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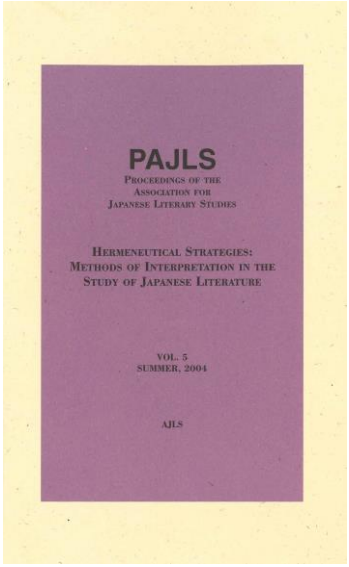

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WHAT IF GOD NEVER EXISTED? SOME THOUGHTS ON KAWABATA, TEXTS AND CRITICISM

Matthew Mizenko

One of the special pleasures of being on the faculty of a small liberal arts college is being given the opportunity of teaching far outside one's area of competence. This semester I have been teaching in a recently implemented core curriculum at Ursinus College. With a class of fifteen college firstyear students, I have been reading from Gilgamesh, the Bible, Aristotle, Dante, Montaigne, Galileo, and Descartes. And yes, in acknowledgement of the existence of a world closer to the one I usually inhabit, the syllabus includes that old Orientalist war-horse, the Bhagavad Gita.

My encounter with the exotic and often inscrutable literature of the West has occasioned some rather provocative thoughts. Our reading from Genesis, Exodus and Matthew caused me to become reacquainted with the Judeao-Christian God, after an estrangement of decades, and years spent trying to introduce Buddhism to my students, not that I particularly understand it myself. In re-reading the Bible, I was reminded of just where the term "logocentric" had originated. There was no silent holding of the flower here. I was almost shocked by forcefulness of the imperatives pronounced by God—especially the Old Testament God. I also re-encountered his awesome—indeed, fearsome—power. He was the original Weapon of Mass Destruction. All in all, it was a sobering experience.

I had another encounter last summer that, in retrospect, intersects in an intriguing way with my experience in that core course. Together with a colleague, I had a lengthy conversation with the much less fearsome, but intellectually awesome, person of Earl Miner. In the course of that discussion, Miner's quite unfashionable notion of "literature as cognition" came up. No satisfactory definition emerged—in fact, we ended up talking around it—but as I reflected on that afternoon, I gave some thought to the fate of the "common reader," the person whose appreciation of writing has somehow managed to escape the influence of most theoretical developments since the "linguistic turn." Why does this person read? What does that common reader look for? For that matter, how do my students read? As little as possible, one might reply, but how about when they are required to read these "Great Books," which we were encouraged not to

refer to as such: for us faculty, because of the unfashionableness of the term, but for the students, perhaps because of the intimidation factor.

The course is called CIE, standing for Common Intellectual Experience, and we probably use the acronym to avoid speaking another intimidating word: intellectual. The course is organized around three seemingly sarcasm-worthy, but actually disturbingly enduring, questions: What does it mean to be human? How should humans live? and What is the place of humans in the world? The CIE texts are meant to be read with those questions in mind. Not that we expect to find any answers, but that we are seeking a better understanding of the questions. The commonality of this intellectual experience comes from the fact that all firstyears are required to take this course. But there's another commonality involved here as well: in effect, we are reading as those legendary "common readers," and certainly not as specialists, or even as informed readers. Needless to say, the course prescribes an approach to reading that has never been the focus of my courses in Japanese literature in translation.

To complicate matters, a student in my CIE class began to wear to class a sophomoric and yet oddly compelling T-shirt—you may have seen it. It has two putative quotations on the front: at the top, "'God is Dead'—Nietzsche," and right under it, "'Nietzsche is Dead'—God." If nothing else, this reminds one not to mess with God.

So here I was, ruminating over this phenomenon we call God, on the one hand, and why we read, on the other. At the same time, I was engaged in a project involving Kawabata Yasunari's essays and occasional writings. Part of me was wondering why anyone would be interested in them, especially since most of them are naturally autobiographical, rooted in the historical Kawabata's own life and opinions. The thought came to mind that people don't care all that much about author's lives, right? (Especially a nationalistic, elitist high modernist like Kawabata, but I'll save that for another occasion.) After all, the Author is dead—didn't Roland Barthes perform the execution?

