

Thoughts on Literature, the City, and Bill

Prefatory Remarks:

I wish to thank the supporting organizations of this event, Norma Field and Sara Arehart for all they have done in bringing about this event, and Jill Bixler, Bill's loving sister, who has played a key role in enabling it to come to pass. We have already had many "That's so Bill" moments in this symposium, and undoubtedly for many of us the copy of Bill's signature at the top of the symposium announcement has been one of those things, bringing back his memory as vividly and evocatively as any photo or memory. And listening to all the talks so far, it becomes clearer and clearer that no one will ever be able to fill Bill shoes, though we know now that Guy Yasko, who spoke movingly in the morning session, came close when he spent those years wearing Bill's clothes.

Tokunaga Sunao's proletarian novel, "Taiyō no nai machi" (Sunless Streets, 1929) received critical acclaim and much attention in Japan when it first appeared, as well as in succeeding years, but not much has been written on this side of the Pacific. Sasaki Kuni's, "Bunkamura no kigeki" (Culture-village: A Comedy, 1926), in contrast, has been largely ignored, while being a popular work. Separated by genre and subject, works like these tend not to be discussed in tandem. But each work is singularly about an emerging type of space within the city, spaces that characterize Tokyo in the early decades of the twentieth-century. Captive as we are, and for good reason, to the residual and continuously reformulated view of modern Tokyo as divided—between high city and low city—these novels give shape to an *overlay* that highlights somewhat different realities. By the latter part of the 1920s, the defining features of the city consisted of densely populated slums, hazardous 'storefront' cottage industries, and socially marginalized neighborhoods spread throughout both the high and low city, with a wide band of heavily industrialized areas ringing Tokyo on three sides. The conversion of inner-city space to the demands of capital would proceed along with the rapid appropriation of Tokyo's periphery, or its *basue*. Tokunaga and Sasaki's novels, in turn, speak to this concurrent marginalization of

inner city space and the development of basue. As played out in Tokyo, the legacy of civilization and enlightenment would turn out to be very uneven in its reach into the everyday life of most citizens, even in the capital.

The advent of modernity—from a new form of government to the conversion of Tokyo into a modern and industrialized capital and metropole—would reveal its contradictions in many ways, foremost among them the very real yet also intensely fabulated view of Tokyo as divided into flatlands rooted in a traditional merchant and skilled-trades-based culture, and the hilly regions to the west where former lands reserved for the samurai class were converted for habitation by commoners, and increasingly repopulated by an emerging middle class that would slightly exceed 20% of Tokyo's population by 1920.

The two stories effectively address the way Tokyo is 're-territorialized' by the familiar forces of capital and the modern State. *Sunless Street*, based on actual strikes that took place in 1926 against the Hakubunkan Printers (today Kyōdō Printing), chronicles the struggles that befell the strikers through the collusion of police, Hakubunkan management, and the thugs they hire as enforcers. The street without sunlight lies at the valley floor in the shadow of what is today informally known as the Koishikawa botanical garden, a Mito daimyo estate now converted into a teacher training school, and fancy homes for Hakubunkan's upper management perched on the adjoining uplands. There, along the valley floor where once flowed the Senkawa Aqueduct through a lovely gorge had, by the 1920s become the Senkawa Ditch, running alongside and under row houses in one of the largest slums in Tokyo with clusters of tonneru nagaya ('tunnel' row houses) clustered by the hundreds. Just 1.5 kilometers north of where present-day Kōrakuen baseball stadium stands, the region illustrates Jinnai's study showing that pockets of poverty and wealth, denominated by the fine topography of hillocks and valleys throughout the Yamanote, formed a patchwork of varying socio-economic clusters.

