The Significance of Space and Time in Modern Japanese Literature

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Introduction

Anyone involved in the critical reading of literature knows that there are numerous ways in which to read a text, ranging from reader-response criticism to a gender studies approach. In this chapter the critical approach I take is to examine the spatial and temporal configurations that can be identified in a literary text. It strikes me that this approach is particularly productive in the case of modern Japanese literature because topographical representations within a text can serve as metaphorical pointers to the traumatic events that have influenced the development of Japanese culture during the modern period. In other words, an exploration of space and time in literature offers insight into the broader social and historical processes by which a sense of being both modern and Japanese has emerged.

When speaking of trauma, I have in mind Cathy Caruth's definition of stories of trauma that articulate 'a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis.' Such a question 'can never be asked in a straight-forward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a

language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding' (1996: 5). In the case of modern Japan, the trauma expressed through literature relates most clearly to the increasingly insistent presence of the West from the 1850s and the consequent dramatic ruptures that affected all spheres of Japanese society, particularly from the beginning of Meiji in 1868. In addition to such external pressures, social upheavals that emerged from within Japan as the authority of the Tokugawa shogunate began to decline also had an effect. Taken together, these changes inevitably had a profound effect on the shape of modern Japanese literary sensibility.[1]

Representations of space and time from the Meiji period (1868-1912) may be read in part as an attempt to articulate this experience of traumatic loss, and to flesh out alternative versions of belonging precisely at a time when a fixed sense of cultural identity was becoming more difficult to grasp. Therefore, it makes sense to see spatial configurations within any literary text not so much as a passive, pre-existing zone in which events simply take place, but rather as a dynamic process intertwined with the historical flow that contributed towards the creation of the Japanese experience of modernity.

We should also keep in mind the complex ways in which modern Japanese writers and critics came to articulate a sense of time and space in their literature. It would be especially wrong to imply that the arguments framed by Japanese writers were entirely dependent on the influence of Western critics. It nonetheless still makes sense to acknowledge within this chapter some of the major Western theorists who have explored similar intellectual territory. After all, the majority of Japanese writers and intellectuals since Meiji have been more than happy to engage with Western literary theories even while they have also continued to draw inspiration from aspects

of their own native tradition. Indeed, as the world has become ever more interconnected through travel and communications, intellectual communities both inside and outside Japan have increasingly relied upon a common body of critical texts in their interpretation of literary works.

Finally, the following broad overview hopefully provides greater clarity to us as contemporary readers, since we are no less heirs to accumulated layers of interpretation drawn from both Western and Japanese critical traditions that have accrued to the way we read Japanese literary texts in the present day.

General Theoretical Approaches to Space and Time

Michel Foucault once noted that, if the nineteenth century was dominated by history, then 'the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space' (1986: 22). And indeed, theories of space proved to be a rich vein in the body of Western critical thought throughout the twentieth century. Some of the most obvious examples include Walter Benjamin's portrayal during the 1930s of the French poet Charles Baudelaire as a mid-nineteenth century flâneur whose bodily engagement with the crowded streets of Metropolitan Paris provided clues to an emergent modernist sensibility (see Benjamin 2006). Georg Simmel's earlier work 'The Metropolis and Mental Life,' written in 1903, was equally influential in its concern with the transformative dynamic between individuals and their urban environments that engendered an 'intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli,' albeit from a more anthropological angle (Simmel 1971: 325).

Marxist critics have frequently concentrated on the material relations between people and place at the level of daily experience, so it is not surprising that they figure prominently in space-centered critical theories. Names associated with this approach include Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Edward Soja.[2] On the other hand, some critics have been keener to employ a psychological framework in their articulation of spatial configurations. For instance, Gaston Bachelard's writing is characterized by a discursive and seductively poetic style, but it also seeks inspiration from Freudian theories. Indeed, his *The Poetics of Space* (1994), first published in 1958, has come to be regarded as one of the most compelling and lyrical explorations of relations between people and place from a psychoanalytical perspective.

Bachelard's interests initially lay in the philosophy of science, but he became increasingly fascinated with the imaginative dimension of the creative mind as it interacted with and was itself shaped by physical space. Drawing on psychoanalytical concerns with the unconscious and poetical 'dream' language, he spoke of a 'topoanalysis,' which he described as 'a systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' (1994: 8). Bachelard sought to trace the dynamic relationships between the individual conscious subject and the wider material world in which the individual is sited. Specifically, his book explored intimate spatial configurations such as the house, the nest or the inside of a shell. Perhaps echoing Freud's assertion in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that images or symbols within dreams may embody multiple meanings (through what Freud called the process of 'condensation'), Bachelard suggested that everyday spaces embody a multiplicity of meanings and memories, or 'compressed time,' as he called it. His book used literary close readings in order to unpack layered realities that he identified in the texts.