Just to check, I dug out my dusty, cracked copy of *Image-Music-Text,* and found Barthes' famous and influential essay from 1968: "The Death of the Author." And there it was: an explicit linkage between the Author and God—the Judaeo-Christian God, I presume. As Barthes writes:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God)

> but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.[1]

Barthes traces the development of this Author-God in a teleology that takes us through the Middle Ages, empiricism, rationalism, the Reformation, and finally the positivism that Barthes describes as the "epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology,"[2] but it is clear that this all originates with God. Earlier in the essay, Barthes had marked the site of the death of the author as that at which a fact is narrated "intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself."[3] The implicit assumption is that God spoke transitively, which is certainly borne out by the Old Testament, and that the passing of this transitive God necessitates the death of his mimic, the Author (a word that, like God, is capitalized in Barthes' essay).

Moreover, along with the Author, we are also condemning the notion of originality, of genius, of "self-expression," and of reading to "decipher" a text (all assumptions, by the way, that continue to be held by the common readers in my CIE class). The "empire" of the Author—that is, the empire of the Author-God—is overthrown, and the book becomes "only a tissue of signs."[4]

The conceit—the "fanciful idea"—underlying this paper is to wonder if there might be cultural contexts in which the Author need not necessarily be condemned to death. Perhaps a culture that may lack a foundational theology of monotheism and of humans made in God's image. Maybe a culture that, instead of declaring that "the Word was God," harbors traditions of thought that have a more problematic relationship with language—perhaps viewing it as an expedient means, for example, rather than God itself? What if the entire question of originality had never reached the level of obsessed-over significance that it had attained in what we call the West? The very significance in Japanese literary history of something that referred to as the "I-novel" (a contextual significance far outweighing that of the Ich-Roman, it seems) is an indication of a certain awkwardness with a concept of self-identity that had been taken for granted in the West (or at least in the West of the grand narrative exemplified by the CIE syllabus). The *watakushi-shōsetsu*'s encouraging of the reader to collapse any distinction between the author and the literary

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[1] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image–Music–Text,* trans. Steven Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 146.
[2] Ibid., p. 143.
[3] Ibid., p. 142.
[4] Ibid., p. 147.

text violates the position that Barthes puts forth. It's worth citing Barthes at some length:

> The *author* still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism itself still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us.[5]

I'm sure that like me, you feel something approaching nostalgia upon hearing these words. We've come so far since 1968. And yet, we haven't resolved the matter that Barthes lets slip here: the distance that we have placed between the practices of "ordinary culture" and of literary criticism in the academy. Barthes doesn't do himself any favors by citing the "tyranny" of the readings produced in "ordinary culture." Must a reader's desire for a kind of knowledge of and intimacy with this thing called the author be deserving of such anxiety and contempt?

Over the years, I have spent a certain amount of time with the Kawabata bungaku kenkyūkai, many of whose members, I guess, will have to be numbered among those "tyrants" of "ordinary culture," because they exhibit a shocking lack of guilt over their curiosity about Kawabata the man. I once joined the Kawabata-ken in a conference held in Echigo-Yuzawa, the "site" of the novel, *Yukiguni.* Some colleagues from the society invited me along on what can only be called pilgrimages to such sites as that notorious tunnel. A couple of friends took me to a recreation of the room in which this person Kawabata wrote much of the novel. Hara Zen, a sophisticated and creative literary scholar, insisted that I pose for a picture while seated at Kawabata's writing table. I was shocked by the suggestion that I commit such a transgressive act—the transgression being an act of mimicry that was predicated on the factuality of this guy Kawabata sitting down and actually writing this thing. Not to mention my horror at participating in such a fetishization of the guy. My colleagues

[5] Ibid., p. 143.

ascribed my reluctance to shyness, and if I had told them the real reason for it, they probably would have looked at me as if I were some kind of idiot. Why, they would probably wonder, do you have a problem with this? Lighten up, already!

