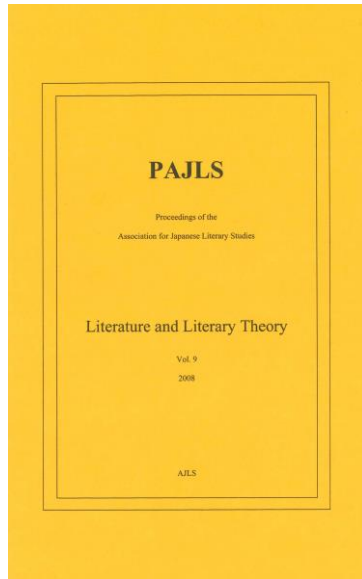


# “‘Nothing More Than Useless Luxury’: Literary Theory After Disaster”

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## “Nothing More Than Useless Luxury”: Literary Theory After Disaster

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In 1949 Theodor Adorno famously wrote that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>1</sup> This pronouncement has been subsequently debated by theorists and even revisited by Adorno himself, and the question of art and its role after catastrophe remains important. Tom Cruise, for example, in a prologue to the 2002 Oscars, questioned the importance of celebrating movies after September 11<sup>th</sup>. His response? “Dare I say it, more than ever.”<sup>2</sup> The two critics I draw upon today, Satomi Ton and Kikuchi Kan, are not Japanese predecessors of Adorno and Cruise, but they too were interested in the question of what happens to art after an event in society that loomed so large as to perhaps even defy representation. The disaster they were responding to was the great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. Yet their response to the earthquake is only meaningful within the context of their earlier criticism and prior interaction. This paper traces the ideas of these two critics from their literary debates prior to the earthquake to the earthquake and beyond.

Though Satomi Ton is often seen as a black sheep in the white birch forest, he did share many philosophical similarities with his *Shirakaba* colleagues, Mushanokoji Saneatsu and Shiga Naoya. He too believed in art for art’s sake and shunned direct political engagement. In his discussion of Shiga Naoya, Francis Mathy notes that literary theory of the *Shirakaba* writers was focused on self-cultivation. “Society as such,” Mathy claims “had little place in their theory.”<sup>3</sup> Mathy’s assertion about *Shirakaba* writers in general is reinforced in Satomi’s own literary criticism. In a series of essays published in *Kaizō* the year before the quake, “Bungei kanken” or “humble thoughts on literature,” Satomi articulated his thoughts on literary art and what it meant to him. In one of these essays Satomi defined art as “the art (*jutsu*) of taking something deep inside the individual and giving it a shape one can see with the eyes or hear with the ears.”<sup>4</sup> And “what was this something?” he asked, “the ‘spirit’ of the artist.” By the end of the essay he suggests that a better word for art “*geijutsu*” might be “*genreijutsu*” or the “art of displaying the spirit.”<sup>5</sup> In short Satomi believed that art was the manifestation of individual genius.

The month after Satomi Ton wrote his essay on the spirit of art, Kikuchi Kan published a response in the journal *Shinchō*. This became the first salvo in the “*Naiyō-teki kachi ronsō*” (debate over the content value of literature). Though Satomi Ton was not mentioned specifically, Kikuchi wrote that he hated esoteric theories of art that talked about the “spirit” or “soul.” Kikuchi explicitly stated that he saw no merit in a theory of art dwelt heavily on the mystique of the “artist,” a mystique that was central to the ideas of the *Shirakaba* writers and critics. Satomi Ton saw this, and rightly so, as a direct attack against his position as he explains it in the *Kaizō* series, and responded in kind. The resulting debate over “content value” first articulates the

<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, Samuel and Sherry Weber trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34.

<sup>2</sup> BBC, “What they said at the Oscars,” BBC News (online),

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/entertainment/2002/oscars\\_2002/1891426.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/entertainment/2002/oscars_2002/1891426.stm) (Monday, 25 March, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Francis Mathy, *Shiga Naoya* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Satomi Ton, “Bungei kanken,” *Satomi Ton zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1979), 131.

<sup>5</sup> Satomi, “Bungei kanken,” 133.

philosophical differences between these two critics and gives clues to their differing responses to the earthquake. Although Kikuchi's "content value" essay was a response to Satomi's definition of art, it was about something very different—the need for art to engage with the world. Central to Kikuchi's argument was the fact that he had read things that affected him emotionally while aesthetically he was unimpressed by the form, as well as works that he read which impressed him aesthetically but left him unmoved. In short he argued that there was a value in the "content" of fiction that was separate from the artistic value of the work. As he later clarified, this was not content as in the traditional divide between content and form within aesthetic theory.<sup>6</sup> Rather, what Kikuchi called "content value" was the moral or philosophical value in the work, the part of the work that directly benefited humanity. Fiction, he wrote, should concern itself with "life first, art second."<sup>7</sup> As Edward Mack puts it, for Kikuchi, content value "is not a measure of artistic value but a measure of the value of art to society and mankind."<sup>8</sup> Thus in contrast to Satomi Ton, Kikuchi is concerned not so much about what art is, as about what art should be.

What really happens in the "debate over content value," as Hirano Ken and others have pointed out, is that Kikuchi and Satomi argued at cross purposes, highlighting a fundamental difference in how they viewed art.<sup>9</sup> For Satomi, the individual artist and the object that expressed his "spirit" were the most important part of "Art." For Kikuchi, what literature can offer society is of the utmost importance. Art is personal for Satomi and social for Kikuchi. Satomi is interested in the artist, Kikuchi the audience.