*Culture Village: A Comedy* was serialized from July to December of 1926 at a time when the word "culture" had become a catchword and a widely over-used prefix to confer modernity and Western-style sophistication to just about anything. Culture village became a generic expression with its most well known referents being such planned developments as Den'en

Chōfu, Seijō, Ochiai bukamura, and Ogikubo bunkamura. (The particular one that Sasaki Kuni lived near that may have directly inspired this work was probably the Mejiro-bunkamura, about a 15-20 minute walk from Mejiro Station and closer to being west of today's Seibu-Shinjuku Shimo Ochiai Station and hence known as Ochiai bunkamura.) Designed for upper-middle class white-collar workers—well paid bureaucrats, upper management businessmen, intellectuals—Sasaki Kuni's work depicts the life of a salaried worker who moves his family to a culture village at the urging of his superior to whom he wishes to curry favor by being close by. Constant fun is made of this development, advertised as being modern, hygienic, and where every day feels like one is on holiday spent in bucolic splendor, but the reality is that the 15 minutes from the station as promised by development brochures is true only if one runs from house to station at full speed, rain brings muddy impassable roads, badgers, snakes and other wildlife greatly outnumber neighbors, and the trains run at long intervals. A novel of manners that lampoons social pretensions and ambition among the nouveau middle class in new culture villages, the work also heralds a new relationship between commodified metropolitan space and its occupants who cannot but feel duped into buying what they did not need or, it turns out, want.

This abbreviated account of a long abandoned essay to which I have recently turned, what does it have to do with Bill? He was not exactly a fan of proletarian literature, even as he could engage the issues at stake in them as powerfully as anyone (witness his review of Arima's book), and he eschewed explicit advocacy in academic work. Yet, in his everyday life as in his work, Bill did not shy away from critical engagement and expressing his thoughts, even though he clearly disliked what might be called 'vulgar advocacy.' How then, best to avoid pushing the obvious, rehearsing the expected, and avoiding the often overdetermined nature of social causes? In his introduction to Minakata, we can see the finest example of just that kind of work. Through his choices of what to address, what not to say, and in a thousand decisions that are enjoined to impart what he must, we discern the kind of engagement that leads not to declaration but to a muted and all the more effective advocacy.

When I met Bill for the first time in the summer of 1980 at the EALC offices on Woodlawn, he talked about literature, people and Chicago. Lamenting the fact that South Side blues clubs were quickly disappearing, he would eventually take me to more than one, as well as to a joyous BB King club appearance with Helen Little, dept MSO, resident advisor, friend, cheerleader, and mother to us all. When Nakagami Kenji came to Chicago for a talk (1982 or 83), with Karatani tagging along, and asked for an ‘authentic’ Chicago experience, Bill steered me (with them) to the remaining South Side clubs that indeed pleased our visitor. (I was too scared and awed to be much of a guide for Nakagami, who drank, smoked, and listened with eyes closed or asleep? to the music. If I remember correctly, Susan Griswold was my equally timid fellow guide.) When Maeda Ai came to spend fall of 1981 at UC, at Bill’s request I drove the three of us to Pullman on the far Southside. By then it came as no surprise that Bill knew far more about the company town and the railway than anyone who worked there on site. There was no Google back then, so if I wanted to ask about a historic street in Chicago that I had heard about, say one modeled after Mayfair London houses with diagonally symmetric housing on a facing street, I could ask Bill. For someone who did not care to drive, the city and its venues were always calling out to him. In turn, he engaged the city as he did literature, as only he could do.

In his essay on Minakata, Bill makes an observation about Sōseki as “paving the way for anti-establishment culture.” Not many would be equipped to make an observation with historical particulars so surely on his side, since most of us are likely to observe—clouded by the limits of our own time and place—that Sōseki was aligned with the establishment. Erudition takes us so far, and Bill’s was informed by a sharp mind and sensibility that we can only marvel at. Maeda Ai was a much adored figure during his stay at Chicago, and he enjoyed his time spent with each of the Japan faculty who welcomed him here. But on more than one occasion, well after the intellectual pyrotechnics of the seminar and discussion were over, Maeda would meaningfully shake his head, and privately express admiration for Bill’s plain and subdued [地味な] contributions which had impressed him the most.

I never once saw Bill as an academic showing off, an occupational hazard for those in the Humanities. Instead, he concentrated his energies on helping us privately. Bill wrote copious

marginalia and comments on the papers we wrote, through which we all learned so much. And he showed us even more in the way that he interacted with the city and the world around us—most pointedly the astonishingly large number of people that were part of his life, from doormen to neighbors and work associates, and the city which he knew and made his own as few others could. If critical theory was the way for those who needed help to think through texts, by example Bill urged us to develop our own sensibilities and let them creatively inform our work. For in the end, even our academic work is intensely personal.