

## Texts in the City: Bill Sibley, Tokyo stories, and myself

News of Bill's death reached me as I was nearing the end of the tenure gantlet. It was probably natural, therefore, that I immediately thought about his influence on me in terms of teaching, service, and research—that time-worn formula beloved of tenure committees everywhere. My work in the classroom has been profoundly influenced by Bill's example—not only what he taught me, but the way that he managed a room, and his relaxed style that I can only hope to approach, never match. Similarly, Bill's generosity and encouragement set a high bar for me as a graduate advisor today. It is research, however, that I'd like to focus on here: how Bill's own work, and the direction he gave to my own early efforts, have shaped me as a scholar and defined my intellectual horizons.

One word kept pushing itself to the front of my mind as I sat down to write these reflections: space. Not Captain Kirk's final frontier, of course, but the kind of space in which life unfolds, which defines our boundaries, and which literature both makes and fills within our imaginations. Bill occupied a special space in my past. His home, and his office, were spaces where I learned what it means to really think about ideas and texts. His own work addressed space as a concept and a trope. And it was Bill who encouraged me to explore a literary genre—detective fiction—in which space plays a central role.

Most generally, Bill gave me the space I needed to learn, to make mistakes, and to grow up intellectually. Despite being a strict scholar of *junbungaku*, he was open to, and even urged, the study of so-called popular literature. This support wasn't pollyannaish, of course: Bill insisted upon the rigor that he brought to his own readings of literature from his students, making us look at all texts in the same thorough manner.

As a result, I was able to take a diverse genre, detective fiction, and apply to it the same literary and analytical skills used in more traditional literary studies. In turn, Bill's admiration of Maeda Ai, and his work on him, led me to think a lot about how space is used in literature, and in particular in detective fiction. I first encountered Maeda in Bill's course on the literature of Tokyo, where we read a number of chapters from *Toshi kukan no naka bungaku* which Bill currently was translating. I still remember my excitement reading Maeda's essay "In the Garden," where Nagai Kafu's *Kitsune* is examined through a geographer's lens, as Maeda charts how Nagai's maternal and paternal influences, shaped in his boyhood home, were translated into literary form, producing a dialogue between the rational modernization of twentieth-century Tokyo and the ghosts of ancient Edo still visible in Nagai's day.

The notion that space could be gendered, either through association or through symbolic means, was one that came to play a central role in my own study of women's detective fiction. Supposedly, the detective is a person who can read the landscape and any space, whether male or female, without belonging to either. This ability to organize and understand space also represents a detective's special brand of expertise, one that imparts power. As I worked on my dissertation, however, the deeply gender-specific quality of spatial knowledge, and its value for solving crime, became more and more evident—no more so than in the stories of Matsuo Yumi, whose *Baruun taun no satsujin* is set in a futuristic Tokyo where expecting women occupy a special, exclusive space where they can gestate. Matsuo's protagonist is a woman, investigating an emphatically feminine realm; at the same time, the bodily specificity of that realm, defined by pregnancy, lies outside her experience. Her inability to understand the space of Balloon Town thus renders her professionally impotent, forcing her to depend upon a side-kick whose identity as an expecting mother provides her with the special

knowledge needed to solve the crime. Thus, this story becomes emblematic of both the necessity of reading spaces, and the complicated relationship of gender to them. Since I had quoted this story so much while writing about it, the next logical step for me was to translate it. It seemed to me that doing so would give me the opportunity to analyze the work in a fuller way than I had been able to do before—a belief inspired in large part by Bill's own championing of, and dedication to, the translator's art.

As it turned out, this translation became my first publication. In a deeper way, however, the process of translating pushed me to think more critically about how language is used in literature—and to draw, again and again, on lessons I learned from Bill in his Rapid Readings class. Even now, when I teach my own Japanese reading class, I regale my students with memories of Bill, sitting at the head of the table with an unopened *Kojien* at his side, taking our garbled and/or mangled renditions of a Japanese text and transforming them into clear, often beautiful English. "It's not really a 'plain,' is it? More like, 'glacial moraine'." It was Bill who taught me words like "pullulate" or "cloacal" (the latter used to describe the open sewers of Ishikawa). Such stories seem hopelessly old-fashioned to my own students, who cannot imagine resorting to a paper dictionary, and who are loathe to go beyond the four or five options offered by their electronic lexicons. If only they could understand the awe, and the admiration, that Bill inspired—and the realization that learning a language is as much a matter of poetry as it is of mechanics.