Way back in grad school—in Earl Miner's office, as I recall it—I heard an anecdote about a group of Bashō scholars who, in the course of their search for ever-better readings of his poetry, planned a trip to Yamadera to take place at the same time of the year at which Bashō had visited it. Their goal was to experience for themselves the sound of the voice of that cicada penetrating that rock. Needless to say, their visit ended without their hearing the *semi no koe.* But, according to Miner, there was no sense of disappointment, for the value of the trip lay in the attempt at re-enactment, and the resulting sense of greater intimacy with Bashō.

On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Kawabata's birth, three colleagues from the Kawabata-ken co-edited a set of five volumes of articles titled *Kawabata bungaku no sekai.*[6] This collection was intended to represent the state of the art of Kawabata scholarship—at least as practiced in the Kawabata-ken. The first three volumes contained *sakuhinron,* the fourth volume contained essays on what the editors called the "background" for Kawabata's writing, and the fifth was a collection of twenty-nine essays on "the author Kawabata Yasunari's philosophy and worldview" (*sakka Kawabata Yasunari no shisō oyobi sekaikan*). Not a single essay in the five volumes goes beyond the fragmentation indicated by these categories.

Of particular relevance here are the fourth and fifth volumes. There is a section in the fourth volume called "Koten to no kakawari," which contains five essays that, by implication, go beyond the expected influence studies. In essays with titles on the order of "Kawabata bungaku to 'Genji monogatari,'" the particle "*to*" implies not only a connection (*kakawari*) but an equation, and perhaps even an identification. Here, Kawabata's writings exist in the same plane as the Genji; chronology is collapsed, and associations outweigh distinctions. (Indeed, Kawabata himself made a similar gesture in his Nobel lecture, *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself,* in which he discussed long-departed poets in such familiar terms that, for example, he referred to Ikkyū as "ano Ikkyū," or "*that* Ikkyū," indicating a degree of familiarity, and perhaps intimacy, that might not ordinarily be expected.)[7]

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[6] Tamura Mitsumasa, Baba Shigeyuki and Hara Zen, ed., *Kawabata bungaku no sekai,* 5v. (Bensei Shuppan, 1999).

[7] Kawabata Yasunari, *Utsukushii Nihon no watakushi (Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself),* bilingual ed., trans. Edward Seidensticker (Tokyo and New York:

Of even greater interest are the essays in Volume Five, all of which are titled something-or-other "*kan*." We have "Kawabata's" view or perspective on the seasons, marriage, language, the nation (*kokka*), time, nature, society, climate, ethics, love, politics, sex, women, religion, education, fate, and the universe. These are somehow intended to add up to an understanding of what the editors called "the author Kawabata Yasunari's philosophy and worldview (*sakka Kawabata Yasunari no shisō oyobi sekaikan*)."[8] It's hard to see how they can. But equally importantly, in apparent violation of Barthes' first principles, they imply that this Kawabata *expressed,* in the fiction that he authored, the viewpoints that he personally held, and that they could be understood by reading his texts. The question of whether the aim is to understand the author or the texts is left unanswered.

In a sense, I envy my colleagues the freedom that seems to result from the lack of problematization of the Author. I didn't always feel this way. In fact, in an essay I contributed to the sakuhinron portion of the series, I made a rather awkward attempt at a critique of the biographical, historical, and in general, extratextual tendencies of much of my colleagues' scholarship. In particular, I was impatient with the endless exercise of finding models (it even has a term: *moderu sagashi*) for many of Kawabata's characters. But now I'm not so sure. Do I need to be so hung up on distinctions, on categories, on the right way and the wrong way to read?

Not long after the publication of "The Death of the Author," Barthes wrote "Empire of Signs." In the "fictive nation" that he called "Japan,"[9] Barthes found—or constructed—a site that seemed to exemplify many of the ideas that he had offered in the earlier essay. And in his contemplation of the "manipulators" or puppet-handlers in Bunraku, Barthes summed up a relevant aspect of the cultural difference that he discovered—or fabricated—in his Japan:

> [the presence of the manipulators] rids the actor's manifestation of any whiff of the sacred and abolishes the metaphysical link the West cannot help establishing between body and soul, cause and effect, motor and machine, agent and actors, Destiny and man, God and creature: if the manipulator

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Kōdansha International, 1981), p. 18. Seidensticker translates the phrase as "that fellow Ikkyū," p. 61.

