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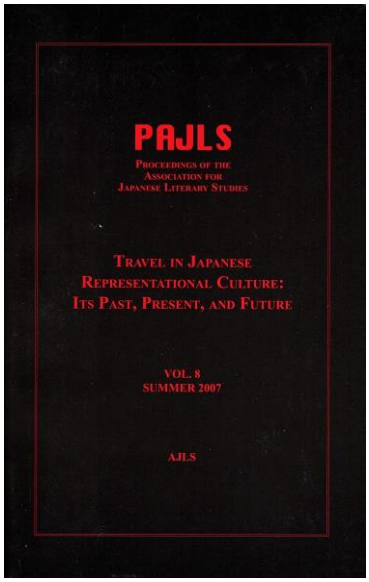

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ON THE LIMITS OF LIBERATION: TAKAHASHI MUTSUO'S CRITIQUE OF QUEER AMERICA

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In April and May of 1971, the thirty-three year-old poet Takahashi Mutsuo spent forty days in New York City. Before his arrival in the U.S., he had watched the film *Woodstock* documenting the inception, production, and culture of the famous concert. This film and what he had heard from the Japanese press about recent cultural developments in America inspired him to go and experience the U.S. firsthand. The stay affected him so deeply that he once commented his New York sojourn was perhaps comparable to Rilke's famous stay in Russia. Without it, he said, "I am quite confident that I wouldn't be what I am now".[1]

One product of this stay was a novella called *Seisho densetsu* [Legend of a Holy Place], which he published in the May 1972 edition of *Shinchō* [New Tide] and later republished in a collection of prose works entitled *Sei sankakkei* [The Sacred Triangle].[2] This novel is a surreal, light-hearted, and often extremely amusing look at the gay underground of New York during the hedonistic era of sexual abandon in the early 1970s, yet at the same time, it also presents a critical look at America and the psychological underpinnings of this phenomenon, presenting these psychological underpinnings in largely existential terms.

Before jumping into a discussion of the novella, one should first include a few words about Takahashi's background. In 1964, Takahashi published the anthology *Bara no ki, nise no koibito-tachi* [Rose Tree, Fake Lovers], which described male-male erotic love in extremely bold language.[3] Although this was not his first publication, it was the first to earn national attention. Etō Jun wrote an unusually long and laudatory article about it for his literary column in the *Asahi shinbun*, and Mishima Yukio was so impressed that he offered his backing for future

[1] Takahashi Mutsuo and Aizawa Keizō, "Takahashi Mutsuo (An Interview)," trans. Hiroaki Sato, *Partings at Dawn: An Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature*, ed. Stephen D. Miller (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1996), 195. For the Japanese, see Takahashi Mutsuo and Aizawa Keizō, "Kōkō, kotoba, unmei," *Kyōen* 2 (1976): 55.

[2] Takahashi Mutsuo, "Seisho densetsu," *Sei sankakkei* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1972).

[3] Takahashi Mutsuo, *Bara no ki, nise no koibito-tachi* (Tokyo: Gendaishi Kōbō, 1964).

publications by the young poet. Takahashi followed this success with other volumes of poetry, including the gigantic, book-length poem *Homeuta* [Ode], probably the most exhaustive literary evocation of the act of fellatio in the entire history of world literature.[4] (Allen Ginsberg was so impressed by this particular work that he personally lobbied Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights Press to publish more of Takahashi's poetry in English.)

No doubt one of the reasons that these works found such an eager reception among the public, despite their relatively daring and potentially minoritizing subject matter, was that Takahashi's work appealed to certain cultural preoccupations of his particular moment in time. Japan was, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, experiencing a wave of interest in the writings of figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Georges Bataille, and Herbert Marcuse, especially amongst intellectual and leftist youth who considered their works essential reading. As the sexual revolution kicked into high gear, young Japanese writers were interested in exploring the meaning and significance of sexual acts to understand whether or not it might contain the seeds of some libratory cultural politics. Writers like Kurahashi Yumiko, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, Terayama Shūji, and Kara Jurō had helped create a wave of interest in writing about "non-heteronormative" sexualities and their potential cultural meanings, and so Takahashi found an audience already eager to receive his work.

