return to Japan, he rediscovered Japanese art and Zen in particular. He was keenly interested in Zen art, as indicated by his essays on haiku and on Japanese art. From time to time, I wonder whether you yourself have been influenced by Zen art.

Noguchi: Anybody is. Anyone who goes to Japan is fascinated by Zen.

Hakutani: I'd also like to know your assessment of your father's poetry and his art and literary criticism. He wrote a great deal in Japanese as well as in English about the Japanese tradition and Japanese art. What do you think of his writings?

Noguchi: I don't know his Japanese writings; I don't read Japanese, unfortunately. I've read some of his writings in English. I've found it difficult to read his books, for instance, on *ukiyo* because he tries to be a poet or literary man discussing something else.³¹ I'm, therefore, not much interested in his writing on art in the descriptive sense. So I don't think I have any influence from my father in my view of Japanese art. In

²⁹ Hifumi (1908-86), Yone Noguchi's oldest daughter by his Japanese wife, was married to Usaburo Toyama, a Japanese art historian and the editor of the three-volume collection, *Essays on Yone Noguchi*. Michio Noguchi is a photographer who has been working for Isamu Noguchi over the years.

³⁰ Noguchi stepped into the kitchen for a few minutes, brought a pot of green tea, and poured it into three cups, which he said, were made by Rosanjin, one of the most celebrated Japanese potters in modern times.

³¹ *Ukiyo*, "pictures of the floating world," is a style of genre painting that flourished in seventeenth-century Japan. Its main theme, man's transient, fleeting life on earth, resembles in some aspects the *carpe diem* theme in the West.

fact, I do not try to be a Japanese artist, although I am very fond of Japanese art. I find my own way; I don't need somebody else to tell me.

Hakutani: What about Brancusi, or any other European artist?

Noguchi: Brancusi had some influence on me, I'm sure, but I didn't want even that kind of influence. We always want to find our own way. As a matter of fact, I would say that my father also wanted to find his own way. Only when he returned to Japan and tried to become Japanese, did he fail, for he was no longer Japanese. He had become a pioneer Westerner. It is a misconception that he was regarded as a Japanese poet while he was in America. To say Japanese or something else becomes shorthand; it's not a real thing. In the imaginary sense, a Japanese can become a Westerner, or a Westerner can become a Japanese. In the case of my father, I think, he became a pioneer American in a sense with the eyes of an Oriental. Take Pound, for instance; he was a Midwesterner who went to Europe and saw Europe with the eyes of a Midwesterner. He tried to transform the English language from this radical point of view. Unfortunately, my father's viewpoint is not understood in Japan because, first of all, they don't understand how historically important it was that he was here at such a time. They don't understand that he became somebody like all these people whose eyes were open to the ideal of the American frontier—from Whitman and Joaquin Miller down to Pound, Dreiser, and so on. I have the attitude of the Midwest certainly as strongly as I have emotionally that of Japan, though you can say I am interested in the ideas of Japan. But I'm strongly interested in the ideas of the West, as well.

Hakutani: Did this idea of the West which you see in you, your father, Pound, Dreiser, and others occur to them because they had grown up in the soil?

Noguchi: Not necessarily. Anybody can be like that. My father did not grow up in that soil, but he became like that. He and others like him were attracted to the openness and freedom of the West, which may not be the classical view of the aesthetics. It's not, in a way; it's beyond aesthetics. It's a kind of nonaesthetic openness. And I have that kind of feeling myself.

Hakutani: Every artist has a desire to be different from any other. Critics used to say that Dreiser, for instance, was influenced by such and such writers, say Zola and Balzac, but if you had read all his work, you would realize he just wanted to be unique and always wanted to create something new.

Noguchi: That's right. Already there was something in this Midwestern journalist, a kind of ambition which is not quite ordinary. I knew Dreiser in the last years of his life. I used to see him. I used to go to the cafe run by a woman named Belle Livingston, who was a type of Mae West. She opened the cafe on Park Avenue, and I used to go there and Dreiser would go there, right here near the Racquet Club.

Hakutani: Did you happen to meet Helen Richardson, his second wife?

Noguchi: No, I didn't. He didn't have any woman around him at the time, as you know. Maybe he did.

Michiko Hakutani: May I ask a personal question, if you don't mind? I'm curious about something as a student of art. You were married once, but you haven't been married since.³² Why is that?

Noguchi: I'm too old. [He and I laugh.]

Michiko Hakutani: Is it because of what happened to your father and mother?

Noguchi: Well, marriage and art don't mix, I don't think. The idea of freedom that the artist needs is not congenial to marriage. I don't know whether or not I could be a good husband, and by now, I think, I've found it too late for me to attempt to be a husband.

Hakutani: As you know, your former wife has been very active as a Representative in the Japanese Parliament.

Noguchi: Yes, she has.

Michiko Hakutani: Was your decision not to marry again partly influenced by your view of your parents?

Noguchi: It may very well have been. I may not have approved of what my father did. I decided that I was not inclined to make similar mistakes.

Michiko Hakutani: I have one more question, if I may. Why did you change your name from Isamu Gilmour to Isamu Noguchi? I'm curious because when I make something and put my name to it, critics often say my work has a Japanese influence.

Noguchi: Your name doesn't mean much; their discussion of you does. You change. You are different if you get married and call yourself, say, Kazuo Jones instead of Kazuo Itoh.

Michiko Hakutani: Did you think about it when you changed your name?