Restrictions of space mean I have touched only briefly on a few of the Western contributors to theoretical interpretations of space and time who have most influenced the Japanese intellectual world. However, suffice it to say that it was really from the late 1960s that critical theory emerged as a major concern in Western academia, and that interest was also taken up in Japan. Many Japanese academics first came to know these Western critics through translation. For instance, Foucault's writing appeared in Japanese versions from the 1960s. A Japanese translation of *Naissance de la Clinique* (1963) appeared in 1969 (trans. Kamiya Mieko, *Rinshō igaku no tanjō*, Tokyo: Misuzu shobō); and a translation of *L'archéologie du savoir* (1969) appeared only a year after publication in 1970 (trans. Nakamura Yūjirō, *Chi no kōkogaku*, Tokyo: Kawade shobō). Japanese critical works that discussed other important Western critics also emerged during the 1970s. See, for instance, Hasumi Shigehiko's book, *Fūkō, Dōrūzu, Derida*, written in 1978. Other Japanese critics encountered Western theorists more directly. For instance, Karatani Kōjin attended Yale University as a visiting professor from 1975 where he met Frederic Jameson and Paul de Man. Also the postmodern critic Asaka Akira, who highly influential book *Kōzō to chikara—kigōron o koete* (Structure and Power—Beyond Semiotics, Tokyo: Keisō shobō) was published in 1983, has also contributed to English language publications.[3]

The dissemination of ideas by these western critics helped encourage a wide range of Japanese writers, especially from the fields of anthropology and sociology, to branch out in a similar fashion into the area of space-centered studies. These studies often took the form of an interest in urban space (*toshi kûkan*), particularly centered on the city of Tokyo.

Unno Hiroshi's *Modan toshi Tôkyô: Nihon no 1920 nendai* (1983) provides a good example of how close readings of literary representations of the physical spaces of Tokyo have been used as a means to sketch out fundamental social and cultural changes in modern Japan. The book explores aspects of urban space in the writings of a range of authors who were active around the 1920s; for instance, Kawabata Yasunari's *Asakusa kurenaidan* (The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa, 1930), Hayashi Fusao's *Hôrôki* (Diary of a Vagabond, 1930), and Tokunaga Sunao's *Taiyô no nai machi* (Streets Without Sun, 1929). In his introduction, Unno emphasizes the value of linking topological features with broader cultural associations. Portraying himself sat on a bench overlooking the River Sumida, and lost in such a reverie that he feels he has been transported back to the 1920s, Unno asserts that the river itself is intimately interwoven into the imaginative geography of 1920s Tokyo (1983: 8).

But, why should he demonstrate such an interest in this particular waterway? Unno's impulse to associate the River Sumida with 1920s culture makes better sense if we consider the circumstances of Japan during the 1980s when he was writing this book. He argues that the 1920s represent the moment when familiar aspects of contemporary Japanese urban life—a rich blending of Western and Japanese arts, literature, theatre, music, and fine arts, etc.—first took shape. In other words, Unno reads the city spaces that emerge in 1920s literature as a reflection of that rich cultural mixture (1983: 11).

This is undeniable, but the author's attraction to the River Sumida may also have something to do with his own desire to escape Japan's frantic post-modern mood during the 1980s when the 'bubble economy' was moving towards its climax, and when, just as in the 1920s, there was a particularly eclectic mixture of Western and Japanese cultures. After all, this would not be the first moment since Meiji that people

have identified the River Sumida as an aesthetically pleasing site of unadulterated pleasure, and an opportunity to step away from the overwhelming complexities of modern life. As I point out in my close reading of Nagai Kafû's 'The River Sumida' ('Sumidagawa,' 1909) in the final part of this chapter, a similar impulse to escape the everyday problems of Meiji and simply enjoy the river was shared by several characters in that text.

In any case, Unno was not the only critic during the period of the bubble economy to identify the river as central to any reading of Tokyo's urban space during the Taishô period. Kawamoto Saburô opens his influential book, *Taishô gen'ei* (1990) with the sentence: 'In the beginning was the River Sumida' (1990: 7). Kawamoto argues that the river served as a kind of literary native place (*furusato*) in which many major writers who came of age during Taishô—people like Akutagawa Ryûnosuke, Satô Haruo, and Tanizaki Jun'ichirô—grounded themselves.

Kawamoto portrays the pre-Meiji city of Edo as a 'water-based capital (*mizu no Tôkyô*) whose development was centered around the River Sumida.' However, the following Meiji generation destroyed it, and replaced it with a land-based Tokyo ('riku no Tôkyô') centered round the Yamanote area. In their turn, Taishô writers mounted their own generational rebellion by rediscovering the river as a source of inspiration. One way to interpret their love of water is as an assertion of self-identity and a willful defiance against the Meiji state and their fathers' generation.

For Kawamoto, the Taishô period is replete with a sense of illusions (*gen'ei*), but this is not to be understood in a negative sense. Indeed, his book argues that it is the very ambiguity and uncertainty associated with the concept of illusions that allowed for Taishô to represent an exceptionally productive and imaginative period.