It seems all too appropriate that, as I speak to you about Bill's influence on me as a scholar, I am in the midst of translating Takahashi Takako's "Byōbō," a story defined by poetic language as well as by complex ideas of space and place, populated by female characters who reflect upon their wealthy suburban neighborhoods in terms wholly divorced from the everyday physical world. As with Matsuo Yumi, I came across this

story during the course of a larger research project—in this case, a book on depictions of pregnancy and childbirth in contemporary Japan—and, as before, I initially decided to translate the story in order to understand it better. Very soon, however, my interest in it became more than academic. Takahashi's message was so ambiguous, the plot so totally creepy, that I knew my students would love it; moreover, the quality of the language and Takahashi's symbolism was unlike anything in the contemporary fiction I was having them read.

The title of the story immediately signals an idiosyncratic view of space: since both characters connote "enormous" or "vast", the conflation of the two suggests something so large that, paradoxically, it transcends spatial definition entirely. Indeed, while I have adopted Maryellen Mori's translation of the title, "A Vast Boundlessness," as a stopgap measure, I don't think this really captures the sense of space and time that Takahashi attributes to her protagonist; reading the whole story and working through the tortured mental processes of the narrator, I find myself wishing that Bill were here to give elegant form to Takahashi's resolutely formless expression!

Byobo's central character is Kiyoko, who is coming to terms with a recent miscarriage. Her husband is bitterly disappointed at the loss of the child, while she feels that she is freed, perhaps temporarily, by not having a baby. This rather straightforward story, however, is interwoven with Kiyoko's efforts to discover why the grove facing her house is being replaced by a series of concrete and steel apartment blocks, a quest that draws her out of her suburban existence and into the gritty world of the city. The distinction between these two places is drawn in stark terms: Kiyoko's neighborhood is depicted as a world of quiet, tree-lined lanes and gentle hills, offering expansive views of the urban clutter of factories, smokestacks, and pervasive yellow smoke. When Kiyoko leaves this safe haven for the urban jungle, however, her

dislocation manifests itself in profound, even vertiginous terms. After reaching city hall, she is sent to an annex where the planning office is located—an experience that calls forth a spatial stream-of-consciousness:

She thought about how, in the department store, the annex was wierdly out of alignment, defying the normal relationship between up and down, a void in the space around it. She found getting to the annex very difficult, filled as she was with a profound unease, as though she was somehow entering a different dimension.

For Kiyoko, however, space is more than physical—it is emotional, experiential, mnemonic. Sitting on a train, Kiyoko is overcome with loathing for a fat baby, and stabs it in the calf with her embroidery needle. As she rushes out of the car, she is horrified by her actions:

She stopped on the platform and turned her head. Where the train had stopped, there now were only two rails, floating in midair. The train's space was a clear plastic box containing what she had done, containing the viscous, bittersweet juice that flowed from a pudgy calf, pierced by a needle.

This image haunts Kiyoko as she watches the building rising in front of her house. In her mind, the relationships between the new residents, moving their things into new apartments, take on tangible form: sticky, viscous bonds, cloying and tepid, like fresh blood:

In the blink of an eye, the giant concrete space had become a soft, warm nesting place for families. At night, the windows glowed languidly, all the same color. Only one window remained dark. Kiyoko hoped that single room would remain dark, always . . . She gazed at the room as if it were a secret path, left there so that she could travel unnoticed amidst a mass of strangers. On the other side of the street was Boundlessness, Infinity, worlds without end.

For Kiyoko, the closeness, the cloying ties, the intimacy of the nuclear family are embodied by the spaces it inhabits—spaces she desperately wants to escape in favor of

a vast expanse, devoid of personal connections: the city, understood not merely as a physical environment, but as an avatar of salutary alienation.

Takahashi's story intrigues me because she approaches space in a very different way than either the detective writers I studied, or urban storytellers like Kafu. For her, the city is neither a context for self-exploration or self-definition, as Maeda described it, nor an embodiment of gendered experience, as Matsuo imagined it. Instead, Takahashi sets aside the mappable in favor of another kind of space, untethered and ungrounded, in a different dimension and defined by relations and concepts known only to its unique denizen. Takahashi's elusive spaces seem particularly poignant to me now, because my relationship with Bill is no longer tied to the terra firma of the University, the Powhatan, or Hyde Park, or even the imaginative realms of language and literature where he was my reliable guide. Instead, he exists in a vast boundlessness, an in-between space of fond memories, wistful emotions, and habits of mind and heart that continue to shape me in ways seen and unseen.

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