Noguchi: At that time all I wanted to do was to become an artist. If I had let my imagination dictate to me, I would have taken some other name, but I couldn't think of anything better. For one thing, I spent my childhood in Japan from when I was two until when I was thirteen. And I associated in some way the life of art closer to Japan than to America. The man who made me into a sculptor was an Italian named Onorio Ruotolo. Mr. Borglum was no good, but Mr. Ruotolo was my kind. He was the one who said I should be a sculptor. Well, in those days, to be an Italian was also to be a foreigner here. America was composed of many foreigners—Italians, Germans . . . I used to know a German sympathizer who was put into jail although he was not a German.

³² In the early 1950s, Isamu Noguchi was married to the famous Japanese actress and singer Yoshiko (Shirley) Yamaguchi. Like Arthur Miller's marriage to Marilyn Monroe, Noguchi's also ended in divorce.

Hakutani: But your mother was an American. Noguchi is such a common name in Japan as you know. The most famous Noguchi in Japan is Dr. Hideyo Noguchi.³³

Noguchi: He was very kind to me. He was the one who said, "Don't be a doctor." He was the one who said, "If you have to be a doctor, come to my place and I'll help you." He was with the Rockefeller Institute. He had a sort of fix for me to become a doctor if I wanted to, but he said, "Don't give up art." So I probably listened to him.

Hakutani: The relationship between you and your father is fascinating, but his views about you are unknown.

Noguchi: There is very little to draw on. It would be more interesting to see the relationship between my father and my mother. It was almost like a business relationship. She was an excellent editor for him. When he got back to Japan, he didn't have the services of a severe editor that she no doubt was.

Hakutani: I'm also interested in your views about your mother, but since you're such a well-known figure, I thought your views about your father would be fascinating.

Noguchi: It would be more interesting, however, to examine myself in relation to America and myself in relation to Japan. The problem is that I don't think I fit in. I'm not understood either way; over here I am Japanese, and over there I am American, a peculiar sort of thing.

Hakutani: Your father was regarded in the same way.

Noguchi: Yes, his problem was that because he had written good poems in English, he was considered to be an English poet, not a Japanese poet. My brother Michio, who was recently reading my father's poems in Japanese, told me that my father had tried to translate his English poems into Japanese, but that they are terrible in Japanese. He says my father did not understand the Japanese language.

Hakutani: But his critical writings in English and in Japanese are both impeccable, for his ideas are identical in both languages.

Noguchi: I'm merely quoting my brother Michio, who can read English sufficiently well to note the difference. I really don't know why he says they are terrible in Japanese; it's possible that my father couldn't translate them. Perhaps somebody else can. I know he was an excellent creative writer; he was occupied with the essence of creation—no disturbances as you might say. When he went back to Japan, he ran into all kinds of disturbances.

Hakutani: He had a big family to support, and now I can see from his writings in Japan that he might have wasted some of his talent there.

Noguchi: Now you see why I don't get married.

³³ Like Yone Noguchi, Hideyo Noguchi (1876-1928) came to the United States as a young man. It has become a legend in modern Japanese history that he was an eminent bacteriologist in the West and that while conducting research in Africa, he died of typhoid fever, having discovered the cause of the disease.

Hakutani: Recently a friend and colleague of mine has sent me an article about you in Japan, which appeared in the *Asahi Newspaper*.

Noguchi: Actually there have been an awful lot of things about me in the press in Japan recently, [it's been] full of them, because I got a prize, a Kyoto prize.

Hakutani: So they're trying to reclaim you.

Noguchi: Oh, yes, I'm suddenly popular there.

Hakutani: You have also been frequently talked about in the Japanese-American press. They say that, with Henry Moore dead, you are one of the two or three eminent living sculptors of our times. Do you go back to Europe sometimes? How often do you go back to Japan?

Noguchi: Yes, sometimes I go to Europe. I have a studio in Shikoku Island and go there twice a year. I like it there very much. If you ask me if I go there because of my father, I doubt it very much. I would say no, but maybe yes, if it is because of my mother. I think, probably, I find myself closer to Japan nowadays than to America.

Hakutani: Because you're older now?

Noguchi: I find things more congenial over there than in America—food, people, and so forth, as you know. It's curious, I mean, considering my mother—she was also very fond of Japan—so that maybe I was influenced by her in that sense, too. I think I'm more influenced by my mother than by my father.

Hakutani: Do people in Shikoku know that you have a studio there and work there? I don't mean politicians.

Noguchi: I don't know any politicians, but I know some people there. Sometimes letters from the United States are addressed, "Isamu Noguchi, Shikoku, Japan," and I get them. I can be very at home in Japan, and I don't know why I come here.

Hakutani: You have a studio in Long Island.

Noguchi: Yes, I know, I know, but I'm trying to establish something separate from me. I'm making a museum in that place so I don't have to be here.

Hakutani: Are you going to do the same with the Shikoku Studio?

Noguchi: Maybe.

It is time to leave, but he seems tireless and could carry on our conversation into the evening. I thank him for the opportunity to interview him. He reminds us of lunch together at the Long Island studio the next day, the address, and the way to get there. He sounds like a veteran New Yorker. He may be thinking of a busy schedule to follow at the studio, his work, his visitors, and all, but he is poised and relaxed. Like a courteous but warm Japanese gentleman, he slowly comes to the door, bidding us goodbye only till the next day. We are bound for our hotel to attend more conference activities in the evening. As we hurriedly walk back through the busy streets, we keep thinking of him and his father and of all those events that had a hand in the making of an extraordinary relationship between father and son.