Once again, the River Sumida serves as a useful analogy. He acknowledges that, compared to the more forward-looking Meiji generation, Taishô writers tried to re-appropriate a city of water that now only existed as a memory, and in that sense, this latter generation is condemned always to look backwards into the past. In other words, Taishô writers are drawn towards imaginative recreations of worlds that no longer exist; as Kawamoto put it, 'the Sumida River became the "Sumida River"' (1990: 9). However, his overall argument is that this sense of self-conscious artificiality—a sensibility that pervades much of Taishô fiction—actually served as a tool for uncovering deeper artistic insights into reality.

Another major critical writer who examined links between popular urban culture of the 1920s and literary works is Suzuki Sadami. Suzuki carried out a far-reaching survey of urban cultural life of the period from a range of different perspectives in his book, *Modan toshi no hyôgen: jiko, gensô, josei* (1992). For instance, he mentions the emergence of modern illnesses during Taishô associated with the sound of heavy industrial machinery, as well as instances of neurosis experienced by those who have newly arrived from the countryside and suffer from the isolation of city life (1992: 15). He also addresses the emergence of the modern girl (*modan gâru*) just after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. This phenomenon of female empowerment was related to an urban environment in which dance halls and cafés had sprung up (1992: 168-195). In addition, Suzuki argues that a modern urban environment contributed to the emergence of a new level of self-consciousness. Specifically, these new forms of self identity can be found in the stories of writers like Satô Haruo and Kajii Motojirô, who featured introverted characters suffering from various forms of depression and hyperchondria (*shinkei suijaku*). For Suzuki, these very afflictions were far from negative; indeed, they proved to be instrumental in the

enrichment of inner worlds of fantasy fleshed out in the literature of the time (1992: 233-234).

A more recent book, Hashizume Shinya's *Modanizumu no Nippon* (2006), explores how a vast range of technological changes (things such as lighting, radio, and electrification) contributed to a new cultural environment and ways of thinking that might be described as modernist. Indeed, modernism has often been identified as central to space centered, urban configurations especially during the Taishô and early Shôwa periods. It makes sense, therefore, that Kawamoto Saburô, Unno Hiroshi and Suzuki Sadami decided to edit a comprehensive, ten-volume anthology of short modernist fiction entitled *Modan toshi bungaku* (1989-1991).

I have mentioned a few of the major critical works by Japanese scholars on the theme. But before I move on to a more detailed examination of how Japanese critics have engaged with their own modern literature, let me touch briefly on the broader Japanese cultural genealogy from which modern Japanese critics emerged. After all, these writers gained their understanding of time and space not only from Western ideas but also from theoretical preconceptions that were rooted in pre-Meiji literary forms.

Pre-Meiji Japanese Literary Articulations of Space and Time

One of the most prominent features of classical Japanese poetry (*waka*, the dominant pre-Meiji literary genre) is the abundance of *utamakura*, which can be traced back to the thirteenth century. The literal meaning of this term is 'pillow-word,' and it refers to a group of poetic words associated with earlier examples of

classical verse, and which often overlap with well-known place names (*meisho*). The effect of embedding these references into a verse was to lend a greater depth and cultural resonance than would otherwise have pertained. From the poet's perspective, skillful use of *utamakura* demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of the literary tradition. As far as readers were concerned, correct identification of a particular *utamakura* confirmed their membership of a shared cultural heritage.[5]

To give one example, the appearance of the place-name Yoshino in a verse always indicated that the season must be spring, since Yoshino was famed for its glorious cherry blossoms. In other words, the use of *utamakura* points to a distinctive interpretation of the significance of space whereby these poems attained depth and cultural value through their associations with certain place *names* rather than through any realistic depiction of geographical *place*. Indeed, most poets who employed *utamakura* would simply not have seen any point in visiting the actual locations. In short, the pre-Meiji literary world generally assumed that space featured primarily as part of a web of linguistic and inter-textual, rather than physical, landscapes.

This is not to imply that all verse produced before Meiji shared exactly the same set of assumptions when it came to the literary reproduction of space. Inevitably, such textual configurations of space changed with time. For example, Haruo Shirane has pointed to an important change during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) when he notes how Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), famed for his seventeen-syllable *haikai* (or *haiku*), saw the poetic canon as 'a highly encoded body of poetic topics (*dai*) and their poetic essences, which the *haikai* poet inherited, worked against, and transformed' (Shirane 1998: 185). One way in which Bashō worked both with and against traditional forms can be seen precisely through his representations of time and space. On the one hand, he adhered to the traditional use of *utamakura*, which referenced

earlier classical poetry; on the other hand, the poet satisfied the demand of his contemporary readers for innovative literary flourishes by taking the almost unheard-of step of actually visiting many of the places that he wrote about. By blending old and new elements in this way, Bashō maintained the familiar mappings of inter-textual space in accordance with past practice, at the same time as he constructed an innovative literary space that pointed to a link between written word and real place.