In his early works and essays from the 1960s and early 1970s, Takahashi developed a concept which he has named "penisism" to describe the idea of using sex in order to fulfill one's own sense of existential lack—the sense that one is not complete, not fulfilled, or not satisfied. In this way, Takahashi strongly echoes the thinking of George Bataille who writes in *Death and Sensuality* that the anxiety of individual existence drives people to pursue various experiences that seem to erase the boundary between self and other. Most important of these is *jouissance*, that disorienting experience of orgasmic pleasure that temporarily gives the illusion of dissolving the boundaries between self and other. As Bataille notes, 'Sexual activity is a critical moment in the isolation of the individual ... it weakens and calls into question the feeling of self."[5]

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[4] Takahashi Mutsuo, *Homeuta* (Tokyo: Shichōsha, 1971). For an English translation, see Takahashi Mutsuo, "Ode," trans. Hiroaki Sato, *Partings at Dawn: An Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature*, ed. Stephen D. Miller (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1996), 225–56.

[5] Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*

Although Takahashi wrote most about men engaging in same-sex eroticism, such feelings, Takahashi argued, are not just limited to them. In fact, all people experience such feelings simply by their very nature as incomplete beings, separated from perfect communion with others by the barriers imposed by the flesh. The "penisist," according to Takahashi, is a person who engages in sex in order to compliment one's existential lack with an external "penis"—some outside being that by its very nature as Other naturally looks complete, whole, and complimentary. In other words, "penisism" involves the use of sexuality to achieve a state of wholeness and connection absent in everyday existence. Takahashi saw the most perfect embodiment of this idea in people who play the so-called "passive" role of insertee in sexuality, and much of his early work, most notably *Homeuta*, deals with men who worship beautiful, seemingly "perfect" young men who seem to promise some sort of emotional and existential fulfillment.[6]

When Takahashi visited New York, he dove headlong into the vast culture of gay bars, bathhouses, bookstores, and pornographic movie theatres that flourished in the 1970s before the scourge of AIDS. Takahashi made an extensive tour of the sexual underground of the city, led by Donald Richie who was then working at the Museum of Modern Art. In his non-fictional essay "Watakushi no Nyū Yōku chizu" [My Map of New York], Takahashi focuses on the visible presence of male-male eroticism on the streets of New York.

> There are specialty pornography shops and movie theatres. At the latter, there are signs saying "All Male Cast" in addition to the ones saying "Adults Only". […] There definitely is a current of the times that tries to deal with sex in an extremely serious manner. At places such as the Oscar Wilde Memorial Shop in the East Village, they sell publications about sexual inversion with a solemnity that seems almost religious.[7]

(NY: Walker and Company, 1962), 100.

[6] For more on this idea, see Jeffrey Angles, "Penisism and the Eternal Hole: (Homo)Eroticism and Existential Exploration in the Early Poetry of Takahashi Mutsuo," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 12, modified: 12 Jan 2006, accessed: 9 Feb 2007 <http://wwwsshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue12/angles.html>.

[7] Takahashi Mutsuo, *Sei to iu ba* (Tokyo: Ozawa Shoten, 1978), 154–55. This essay was first published in 1971 in a magazine called *Otoko Joy* [Male Joy].

Soon after returning from New York, Takahashi drew upon his experiences to produce the novella *Seisho densetsu* documenting one man's sexual awakening and investigation into the nature of homoerotic desire. The novella is the account of an unnamed protagonist who explores a foreign city that is described in surreal terms as a fantastic, almost otherworldly place. Interestingly, even though the descriptions of place match New York almost perfectly, he never specifically identifies the "Holy Place" where the action takes places as New York; rather, it seems to be an exaggerated version of the city, some almost mythological place where human actions take on grandiose, extreme gestures. In this way, Takahashi's own trip to New York becomes a special form of travel not through ordinary space or time. By removing specific references to special places and actualities, the narrative helps to divorce itself from a hard *shi-shōsetsu*-like reality.

