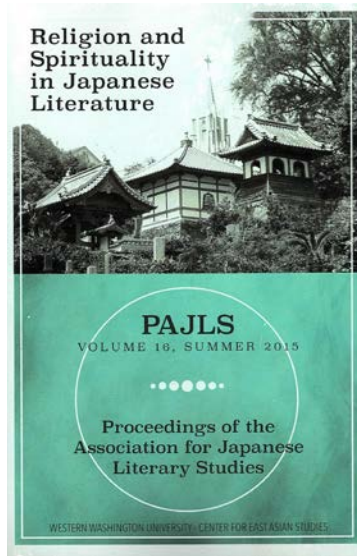


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Yasuoka Shōtarō's and his M/Other

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I would like to discuss the topic of spirituality in the work of Yasuoka Shōtarō (1920-2013) by examining two important novels he published in the 1950s and 1960s: *Kaihen no kōkei* (海辺の光景 A view by the sea, 1959)¹ and *Maku ga orite kara* (幕が下りてから After the curtain is closed, 1967).² In his earlier stories, Yasuoka often talks in a humorously self-deprecating manner about his failed student and soldier days and his dysfunctional family life after the war. But behind his stories of small everyday struggles, this author is looking forward to some miraculous call from beyond daily reality so as to renew his life in a fundamental way.³

“No no koe” (野の声 A voice in the wilderness, 1964)⁴ may be the most typical story in this regard. The protagonist graduated from college a few years earlier and still hasn't managed to get a job. After a number of fruitless visits to Tokyo, he has another job interview on the day of narration, but he comes out of the building with another rejection. In the evening he goes to Shinbashi station, where he happens to overhear an American man, a Christian missionary, speaking of a voice that called him to come to Japan. “For the sake of Jesus Christ,” he says, “I sold my home, my land, and my cattle. I sold 100 cows and 100 pigs, but I have no sorrow...” (410). The protagonist is not particularly impressed by this talk: he thinks it is one of those talks by “pushy American missionary guys,” and goes on to take his train back home. On the

¹ In Yasuoka Shōtarō shū (hereafter referred to as YSS) Vol. 5. Page numbers of quoted passages in Japanese are from this version. Page numbers of English translations are from Wigen's translation. Translations of other quoted passages in this essay are mine, unless otherwise noted.

² In YSS Vol. 7.

³ Studies on Yasuoka Shōtarō are limited even in Japan. It is particularly rare to find critical discussion on the topic of spirituality in Yasuoka's earlier works. Hasumi Shigehiko is an exception. See his “Yasuoka Shōtarō ron.” In Yasuoka's debut short story, “Garasu no kutsu” (Glass Slippers), Hasumi reads the author's “mission to hear the voice from the universe, a faint voice that no one can ever comprehend articulately”(203).

⁴ In YSS Vol. 3. Page numbers of quoted passages are from this version.

train, however, he realizes that he is murmuring to himself, “100 cows, 100 pigs,” and starts to picture that American man’s long journey with his cows and pigs—from his rural farm to a nearby town, walking across large fields and over many hills—in order to sell all his possessions at the town’s auction. This vision then leads the protagonist to imagine the depth of spiritual passion that has seized the American. The Japanese protagonist now grows excited, as if he himself were possessed by the desire to give up everything and to start his life completely anew. The short story ends here. The protagonist is not depicted taking any action similar to the American missionary. But the story does show his thirst for spiritual renewal of his life.

Yasuoka is known for the strong tie he had with his mother. His father was a military veterinarian, who was constantly deployed to battlefields during Japan’s long wartime period in the 1930s and 1940s. An only son, Yasuoka was raised almost exclusively by his mother during his childhood and adolescence. In short, she was his single spiritual backbone. The long, deep intimacy he had with his mother did not, however, create in him a simplistic image of a mother who loved him unconditionally. Rather, he pictures his mother as composed of two opposing elements—loving and familiar on the one hand, but bossy and intimidating on the other. In “Kokyō” (故郷 Home, 1955)⁵ he describes the strongest memory he had of his mother: for some reason she became upset and pinched him very hard. Though unable to recall why she did this, he does vividly remember the degree of pain he experienced, and the feel of his mother’s icy stare. It must be added that his mother developed mental instability before her death. Memory of the uncanny image of her stare is only amplified by knowledge of later madness.