The following section argues that further rupturing of the classical tradition led to another significant literary shift during the Meiji period, especially as new writers arose who were inspired by Western concepts of realism and individualism. However, this is not to suggest that, in the modern period, the Japanese suddenly found themselves capable of imagining spatial configurations within literature that were free of all earlier Japanese inter-textual references. After all, no culture can suddenly turn off the tap and remove itself from the broader context of the times. At the same time, it is true to say that even this context was likewise undergoing a process of constant transformation, and it was inevitable that, with new cultural influences coming in from the West, theories of space should also change. As Japanese writers and critics began to engage with newly imported forms of landscape as well as their own native preconceptions, a new set of problems arose in relation to individual identity and the phenomenal world.

Modern Japanese Literary Theories of Space and Time

Given this long-standing complex relationship between place, space and literary representation, it is not surprising that critical writers since Meiji should also have explored ways to articulate their experience of changing relations between

people and place. One of the most sensitive critical voices during the interwar years was that of Kobayashi Hideo, whose short essay 'Literature of the Lost Home' ('Kokyō o ushinatta bungaku') touched on the deep anxiety shared by many of his urban-based contemporaries about what they perceived as the loss of an 'authentic' native place (*furusato*).

Written in 1933, the essay embodied Kobayashi's reflections on his sense of increasingly tenuous links between people and place when he was growing up in the first decades of the twentieth century. He recalls how, even though he was born and raised in Tokyo, he never felt comfortable when people addressed him as a native child of Edo (*Edokko*). It may well be that Kobayashi was echoing Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's (1892-1927) famous mention of a 'vague uneasiness' (*bonyari shita fuan*) in his suicide note only a few years earlier when he lamented how 'I have a kind of uneasy feeling (*fuan na kanjō*) that I possess no home.' Kobayashi contrasts his own experience of rootlessness with a friend who was born outside of Tokyo and had retained a much stronger sense of native place. One day, as the two are returning to Tokyo by train from Kyoto, Kobayashi is startled to see his friend deeply moved by the sight of a mountain road outside the carriage window because it reminds him of his native place:

> While I listened as he related how the sight of the mountain path brought forth a host of childhood memories that made him choke with emotion, I felt strongly that I did not understand what the "countryside" (*inaka*) meant. Or rather, I had a deep sense that the "first home" and the "second home"—indeed, the very meaning of the "native place" (*kokyō*, *furusato*)—were alien to me. Where there are no memories there is no native place. If a person does not possess

powerful memories which are the product of an accumulation of numerous immutable impressions provided by an immutable environment, then the healthy emotion that fills out the word "native place" will mean nothing to him (Kobayashi 1968: 31-32).[6]

The physical reconstruction of the city of Edo into Tokyo from early Meiji had never stopped and, particularly after the 1923 earthquake, even less of the old city remained. The result was that, unlike the friend whose recollection of childhood experiences was set off by specific visual sensations, Kobayashi's upbringing in a constantly changing metropolitan landscape denied him the ability to identify links between personal history and fixed physical details of the city.

A few years later, the poet Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942) evoked a similarly traumatic mood of rootlessness and rupture in an essay entitled 'Return to Japan' ('*Nihon e no kaiki*,' 1937), when he compared the experience of his compatriots to the mythical figure Urashima Tarō. In the legend, after spending three years in the sea-god's palace under the sea, Urashima finally returned home only to find that, calculated in human terms, he had been away for three hundred years. The native place associated with friends and loved ones had now disappeared. Hagiwara sees similarities in the experience of the Japanese of his own age, who had become so disconnected from their origins that those pre-Meiji roots had withered away, and the native place could now best be likened to an old mansion with rotten eaves and a wasted garden.

A fascination with literary representations of time and space as a theoretical means of interpreting cultural phenomena has been no less prevalent among postwar

Japan intellectuals and literary theorists. For example, Isoda Kōichi broke new ground with his book *Tokyo as an Idea* (*Shisō toshite no Tōkyō*) in which he used the map as a frame for portraying the modern metropolis of Tokyo as a series of competing economic and cultural power structures. For instance, he noted how post-1923 earthquake maps of Tokyo marked off the Western half of the city as a residential area now designed to accommodate the aspiring middle class. In contrast, the *shitamachi* (downtown) area centered around the River Sumida, which once served as an evocative backdrop for the Edo-period literary and visual arts, was now deprived of its former cultural câché and alloted a more mundane role as a site for industrial development. He also makes the point that Tokyo railway station, completed in 1914, bore the name Central Station (*Chūō teishajō*) on some maps. For Isoda, this name indicates that the station stood not only at the center of Tokyo, but also at the heart of a burgeoning economic and colonial power. In literary terms, the emergence of Tokyo as a site of economic and cultural capital during Meiji had already been depicted in Tokutomi Kenjirō's novel, *Footprints in the Snow* (*Omoide no ki*,1902), when the protagonist makes a journey from his native place in Kyushu to the exciting centre of modernity that was Tokyo.