A number of Takahashi's early works, like *Homeuta* and the novel *Zen no henreki* [Zen's Pilgrimage of Virtue] are densely strewn with religious symbolism. Sometimes his use of religious imagery is quite comic. In one scene, the narrator happens across a store selling homoerotic prints by Tom of Finland, including one where a group of men are gleefully gathered around a handsome, masculine man who is dressed in leather and has a phallus so big that it puts the phalluses in Edo-period *shunga* to shame. The narrator realizes that this image is in fact a religious icon created for devoted worshippers of the man-root, and it shows the same devotion that many Christians devote to Jesus Christ.

The image of men so lovingly devoted to a beautiful young man makes the narrator recall St. Christopher, the elderly ferryman who transported Jesus across a river. The story of St. Christopher becomes for him a symbol of men who dedicate themselves to serving young, handsome gods. For the rest of the novel, the protagonist uses the word "Christopher" to describe men eager to serve other men and looking for a "Jesus" to worship. In one of the novel's many witty moments, he notes that the name of the street where all of the gay bars in the "Holy City" are located is named "Christopher St." Just reverse the order of the words, and one has the name of the sacred ferryman.

On Christopher Street, the narrator begins to navigate the river of no-holds-barred sexuality that New York represented in the early 1970s. His guide is a character named Tony-John who shows the protagonist where to find sex with other men, and who gives the protagonist several lectures on the nature of male homoeroticism itself. For instance, one day, he shows the protagonist a book covered with images of angels, trumpets, and honeysuckle vines. The protagonist at first assumes it is a religious

text or a book of prayer, but inside, he finds more drawings by Tom of Finland. This time, it is a series of pictures depicting men in a bathroom engaging in a circle of sex, one inserting his penis into the rectum of the next person, that person inserting his into another. In the middle stands a single, unattached couple. Tony-John explains the unattached couple is the only real set of "Jesus and Christopher figures". Because all the other figures are penetrating and being penetrated simultaneously, they are "Jesus" and "Christopher" at the same time. Tony-John states, "This is the ideal of the homosexual, but in real life, there are no 'Jesuses,' just 'Christophers.'"[8] This comment recalls the idea in *Homeuta* that it is mankind's natural state to be in the position of the admiring supplicant, waiting to receive fulfilment from some external object. The "Jesus" position is problematic, however, since all humans are finite beings, each with their own existential lack.

This becomes apparently clear when Tony-John leads the protagonist to the Jordan Baths, a place that Takahashi modelled on the infamous St. Mark's Bathhouse, one of the most popular places for anonymous sex between men in the late 1960s and 1970s. There, the narrator sees the penis of a black man poking through a glory-hole in the wall. This phallus is not, however, just any ordinary appendage. "The noun 'penis' is too simple for what I saw there. Substance, physical presence, existence, essence… It was all of those, a substance that is also the whole".[9] In other words, the man's penis comes to represent the essence of completion, the substance that will satiate his feeling of discontinuity and lack. The protagonist suddenly finds himself desperate to worship this man, whom is called "King Antonio." Unfortunately, his penis is so large that as he is trying to give him fellatio, he cannot breathe and passes out from a lack of air.

Tony-John, who is actually a priest by trade, manages to arrange a meeting in his church between the protagonist and King Antonio. When the protagonist finds his beloved sleeping near the altar, he pulls down the sleeping man's jeans, setting into motion a surreal chain of events. He finds the man's tower of flesh has been gouged out, leaving only a bloody hole packed with gauze. The protagonist then pulls down his own pants, and inserts his own penis into King Antonio's rectum. At this moment, the chapel comes apart; and space itself seems to rip in two, and the church begins to collapse around them. Tony-John shouts that this is

[8] Takahashi Mutsuo, "Seisho densetsu," 192.
[9] Takahashi Mutsuo, "Seisho densetsu," 202. Ellipsis is in the original.