[8] Tamura Mitsumasa, et al., Ibid., v.1, "Introduction," p. 4.

[9] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 3.

> is not hidden, why—and how—would you make him into a God?[10]

It is the lack of hiddenness, the lack of sacrality, or of mystification, or, shall we say, the lack of *claims* to sacrality and mystification, that, in this formulation, makes moot any association between the puppeteer and a (Judaeo-Christian-type) God. In my conceit, I make a similar assumption about the author. Kawabata is simply there, visible to all, not held in question. You can see him—there he is. There's no need to make him into a God. You look at him, you look at the puppet, you consider them together. That is, you look at Kawabata, you look at the texts, you consider them together. You don't worship him—you see him, you wonder about him, you marvel at his skill, you begin to develop a relationship with him. You begin to imagine a kind of closeness, you begin to feel that you *know* him. He—this puppeteer-author—becomes just another facet of this set of contingencies we'll call Kawabata. In Western puppetry Barthes detects a sense of "discontinuity" that emerges from "the antinomy of *animate/inanimate*." In Bunraku he sees a "redeemed body," a "lovable body."[11]

If you have ever seen a photograph of Kawabata, I'm sure you would be hard-pressed to call his a "lovable body," but in a less superficial sense, that may be what he is to my colleagues. Perhaps it's the effect of the puppeteer and the puppet together, metaphysical dualisms not a factor, the lovable body as an object of intimacy. It's this sense of intimacy with the author Kawabata that I detect in my colleagues.

This being a conceit, its bubble bursts very easily. This dream is born of my desire to resolve seeming contradictions, and to find a way to accept, and not automatically reject, practices I have observed among the members of the Kawabata-ken, practices concerning which I have had reservations in the past, even though such reservations were sometimes embarrassing to hold, considering my colleagues' generosity to me.

In pursuing this conceit, on the one hand, I run the risk of indulging in cultural essentialism. I certainly do not mean to imply that *all* literary scholarship in Japan has the characteristics I have been describing. We all recognize the diversity and rigor of academic approaches to literature in Japan. And there is always the fear that I may be misreading my colleagues: perhaps they're nothing more than a fan club consuming commodified images of Kawabata. So be it. But on the other hand, I wonder about the possibility that my idle thoughts, occasioned by my

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[10] Ibid., p. 62.
[11] Ibid., p. 60.

inadvertent encounter with God, can have some broader significance for our thinking about authors, texts and criticism that extends far beyond Japan's cultural borders. Whatever the case, I feel compelled to try to understand why my friends had me sit at Kawabata's desk, and why I sometimes find myself staring at photographs of Kawabata as if I somehow can get to know him. Not necessarily to *like* him, I hasten to add. But to *know* him, whatever that may mean.

Postscript. I am currently teaching a course on pre-20th century Japanese literature in English translation. At the time of this writing, we have been reading poetry from the *Kokinshū* and *Shinkokinshū.* Perhaps the dilemma explored in this paper is not unlike that faced by many of the poets collected in those anthologies: in spite of their awareness of the dangers of attachment, they nevertheless cannot help being drawn to love and beauty. Although it may seem almost vulgar to liken critical theory to enlightenment (the exact nature of that vulgarity is a matter of perspective), what I may be contemplating here is the idea that there is something *human,* in the sense of unenlightened, in wishing to treat the author as someone who pre-exists the text, who "nourishes" the book, who "confides" in us. If, in a time of increasing dehumanization, we wish to assert some kind of neo-humanism, to dream of ourselves as subjects, then it is understandable that we wish to see in texts a reflection of that imagined self. At this point in critical time, might it be that a denial of the human existence of the author—as *author*—can only imply a denial of our own? If Saigyō expresses a wistful desire for a companion to build a hut next to his, may we not seek a certain kind of companionship, however imagined or fantasized, in our reading? I would like to think that we are beyond the point of having to worry about Barthes' concern over a reactionary attitude "in the name of a humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader's rights."[12] That is, I would like to think that a re-imagining of the reader could invoke a humanism that is no longer hypocritical, but rather part of a continuing exploration of how and why people read.

[12] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," p. 148.