Isoda's mapping of Tokyo as modern Japan's metropolitan centre relates even more directly to developments in Japanese literature when he refers to a dispute among authors during the 1920s and 1930s concerning the literary language most appropriate to depict the experience of modern everyday life. He pointed out that writers such as Nagai Kafū (1879-1959) and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), who were raised in Tokyo and had close roots to the city's *shitamachi* and Edo traditions, were naturally keen to retain elements of the native Tokyo dialect (*Tōkyō hōgen*) in their texts. In contrast, naturalist writers who had moved to the capital from provincial

regions and who brought with them their local dialects, were more willing to give up individual linguistic idiosyncrasies and forge a new standard Japanese (*hyōjungo*) that could most effectively communicate the new world they were building together in the capital. Isoda continues with cartographic imagery by portraying this struggle for linguistic hegemony among writers of differing ideological persuasions in terms of a patchwork of competing literary coteries (*bundan*) that dotted Tokyo like intellectual 'villages' (Isoda 1979: 32).

Another major Japanese intellectual involved in the cultural mapping of Tokyo during the 1980s was Jinnai Hidenobu, especially with his book *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology* (*Tōkyō no kūkan jinruigaku*). As the title suggests, his approach was more anthropological than literary, but he sometimes touched upon literary references as a means to flesh out the complex palimpsest of history and lived experiences that he feared was getting lost during the 1980s. This was, after all, a time when the older city was being buried under exuberant high-rise structures that reflected the bubble economy. Jinnai saw great value in 'reading' the contemporary city as a kind of visual text. The simple act of walking through the city districts provided him with a very practical means to engage with the urban terrain, with all its layers of history and cultural associations.

One way in which Jinnai's exploration of Tokyo touched upon literary articulations of space and time related to his assertion that it was only with the advent of modern Japan that water spaces stopped serving as the city's major structural feature. Indeed, he goes so far as to portray the *shitamachi* area during the Edo and early Meiji periods as basically a major urban space built on water. It was only during the course of the Meiji period that new roads and railways systems sprang up around the geographically higher area of the Yamanote region, which emerged as the

preeminent center of modern commerce and banking. As the *shitamachi* lost its position as principal cultural center, old waterways were filled in over time and Tokyo turned into what Jinnai calls a 'land metropolis' (*riku no tō*) (Jinnai 1985: 99). Kawamoto Saburô was clearly drawing from Jinnai's ideas in his own book, *Taishô gen'ei*.

It is worthwhile playing up the significance of these important Japanese intellectual figures since Meiji who have evinced an interest in representations of time and space because, in the last few decades, there has been a tendency for scholars of modern Japanese literature to focus almost exclusively on the writings of Maeda Ai when writing about such representations. However, this is not to downplay the real value of Maeda's urban discourses (*toshi ron*) and theorizations of space (*kūkan ron*) in enriching our reading of modern Japanese literary texts. The fact that a collection of Maeda's best known essays have been translated into English and published as a single book (*Text and the City: Essays on Japanese Modernity*, ed. James Fujii) indicates the extent to which Maeda's research has touched a generation of Japanese academics not only inside, but also, outside of Japan.

Maeda was part of a postwar group of intellectuals who were delighted to engage with the writings of cutting-edge Western theoreticians such as Foucault, Bachelard and LeFebvre. His interest in the material significance of maps, as well as the metaphorical mapping of landscapes that could be traced out in literary texts, merely echoed his conviction that both Edo and Meiji periods were fundamentally visual cultures. And indeed, his work extended to the study of a wide range of visual manifestations of culture: from mass culture and films, to panoramas and world fairs.

When Maeda turned his attention specifically to literary readings, he amalgamated a concern with material aspects of modern life and spatial configurations in order to give shape to deeper currents of cultural change. For example, he identified Miyazaki Koshoshi's short story, 'Returning Home' ('Kisei,' 1890) as the first example of what he termed 'native place literature' (*furusato bungaku*) by linking the text's internal geographical structure to the broader social conditions of mid-Meiji. This literary sub-genre typically described a young man based in Tokyo who makes a brief trip back to his native place. Such a story provided an opportunity to contrast the sense of rootlessness associated with metropolitan life to the positive delights of the native place where the skies appear bluer, the water cleaner, and the locals more trustworthy and upright. In short, Maeda identified this nostalgic vein of writing as a critique of modernity and as a search for a compensatory balm to heal some of the traumatic cultural and social upheavals of the Meiji period (Maeda 1990: 220).[7]

Another Japanese critic whose work has strongly influenced the way we read modern Japanese literature from a spatial perspective, both inside and outside of Japan, is Karatani Kōjin. The extent of Karatani's influence on his own generation of scholars can been judged from the fact that he shares the rare distinction with Maeda of having seen some of his most distinguished texts translated into English. One such book is *The Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (*Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen*, 1980), which was particularly important in the way he used the concept of landscape to argue that a fundamentally new way of seeing the world emerged in Japan during the late 1890s in conjunction with the literary trend of realism. Karatani traced this new epistemological view through the writings of Kunikida Doppo (1871-1908). For example, in 'The Musashi Plain' ('Musashino,' 1898), the narrator visits the area of

Sakai in the Western part of Tokyo in early summer with a friend. When they enter a teashop for refreshments, an old lady ridicules them because they have come at the wrong season: like Yoshino, Sakai was a 'famous place' (*meisho*) renowned for its cherry blossoms, so they should have come in spring. However, Karatani points out that Doppo is laying claim to a new understanding of time and space here in the way he boldly stands against convention. The narrator has come to appreciate Sakai not for its traditional seasonal links, but as a locality to be savoured, from his own modern individualistic perspective, precisely for what it has to offer in the off-season, during the summer.