all because the desiring subject has violated the desired object; "Christopher" has violated "Jesus." Simultaneously, a crucifix falls onto the protagonist even though there had been no crucifix present a moment ago. He passes out. When he comes to, the protagonist's hair has gone white yet his skin has become smooth and youthful. He notes, "The ugly old man and the fresh-looking youth were lodged together in a weird existence. Within this single body, I was both [St. Christopher, the] old ferryman and [the handsome, young] sacred visitor [Christ whom St. Christopher should be worshipping]."[10]

How are we to interpret this series of surreal events? Apparently, the protagonist's attempt to become a phallic, penetrative "Jesus" is a blasphemous reversal of the "worshipper-worshipped" dichotomy—a heresy symbolized by the collapse of the church and the falling of the crucifix. By penetrating and becoming one with the flesh of King Antonio, he has incorporated into himself some of the elements of his ideal, namely phallic dominance, youthfulness, and power. But the same token, he is not able to become an absolute "Jesus." At most, he can only be a strange combination of the two. As Tony-John explained earlier, there are no true "Jesuses."

Now, if one takes this conclusion at face value, this conclusion makes little sense. This only makes sense if we understand the two archetypes not as fixed sexual roles, but as representatives of the desiring subject and desired object—the two crucial elements of Takahashi's concept of penisism. Elsewhere, Takahashi suggests the desiring subject (the "Christopher") experiences desire as an attempt to overcome a primordial feeling of absence and incompletion, which are often coupled with the desire to access lost youth, health, or vitality. The protagonist of *Seisho densetsu* creates elaborate fantasies of the perfect compliment to his desire, but because these fantasies are continually spurred on by the wild workings of imagination, they can never be entirely fulfilled. In other words, the desired object (the "Jesus") has shoes that are impossibly big to fill. Even someone who appears to fulfil all the wishes of the desiring subject is himself a bounded, finite man with his own sense of incompletion. It is for this reason the role of the desired object must remain an ideal. All one can hope for is to become a combination of the two—a desiring subject who fulfils, at least part of the time, some of the boundless desires of his partners.

Takahashi's description of the gay underworld of the Holy City as a city full of desiring subjects, eternally destined to search for some

[10] Takahashi Mutsuo, "Seisho densetsu," 235.

impossibly grandiose "god" to fulfil their desires echoes the sort of language that certain American writers were also used to talk about the gay subculture of New York. David Fernbach, a communist activist who edited the writings of Marx, published the book *The Spiral Path* with the Gay Men's Press, which he helped to found. There, Fernbach wrote that, "it can be very difficult to establish any lasting relationships, based on a love fed by the sublimation of sexuality into affection for which our species has a peculiar disposition. Without this sublimation, our sexuality simply follows the ever-changing flux of desire, seizing on partial objects, surface appearances, rather than being used to form genuine interpersonal bonds."[11] As result, Fernbach found that gay men would engage in a "desperate quest for a 'Mr Right' who, almost by not be found by this route," then concluded that it "is unquestionably a symptom of some very deep malaise that gay men so often find it hard to form ties of solidarity, and live so individualistic an existence."[12] The queer activist and cultural critic Ian Young in his book *The Stonewall Experiment* attributed this malaise to the fact that many men had been imprinted early in their lives with the notion that their sexuality was bad, and the riotous celebration of homoeroticism in the gay subculture of the 1970s was an attempt to escape that imprinting. Still, that escape was not often successful and only highlighted the still marginal status of gay men as they left the bars and bathhouses and attempted to return to heteronormative society with only mixed success.[13]

Certainly, Takahashi is suggesting that the root cause of the free sexuality that fills Christopher Street is a certain, deep rooted malaise, but one that arises not so much from internalized homophobia as from the fundamental sense of lack and discontinuity that arises from the very process of individuation. Indeed, in the final lines of the novel the narrator fundamentally questions the notion of the individual as a complete, unified subject when he asks himself, "Could the "I" that thinks it experienced everything have actually experience anything at all? Could it be that the "I" never existed in the first place?"[14] It seems from this passage that the notion of the complete, whole self organized neatly behind the single signifier "I" is a fiction; the self is always in flux,

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[11] David Fernbach, *The Spiral Path: A Gay Contribution to Human Survival* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1981), 104.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ian Young, *The Stonewall Experiment: A Gay Psychohistory* (London: Cassell, 1995), 130–61.