And so, during his last moments with his mother, Yasuoka was exposed less to her familiar and intimate face, and more to her as “unknown other.” *Kaihen no kōkei* is an important novella, as it is a semi-autobiographical story describing Yasuoka’s reactions to his mother’s death, that is, the loss of his spiritual foundation. Its story line depicts Yasuoka’s alter ego protagonist, Shintarō, during a nine-day stay at his mother’s hospital bed. The chronological record of the hospital stay is punctuated by a series of Shintarō’s recollections of past days with mother.

The novella opens with Shintarō’s arrival from Tokyo to a mental hospital in Kōchi, on the island of Shikoku in the southwest, where his mother,

⁵ In YSS Vol. 2.

Chika, lies in bed in critical condition. His first reaction to his mother is to distance himself from her, as she lies in bed in a coma, her body emitting a strong odor of decay: she looks abject and helpless, unable to respond to anyone or anything. Almost immediately, however, he starts to feel comfortable being with her, although he is also suffocated by the small room filled with her smell and with Kōchi's summer heat. Thus, his awareness of his distance from her paradoxically leads him to narrow his sense of distance from her. The closer he comes to his mother, the further she recedes from him, and the further he intensifies his effort to feel closer to her. The story repeats this pattern until she dies, and Shintarō maintains a tense emotional stance throughout the process.

In the first half of the novella, in a series of flashbacks, Shintarō stresses his closeness to his mother through the triangular psychological tension that had existed among mother, father, and son. While growing up, Shintarō had exclusively bonded with his mother, as his father had for years been away on the battlefields. When his father, Shinkichi, comes back home after Japan's defeat, the family develops a psychological tension. The mother is always allied with Shintarō and more or less openly criticizes her husband, who has lost his willingness to work and stays all day in the yard alone, growing vegetables or raising chickens. Shintarō doesn't work, either, as he is seriously ill and stays in bed for a few years. With no one able to hold a steady job, the family is quickly hit by an economical crisis and decides to break up. Shintarō moves to a small apartment in Tokyo, while his parents go back to their birthplace of Kōchi, living with Shinkichi's brother's landlord family in a farming village. Chika's mental instability deteriorates quickly there and two years later she is in the hospital in critical condition.

The first half of the novella ends ironically in terms of Shintarō's assumption about his mother's blind love for him. The pain from treatment of bedsores leads her to cry out "Ow, Ouchi..." People at the hospital think she is half awake and her nurse tries to wake her up completely by repeatedly telling her that her beloved son is back from Tokyo and is right next to her now. Chika never responds to her nurse's words and later just mutters, "Father," before going back to a state of coma. "Father" here is a reference to Shinkichi, and Chika's call for her husband, instead of her son, surprises everyone around her, as she seems to implicitly reject her son. Shintarō's reaction to this "voice" is two-fold: he is uncertain about what she really feels (and whether she can subconsciously feel or think anything), but he also becomes aware of his distance from her.

The novella's second half consists of Shintarō's intense examination of his mother's madness. Here we will focus on an episode in which Shintarō received a letter from Chika a few months after her departure from Tokyo. The writing on the envelope had been crooked and irregular and the stamp was pasted on the back. The sheets inside were disordered, and their contents not really believable: according to Chika, Shinkichi never spoke to anybody and furthermore her sister-in-law was cruel, demanding that she take off all her clothes and then chasing her with a stick. The letter concludes that she needs to live with Shintarō in Tokyo as soon as possible.

The letter seems odd but the way in which Shintarō reacted to it was as striking as the letter itself. He hides the letter in his desk drawer and secretly reads and rereads it "thousands" of times. According to him, the emotion behind his obsessive reading is "what one might feel for a snake in a glass cage, when one suddenly recognized in it a kindred soul" (179). Trying to "refute the notion that his mother was truly mad"(179), he now pushes himself to the indeterminate border that separates sanity from insanity, seeking to prove to himself that his mother is still emotionally available. Again, we see here his extreme effort to narrow his distance from his mother by almost identifying himself with her obsessed and obscure subconscious.

Shintarō's recollection of his mother in the novella's second half, of the day when he sent her to the mental hospital, ends up ironically betraying his own effort to "understand" her. He had come to Kōchi a year after his separation from his parents. Seeing his mother, he realized that, as his father had warned him, she was completely deranged, and that he must agree with his father's plan to send her to an institution. Shintarō, his father, and his aunt then take Chika to this hospital by Kōchi Bay, fabricating a story for Chika that Shintarō is now taking her back to Tokyo. On the way, however, they tell her they will all first spend some time at the beach. At the hospital, they meet the doctor, who, after a small check up, leaves his office to see if Chika's room is ready. Alone in the doctor's office with the other three family members, Chika suddenly mutters to herself, "So, I'm to be locked away after all, am I!" (184) [「ふん、とうとう放りこまれることになったか」(434)]. All three are overwhelmed and frozen by this "voice." Chika is presented here as an enigmatic other, who seems to know what they are doing to her. The people around her are stirred because of the guilt they feel about their lie and because of the uncertainty they feel about the degree of Chika's sanity. In this episode Shintarō again witnesses with shock that his mother is slipping away from him.