The best-known section of the book that addresses the emergence of a new epistemological understanding of time and space during Meiji relates to what Karatani calls Doppo's modern 'discovery of landscape' in his story, 'Unforgettable People' ('Wasureenu hitobito,' 1898). One particular scene describes the narrator on a boat passing a small island in the Inland Sea, when he catches sight of a man on the beach. The man appears to be picking things up and putting them into his basket. The boat very quickly moves on and the beach scene disappears from view, but the scene remains unforgettably etched into the narrator mind. Karatani argues that this is the precise moment when a modern literary perspective is inserted into the landscape, both literal and metaphorical. An irreversible transformation of perception has taken place whereby earlier conceptions of the relationships between people and place centered upon inter-textual famous names are swept away. Instead, 'ordinary people' located in recognizably real landscapes have come into being (1993: 23).

Close Reading: Nagai Kafū's 'The River Sumida'

I have set out some of the most distinguished contributions to theoretical interpretations of space and time that have influenced the field of modern Japanese literature. This final section provides an example of how such theories can be applied to a specific close reading of a Japanese literary text. Nagai Kafū's 'The River Sumida' is a text that benefits from a spatial analysis not only because it exemplifies various ways in which space-centered configurations can articulate a range of feelings and emotional responses related to the age, but also because it demonstrates the impact of cultural trauma as a fundamental aspect of the Japanese modern condition.[8]

The story centers around the fortunes of seventeen-year-old Chōkichi, who is instinctively inclined towards the pre-Meiji arts of music and acting; his mother O-toyo who, despite being a teacher of *Tokiwazu* traditional music, wants her son to study hard in order to succeed as a modern bureaucrat; his uncle Ragetsu, a haiku poet whose disreputable youthful exploits got him expelled from the family home; and O-ito, Chōkichi's fifteen-year-old love interest who is about to enter a geisha house as the story begins. 'The River Sumida' was one of the stories written by Kafū in the first couple of years following his return to Japan after a five-year journey around the United States and Europe. Most events of the story, which take place around the *shitamachi* area close to the river, are portrayed in a way that strongly hints at the traumatic effects of Westernization on the Japanese psychological as well as physical landscape. In fact, Kafū had nothing against the West *per se*: many of his experiences abroad were entirely positive. However, upon his return to Japan he lamented what he felt was the way his country was turning into a pale imitation of the West at the same time as it was losing its own (as he saw it) authentic identity. Chōkichi may be interpreted as a symbol of resistance against the forces of modernity.[9]

The significance of space in 'The River Sumida' can be read in numerous ways. Most obviously, the actual title highlights the central role of the river as it runs, quite literally, from one end of the story to the other. But, whereas Steve Rabson's interpretation focuses on the environment of the river as a character, my own reading is more directly concerned with how the main character Chōkichi *engages* with the environment. The river serves both as a metaphor for the vicissitudes in Chōkichi's life and as a balm for his emotional crises. The textual structure bears comparison with Bachelard's concept of topoanalysis, in the sense that the young man's psychological nuances are spelt out through the manner of his engagement with the surrounding environment. For example, the mixture of expectancy and unease that pervades Chōkichi as he awaits O-ito's arrival on Imado Bridge is given shape through his contemplation of a darkly brooding, and yet intriguingly beautiful river. Likewise, towards the story's end when he realizes that his aspiration to become an actor is unlikely to be fulfilled, Chōkichi displays a determination to fall sick and possibly even die by deliberately wandering through summer floodwaters that have overflowed from the river, with the result that he catches typhoid. From beginning to end, the river's insistent presence suggests that, notwithstanding Jinnai's likening of the rise of modern Tokyo to the emergence of a land metropolis, Kafū was determined to cling stubbornly to a landscape still under the sway of older water-based structures.

This is not to imply that the modern features of Tokyo can be entirely eradicated from the text. It may be true that for much of the story the reader's gaze is directed along protective, shadowy backstreets that throw up titillating and timeless images such as a woman showering in moonlight, glimpsed at by Ragetsu through a gap in the bamboo fence as he makes his way towards the river ferry that will carry him to his sister's home. Nevertheless, the modern world occasionally has the power

to break through such nostalgic remnants of an earlier cityscape. As Ragetsu walks in the direction of his sister's house, he encounters 'newly built rows of cheap houses waiting for renters' that have risen up over reclaimed paddy fields (182). And later on, when he tries to persuade his nephew to complete his school studies for his mother's sake, they walk together along the Oshiage Canal, where pollution from the mechanical age has already left its mark: 'Industrial soot floated down from somewhere, and from somewhere came the noise of industrial machinery' (212).