[14] Takahashi Mutsuo, "Seisho densetsu," 237.

searching for a complimentary Other that might make it whole. To Takahashi, New York apparently embodied the kind of place that might arise if people have the ability to act freely upon these desires, to engage in an uninhibited search through the many bathhouses or porno theaters in the city in order to find a sense of fleeing fulfillment. In this sense, New York, which he transformed into the almost mythological "Holy Place" in his novella, comes to represent the most human of cities.

The novella ends with a dramatic warning. In the last few pages, the protagonist leaves the city and takes a ferry toward the sea. As the island of the Holy City retreats, it first looks like battleship and then the biblical city of Sodom. The protagonist thinks,

> One could see indications of the downfall of this country that had supported the world for decades. Fiery brimstone rained down from heaven upon this floating island where wealth and sin were piled as high as they could go. Thunderbolts struck, and the skyscrapers began to collapse one by one, emitting great roars. The floating isle dyed the surface of the water the color of blood as it sank under the weight of its own wealth and the sin that is synonymous with it.[15]

This ending in which the narrator imagines a Sodom and Gomorrah-like ending for the city greatly resembles the ending of the non-fictional article "My Map of New York" which Takahashi wrote soon after returning from New York. The article explains that Takahashi pictured an almost identical vision while riding the Staten Island ferry away from Manhattan. He writes,

> I imagined that this gunboat-shaped island full of wealth and people sinking under its own weight into the water. A rain of fire poured down as thunderbolts clapped. The weight of wealth and people was also the weight of sin. One can say that the history of humanity, not just America, is the history of sin. However, there is probably no between place to vividly depict the equation of cities with the bad side of humanity than America, which was built upon the sacrifices associated with the subjugation of the Indian's paradise and the forced slavery of blacks. Specifically, there is no better place than New York, the

[15] Takahashi Mutsuo, "Seisho densetsu," 237.

> city that condenses these traits, to show this. For just a moment, I imagined a vision of this evil city that was so vibrant *because* of its evil.[16]

New York appears here as a modern day Babylon. (Takahashi has mentioned to me in informal conversations that his early experiments with Catholicism imprinted him with a strong image of the sinful city of Babylon, and it was these images that came to mind as he was writing the novella.) Although this sin is what makes the city so exciting and so full of promise, it also carries the seeds of its own destruction. Other works by Takahashi, such as *Zen no henreki* [Zen's Pilgrimage of Virtue] and *Tankyūsha* [The Searcher] often deal with the tendency of sexually iconoclastic men to engage in increasingly risky behavior that ultimately threatens the health.

In his book *The End of the World,* Erik Rabkin notes that in literature, when one world ends in a narrative, one is not destroying everything, but simply the world that one has experienced.[17] Indeed, in the final scenes of *A Legend of a Holy Place,* the protagonist is seen departing from the city. Yet even as the city burns, silently destroyed by its own sinfulness, the narrator proceeds to another world, leaving the Holy Place behind for somewhere else, presumably his native Japan. This is an appropriate ending for a work in which the protagonist arrives at an understanding of the nature of sexuality. Now that he understands the sexuality is driven by a desire to form connections absent as a product of individualion, he is left to decide how to recreate himself in his new world, how to deal with this self that is partial and always yearning for the missing yet impossible compliment.

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[16] Takahashi Mutsuo, *Sei to iu ba*, 160–61.
[17] Eric S. Rabkin, "Why Destroy the World?," *The End of the World*, eds. Eric S. Rabkin, Martin H. Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983) vii.

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