In an episode that immediately follows this scene of checking into the hospital, Shintarō tries to narrow the distance he feels from his mother. First, he is told that his mother's end is near as her breathing becomes visibly weaker. He then falls asleep for a short while and has a dream. He is on the back of a large sea turtle, and in the dream he is thinking of his childhood days when his mother taught him how to swim in the ocean. His mom tells him to open his eyes in the water, and with the awe of an innocent child's eyes, he sees his mother just next to him—"her large, black body rippling in the green water" (189).

The secure bond with his mother in his dream is followed by his last effort to be closer to her. After waking up from the dream, he stays awake for the remaining hours of the night, just listening to his mother's breathing, as "he started to feel as though his own breathing had synchronized with hers" (189). Momentarily, Shintarō is united with his mother almost as one being.

In spite of his repeated efforts once again to live with her, his mother's steady withdrawal from life continues and she passes away soon after the new day has dawned. His first reaction to this closing moment is a sense of relief. He realizes that everything is over, and he goes out of the hospital room. He starts enjoying Kōchi's sunny summer day, wishing the sun to cleanse his body, which has been "permeated by the gloomy smell."

Then, suddenly, Shintarō has a famous vision of the dry bottom of the sea, which is revealed in front of him. This quickly ends the entire story, leaving the humbled protagonist with a tremendous sense of awe:

(...) all across the un-rippled surface of the bay, now calmer than a lake, there stood hundreds upon hundreds of stakes, looming blackly out of the water as far as he could see...For a moment the entire landscape lay still. (...) The wind fell, the salt smell vanished, everything seemed to recede before the eerie view that had risen from under the sea. As he looked at the rows of stakes standing like the teeth of an upturned comb, like tombstones, it was a death he held in his own hands that he saw. (196)

In our context of surveying Yasuoka's work in terms of his search for spiritual renewal, this is the first time for one of his protagonists to be fully moved by something beyond ordinary everyday reality. Note, however, the difference between this moment and the one indicated in "No no koe." The American farmer had experienced his epiphany through a "voice," which unambiguously demanded he take action in order to renew his life. In the case of Shintarō, he experiences this revelation through a silent "vision," whose obscure messages left room for interpretation.

The impact Shintarō has experienced here may be as strong as the one that the American man in “No no koe” apparently had to cause him to interrupt his farming life in the wilderness. But in contrast to the outgoing journey of the American man, who had sold his entire farm and come to a foreign country for his Christian mission, Shintarō now seems ready to just go back to his home in Tokyo. Yet, Yasuoka himself was to take a long inward journey to examine his self and his life: it took eight long years after publication of *Kaihen no kōkei* for Yasuoka to complete his next novel, *Maku ga orite kara*.

Before talking about this next novel, let me comment on the content of this final vision. We may see here the double image of Chika discussed earlier. At one level, Shintarō’s vision of his mother can be seen as a hugely opened, dried up mouth, which threatens the viewer with rows of black teeth. It looks like an amplified image of Chika’s mouth, which is repeatedly described as a sterile, dried up hollow. Following the comment by Yomota Inuhiko,⁶ we may say this is a picture of the “vagina dentata,” which expresses Shintarō’s fear of his mother in conjunction with his fear of her death, as well as of death itself.

At another level, this picture connects Chika with nature. It foregrounds the sea of Kōchi as the place to which her body and soul have finally returned. It is somewhat surprising for Shintarō, as Chika had throughout her life suppressed her connection with Kōchi. Though born there, she had grown up in Osaka and was always proud of her city-girl identity. By the same token, she disliked her husband essentially because he grew up in one of Kōchi’s rural farming families. The picture indicates that with death, her binary semantics between Tokyo and Kōchi or between modern city and rural nature is negated. The vision is somewhat comforting to Shintarō, as it seems to indicate that after all, one returns to nature when one dies. A spiritual crisis, caused by the loss of his mother, thus leads the protagonist to face the possibility of connecting the uncanny image of his mother with the equally uncanny, yet powerful, vision of Mother Earth.