When it comes to those landscapes that appeal to Kafū so powerfully that his text lingers over them with evident lyrical delight, they frequently convey a sense of decay or putrefaction. This is due in part to the inevitable influence of fin de siècle Decadent poets on a newly returned Japanese author with a keen enthusiasm to pay homage to all things French. For this reason, when Chōkichi absconds from school to wander around the area of Asakusa, he becomes aware of 'worm-eaten' leaves and sinister looking men dressed in dirty kimonos (193). And when Ragetsu does finally get to his sister's, the home is described as dilapidated, its paper doors patched over with faded pictures of beautiful women, while mice can be heard scurrying in the roof above and there is the hum of insects all around (183). The overall effect of such a description is not to create an unpleasant atmosphere; on the contrary, it suggests a comfortingly well-worn environment in which the varied lives of humans, rodents and insects rub along together as part of an organic whole. At the same time, it is undeniable that the tone of decay also implies that any literary attempt to portray an idyllic landscape entirely removed from the everyday difficulties of real life is ultimately a flawed venture, and is indeed increasingly doomed as the features of modern Japan became ever more clearly woven into the urban fabric.

Space also features significantly in its affect on the narrative's temporal flow. For instance, when Chōkichi is waiting for O-ito on Imado Bridge, this is simply the first of several points in the story where narrative movement—the question of what happens next—is suspended and the reader is invited to pause, and to contemplate aspects of the river from an overwhelmingly lyrical and visual perspective. As Chōkichi watches from the bridge, narrative progression gives way to painterly flourishes in the shape of 'thin lines of lightning' in the gathering darkness that illuminate the upper reaches of the river. Moreover, a viscous sensuality makes itself visible through reference to 'the wet stakes in the water, the bits of seaweed coming under the bridge on the flood tide' (188). There are, it is true, some signs of the bridge as a site of daily human activity when a couple of strolling singers pause to admire the moon before they move on towards the Yoshiwara – Tokyo's famed red-light district. However, a photograph of the same bridge taken by Kusabame Kinbei near the beginning of Meiji throws into question the extent to which even these figures should be interpreted as ordinary people in everyday space. The bridge is of the familiar traditional, wooden type that frequently appeared in earlier *ukiyoe* prints.[10] In short, even apparently realistic strolling musicians could just as well be interpreted as figures drawn directly from the repertoire of traditional *shitamachi* characters.

Kafū takes great effort to blur boundaries between real and imaginary spaces, and this is nowhere more evident than in his depiction of Chōkichi's visits to the Miyatoza kabuki theatre. If Bachelard is right to suggest that spatial configurations like nests and shells lend shape to the intimate world of human desires, then the Miyatoza can be understood as a site that houses a similar body of hopes and aspirations. In fact, Bachelard directly addressed the symbolic significance of the theatre in a way that sheds useful light on the psychological impulses that drew Kafū

to mark out a theatrical territory within his own story. Bachelard speaks of a 'theatre of the past' that is constituted by memory. Within this theatre,

> the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles. At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability – a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to "suspend" its flight (Bachelard 1958: 8).

Mention of a yearning for stability bears close comparison with the literary search for a timeless native place (*furusato*) identified by Maeda Ai in Meiji fiction; it reflects a similarly profound desire to locate a predictable and protective 'home' safely outside of history as a means to guard against the traumatic and unforeseeable fissures of modern life. This is why Chōkichi finds such relief in escaping the harsh sunlight of early spring, and plunging into an enclosed theatrical world where (in Seidensticker's fine rendition) 'the warm, sour (*kusai*) smell of the theatre crowds pressed down from the yet darker regions above' (203). These crowds are populated not by ambitious Meiji individuals, but by refugees from a world beyond their control, uprooted ghosts whose only choice is to seek comfort in numbers.

The author uses this theatrical space to articulate a freedom of sorts by throwing into further question the distinctions between reality and artificiality, and the relative merits of both. From his vantage point in the Gods, Chōkichi observes a scene in which a courtesan gazes upon the moon, the outline of which is reproduced on stage by 'strings pulling away clouds to reveal a light, a large round hole in the black screen.' However, the clumsy amateurishness of this effect in no way detracts from its profound impact upon the young man. Quite the contrary, it allows him to

re-evaluate earlier experiences in the 'real' world beyond the theatre's confines. Recalling how he too had looked up towards a bright moon from the Imado Bridge, the entirely artificial theatrical scene now before him appears to take on a more realistic aura, to the extent that 'the stage was no longer a stage.' It is perhaps only natural then that, after leaving the theatre and stopping for a moment on the very same bridge, he should brace himself against the bitter cold and mark the space by allowing a fragment of a traditional Jōruri (puppet theatre) ballad to issue from his throat (204-205).