In *Maku ga orite kara*, Yasuoka in fictional form examines the new phase of his life after the loss of his mother. This novel focuses on the city life of his new alter ego protagonist, Nagano Kensuke, who lives in Tokyo around 1960, as the city is quickly re-modernizing. He is a self-taught illustrator, who has suddenly become popular in the last couple of years. He feels deeply uncertain about his sudden and minor fame and his place within the media.

⁶ See Yomota (325-326).

Privately, his life has also changed a lot. He married three years ago and lost his mother two years ago. At the age of 37, Kensuke is in a midlife crisis and needs to examine his life.

In terms of the time span of the narration, the story takes place over just a day and a half. One evening the protagonist happens to see a woman he had an affair with during his postwar days. The next day, he goes to see that woman at her place on the outskirts of Tokyo, and the story ends with him on the way back home. This novel, however, expands itself to nearly 300 pages long, by inserting the protagonist's recollections and reflections about his current marriage, his past relationships with his parents, and Mutsuko, the woman with whom he had an affair.

Thematically, the story begins with Kensuke's ambivalence vis-à-vis "modern" values. He is married to a woman named Yōko. She expresses herself articulately and is an organized manager of family affairs. In short, she is a "modern" woman and he is basically happy with her. But she has a, let's say, cleanliness obsession, which threatens him. Right after they got married, she gathered all the old things he had brought from his apartment and burned everything. She seems to be obsessed with the idea that things in the past are dirty and outdated and that she wants to start the couple's life from scratch, a new life with only clean and modern things. Kensuke is uncomfortable with his wife's obsession and claims that he loves things that are more *fuketsu* (不潔), that is, "unclean and messy." He detects in himself something obscure, which resists Yōko's aggressive advocacy for modern values.

Practically, Kensuke is almost thoroughly a modern man in terms of his profession (a trendy journalistic job), his choice of wife (a "love marriage" with a stylish urban girl), and his lifestyle (a single-family house in Tokyo). Yet, a part of him is stubbornly drawn to something un-modern, a love for things unclean (*fuketsu*). The novel revolves around his examination of who this obscure other within himself is.

As the main plot indicates, it is through his relationship with Mutsuko, his one-time lover, that Kensuke examines this obscure desire. Note first that the way in which Kensuke approaches her is not straightforward. He finds her unattractive, yet his feeling for her is strong even five years after their relationship had ended.

Mutsuko had originally come to Kensuke's family during the postwar period, when the Nagano family had been in deep financial trouble and decided illegally to sublet a portion of their rented house. Mutsuko and her husband, Mr.

Okuda, become their renters, and the two families lived together for several years. Their landlord later discovered the Naganos' illegal sublet and asked them to leave. Mr. Okuda then came to rescue the Nagano family by proposing to buy the house. He even gave the Naganos permission to stay for half a year before moving out.

Mutsuko had from the beginning of the co-habitation of the two families been painted in a negative light by Kensuke's mother, who was harshly critical about her look and demeanor, saying she was unsophisticated, spoke with a strange dialect, and had a dull personality. Kensuke had agreed with his mother and at first found Mutsuko unattractive.

At the same time, Kensuke seems to have been more irritated by his mother's excessive harshness. Mutsuko's husband was a painter who became successful soon after they had started renting space in the Naganos' house. In his mother's hostility, Kensuke detected her jealousy of Mutsuko, who now had a successful husband. Kensuke, for his part, was also suffering from a strong sense of insecurity because of the fact that his mother had stopped assuming her mother-like role and that his own "family" was mentally deteriorating in the new extended-family-like living conditions. Her mental instability grew more and more visible before the family moved out of the shared house. In this situation, Mutsuko seems to have been the only stable and unchanging person in the house. Unlike her husband, who, with success, came to dress better, socialize more, and gain weight quickly, Mutsuko remained the same—looking messy, with the same old clothes, talking about unexciting topics with her heavy dialect. It seems like Kensuke needed Mutsuko's stability as a way to cope with his family's rapid breakdown. His sexual intimacy with Mutsuko did not, however, help him overcome his sense of insecurity; rather, it intensified his sense of spiritual emptiness.

The true nature of Kensuke's attraction to Mutsuko is dramatically articulated toward the end of this novel. Kensuke recollects his return to Mutsuko's place on the day the Nagano family had finally moved out. On that day Kensuke's mother suddenly claimed at the train station that she had left her suitcase somewhere, and that it contained money and important papers. After his parents' departure, Kensuke looked everywhere for the suitcase and finally went back to their old house.

On the way back from the station, he passed an old *dōsoshin* (道祖神) statue by the road, recollecting Mr. Okuda's words that this statue was a sign of "no trespassing." Inspired all of a sudden by these words, he was grabbed by a

strong sexual arousal. Kensuke seems to have taken the statue as a mark of the beginning of his home territory, and immediately after he passed this point, the trees and the land were all literally eroticized and he was drawn to them with intensely ambivalent sensations.

Suddenly, the raw smell of the trees and soil around him wrapped him sweetly and softly. The desire to be drawn into and buried under the muddy soil aggressively occupied him with ecstatic and terrifying sensations...(250).

What is desired by the “obscure other” in Kensuke is here conclusively visualized. Its epiphanous function is equivalent to the final vision of the dried up sea, described at the end of *Kaihen no kōkei*. This erotic sensation is immediately followed by the description of his explosive desire for Mutsuko. To read this development in a reverse order, we see what is hidden behind his desire for Mutsuko. This passage reveals his nakedly animistic desire for the bond with the soil of his home(land), together with the mythologization of Mutsuko as a sort of Earth Mother. The vision of the fusion between the protagonist’s mother and Mother Nature, stressed at the end of “*Kaihen no kōkei*,” is recaptured here in the vision that merges Mutsuko with the protagonist’s home territory image. Note also that in contrast to Shintarō, the protagonist of the former novella, who remains a passive observer of the epiphanous vision, Kensuke is an active participant in the creation of this erotic vision.

Back in the present day of the story’s narration, Kensuke makes his second return to Mutsuko’s home, five years after the first time. This visit makes him realize that Mutsuko is not a mother goddess, who should passionately respond to his intense drive. With a calm smile, she talks about the days they lived together and mentions how scared she was of Kensuke’s mom, who seemed to always stare at her from behind. Irritated by her air of calm satisfaction, Kensuke says to himself: “It is not my mother that I am scared of. Something sticky and smelly covers all my body and it is being constantly dried out and cooled off. That is what truly creeps me out and terrifies me” (281). The description here is rather abstract, but in our context of reading in terms of the modern/un-modern binary, what he is most afraid of seems like his own self-cleansing action, with which he keeps erasing his connection with things unclean. This is then a picture of an inner battle within his own self, a battle in which that within him that chases after modern values tends to overpower the other, primitive part of him, who wishes to maintain a connection with, say, the smelly traces of his old “home.” In this way, he now fully articulates the nature of his self: It is a hybrid self, which consists of the constant negotiation for the

balance between two opposing sets of values within him, that is, ultimately, between the chaser of modernity and the seeker for animism.

Kensuke's discovery of his suppressed desire to connect with nature parallels the conclusive vision in *Kaihen no kōkei*. While Shintarō's mother never consciously discovered her desire to be reconnected with nature in her birthplace of Kōchi, Kensuke is now consciously aware of his hidden desire for nature, even though his "nature" in this novel remains generic and has no identified locality. This awareness seems to allow him to feel independent from his mother. In terms of the sources for his spiritual energy, Yasuoka articulates in this novel a shift of his focus – from his mother to his native home.

On the way back from Mutsuko's place to his own home, Kensuke stops at a coffee house somewhere in Tokyo and ponders his desire for home, while eavesdropping on the conversation of a couple sitting next to him. The man, who seems like an amateur alpinist, tells his girlfriend that he is ready to build his own home with her, while she seems to silently dismiss his claim about his readiness for a new family. Kensuke feels lucky to already have his own home and realizes that he now strongly desires to go home. The "home" he wants to go back to, however, is now double-layered. It is the home he has in Tokyo with his wife Yōko. This home will continue to be principally ruled by Yōko on the basis of her modern values and choices. But he can now believe that as long as he maintains this home, he will continue to look for the connection with another "home," the native home of his spiritual foundation. This is an interesting resolution for Yasuoka's journey for spiritual renewal, when we compare it with the approach of the American man in "No no koe." Instead of throwing everything away and restarting his life from scratch, Yasuoka's alter ego protagonist in this novel proposes an alternative, hybrid approach. That he maintains his everyday home is a necessary condition for him to slowly but steadily look for his native home.

Retrospectively, we know that 14 years after this novel's publication, Yasuoka fully develops his identification with his homeland of Kōchi in his epoch-making publication of *Ryūritan* (流離潭 A tale of wanderings, 1981).⁷ In terms of the achievement of our novel in his search for his "home," it is probably fair to say that *Maku ga orita kara* marks an important first step for

⁷ YSS Vols. 8 and 9. In terms of Yasuoka's examination of the topic of home in his later works, see my essay listed in the selected references.

this author's long journey to find closure and to resolve the sense of fear and disconnectedness he has towards his native Kōchi.

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