In fact, Chōkichi's first experience of the Miyatoza as a balm to 'ease the pain' proves so effective that he returns the following day. And during this second visit, the theatre's physical layout is highlighted in a way that further undermines any simple distinction between a fanciful theatrical space and the harsh reality of the wider world. As before, the young man is captivated by the stage performances, but this time he has become conscious of 'the lively balconies to the left and right of the theatre' (206). Paul Waley has painted a vivid portrait of the 'chat and banter' that took place among the audience at a kabuki theatre (1984: 180). Indeed, he suggests that these social interactions were almost as significant a part of the whole experience as the performance on stage. The theatres tended to be so dark that the actors' faces had to be lit by candles. Some wealthy spectators had boxes, but most people sat on mats 'in small compartments divided by narrow gangplanks' along which waiters delivered tea and refreshment to customers (Waley 1984: 180). Such a layout worked against any clear distinction between stage and auditorium. Indeed, the audience might be understood to have occupied a liminal position; they were not only paying customers from the outside world but also performers in their own right, both watching and being watched by other groups of viewers within the theatre itself. No

wonder that Chōkichi should have been drawn to the potential delights of an acting

career, which offered the opportunity to play out a predictable and defined role in a

world where the endings were already known.[11]

But it is also possible to interpret the spatial interaction between theatrical and

external worlds from another angle. After kabuki theatres were banished to the

Asakusa district in 1841, the area quickly became a haven for all sorts of performing

arts, so that kabuki theatres jostled for space with puppet theatres. The Miyatoza,

which continued right up until World War Two, stood out as 'a stronghold of the

untainted kabuki of Edo, a theater for kabuki connoisseurs' (Waley 1984: 178). Kafū,

who should definitely be counted as an aficionado, would have been very aware that

the district in which the theatre was located formed the backdrop to some of kabuki's

most popular productions. This linkage between the worlds both inside and outside

the theatre building only increases a sense that the theatrical space should be

understood less as a site of retreat from reality, and more as an active springboard of

engagement, a kind of willful artistic bleeding into the surrounding environment. In

this sense, the characters in 'The River Sumida' occupy an intriguing middle ground

between aesthetic representation and lived experience.

Examining Kafū's story from the perspective of space and time is only one

possible critical approach. Even in terms of spatial configurations, I have certainly not

exhausted all possibilities. But let me conclude by pointing to a broader picture of

how space and time relate to this specific story written in the first decade of the

twentieth century. Bachelard's exploration of intimate places seems to have been

driven by a desire to uncover a pleasurable sense of where one belongs. However, in

the Japanese context the very concept of home is particularly problematic. As far as

literary production is concerned, the loss of a fixed sense of belonging became a

powerful inspiration for modern Japanese writers to try and make sense of their own time and place through language. In Kafū's literature, there are certainly legitimate grounds for finding fault in the way he too easily differentiates the old and the new, and tries to set up an overly simplistic contrast between a supposedly authentic Japanese past and a shallow and insubstantial modernity. However, from a more sympathetic perspective, 'The River Sumida' may be read as a serious attempt to give shape to the traumatic events that informed his age.

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NOTES

[1] Donald Keene (1984) describes the strong impact on Japan of Western literary texts during late Tokugawa and Early Meiji, especially Chapter 3, 'The Age of Translation,' pp. 55-75. John Mertz (2003: 101-6) discusses the importance of translations of English literature from the late 1870s in shaping the Japanese understanding of modernity.

[2] Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) explores space as a socially constructed environment rather than as some natural pre-existing phenomenon. David Harvey's *The Urban Experience* (1989) argues that, under a capitalist regime, money acts as a mediator of commodity exchange to give shape and meaning to our very understanding of space and time in the urban environment (164). Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) critiques orthodox Marxist ideas by calling for a reevaluation of the balance between space and time, and for the development of a spatial hermeneutic.

[3] See, for instance, his article 'A Left Within the Place of Nothingness,' in New Left Review 5 (September-October 2000).

[5] For a detailed examination of Japanese *meisho* and *utamakura*, see Edward Kamens (1997). Shirane (1998) provides details of Bashō's travels through Japan.

[6] *Kobayashi Hideo zenshū* (1968) vol.3, Tokyo: Shinchōsha: pp.31-32.

[7] Stephen Dodd discusses in detail the traumatic cultural and social upheavals of the Meiji period in his book, *Writing Home*. For an analysis of Miyazaki Koshoshi's 'Kikyorai,' see p.18 and p. 26.

[8] In this section, page references correspond to Edward Seidensticker's translation of the story in *Kafū the Scribbler* (1965). In addition to what is found in Seidensticker's book, other critics who have done close readings of 'Sumidagawa' include Steve Rabson's 1982 article, 'Nagai Kafu: The River Sumida.'

[9] For a detailed analysis of Kafū's view of the West, see Rachael Hutchinson (2011). Dennis Washburn (2007) deals extensively with the question of authenticity in

modern Japanese culture. Ikuho Amano (2013: 79-102) explores Kafū's difficulties in returning to Japan from the West as a 'decadent returnee'. Kafū's returnee stories are also examined by Hutchinson in her book, pp. 133-172.

[10] For Kusabame Kinbei's late Edo-early Meiji photo of the bridge, as described by Kafū, see http://oldphoto.lb.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/en/target.php?id=124 (last accessed 10th April 2015).

[11] In fact, as a young man and to the horror of his father, Kafū was very keen to find employment in the theatre, and he even had a part-time job for a while handling the clappers in the Kabuki-za.