It is no surprise then that these two authors had such different views of what would happen to "Art" following the earthquake. The Great Kanto Earthquake was a disaster too big to be ignored. Over one hundred thousand people died and about half of the Tokyo-Yokohama area lay in ruins. Most major publishing companies and the authors who wrote for them were within the disaster zone. The major figures were safe, but the destruction of the infrastructure made them struggle for their livelihood. An oft cited statistic is that of the 370 magazines published in Tokyo on the eve of the quake only seventy were able to produce an October edition.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the obvious setback, the industry itself recovered quickly, fueled in part by public demand for information about the earthquake, which in turn gave writers more opportunities for work. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke noted that he was approached by several magazines for earthquake related material and at least six different magazines included something from him in their first post-quake issue.<sup>11</sup> September must have been a busy month.

What the earthquake meant for literature, and the arts in general, was a major theme addressed by literary critics. Some thought that the earthquake would inspire a new kind of literature. For example, in its first post-quake issue the magazine *Josei* (Woman) advertised a contest for new (post-quake) literature, implying that literature written after the disaster would somehow be substantially different from that produced before.<sup>12</sup> The critic Chiba Kameo drew

<sup>6</sup> Satomi addresses the distinction between form and content in aesthetic theory in his essay series and in his response to Kikuchi.

<sup>7</sup> Kikuchi Kan, *Kikuchi Kan zenshū*, vol. 22 (Takamatsu: Kikuchi Kan kinenkan, 1995), 480.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Mack II, "The Value of Literature: Cultural Authority in Interwar Japan" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2002), 238.

<sup>9</sup> Hirano Ken, "Kaisetsu" in *Gendai Nihon bungaku ronsō shi*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 2006), 637.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Odagiri Susumu, "Kindai bungaku to Kanto daishinsai," in Odagiri Susumu, ed., *Nihon kindai bungaku daijiten*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1977), 81-83.

<sup>11</sup> Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1995), 152.

<sup>12</sup> *Josei*, vol. 4, no.4 (October 1923), unpaginated front matter.

comparisons between the effects of the Great War on European literature and the possible effects of the earthquake on Japanese literature.<sup>13</sup> Just about every member of the *bundan* had something to add, but Kikuchi Kan and Satomi Ton emerged in the discourse as two polar opposites. Kikuchi Kan's essay "Saigo zakkan" or "Post-Disaster Impressions" asserts that literature is useless in the face of disaster whereas Satomi Ton's essay "Tama wa kudakezu" or "The Pearl Will Not Be Broken" views art as an indestructible jewel that cannot be affected by external events.

Kikuchi Kan's "Saigo zakkan" is a collection of distinct "impressions" of the disaster, a *zuihitsu* per se, and not a sustained argumentative essay. Some sections describe his experiences, some his musings on earlier disasters, but the inflammatory statement for which the essay is best known appears near the introduction:

To us literati, the first blow was that we came to know clearly that, in the boundary between life and death, existence and extinction, this thing called literature, along with antique scrolls, is nothing more than useless luxury. Although we must have already known this, to have it shown with such clarity is truly depressing.<sup>14</sup>

Kikuchi sees disaster as a liminal moment between life and death, and in that moment he sees no place for literature or the arts. Disaster reduces humanity to their basic needs for survival, to eating and sleeping: In his words, "'Man cannot live by bread alone' is a luxury of safety."<sup>15</sup> As a poignant metaphor for this transformation, Kikuchi describes how a local musical instrument shop now sells Miso.

Satomi Ton's post-quake essay ignores Kikuchi's central dilemma, questioning the value of art after disaster, in favor of arguing that "Art" cannot be affected by a *mere* disaster. "The Pearl Will Not Be Broken" clearly asserts that the earthquake caused no "fissure in Art, either visible or invisible."<sup>16</sup> Satomi is not so blissfully blinded to think that there will be no material effect on artists, but that effect is that "artists" will have to move to the more popular forms of their craft to survive. "A painter might have to paint signs for food . . . and the musician might have to become one part in a cinema orchestra . . . but as long as they are artists . . . art is safe."<sup>17</sup> He cedes the fact that the instrument shop may have to sell miso, but that the effect on "Art" itself is non-existent.

Satomi's faith stems from his definition of art. "The Pearl Will Not Be Broken" began by re-asserting the importance of individual genius to the creation of art—no matter the scope. "Even architecture, which requires tens of thousands of hands or music requiring hundreds, the resulting art is the manifestation of a single spirit of the leader or planner."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Satomi asserts that art, unlike government or business, exists whether or not it has an audience. In his words: "Art is not a commodity directed at others."<sup>19</sup> This is one reason why Satomi does

<sup>13</sup> Chiba Kameo, "Shinsaigo-ha no shisō to bungei" in *Kaizō*, vol. 5, no. 12 (December, 1923), 257-264.

<sup>14</sup> Kikuchi Kan, "Saigo zakkan" in *Chūō kōron*, vol. 38, no. 11 (October, 1923), 116.

<sup>15</sup> Kikuchi, "Saigo zakkan," 116.

<sup>16</sup> Satomi Ton, "Tama wa kudakezu," in Satomi Ton, *Satomi Ton zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1979), 102.

<sup>17</sup> Satomi, "Tama wa kudakezu," 103.

<sup>18</sup> Satomi, "Tama wa kudakezu," 102.

<sup>19</sup> Satomi, "Tama wa kudakezu," 103.

not see the “popular” forms of art as being truly art. It doesn’t matter that the instrument shop sells miso; “Art” exists beyond its commodified form. Satomi takes the idea of disaster further and imagines a world where everything is destroyed but a single artist. In Satomi’s thought experiment, the artist would not stop producing art. Even if all is lost, as long as the “spirit of the artist remains,” Art is safe.

Satomi Ton, seeing no need for Art to interact with the outside world saw nothing change in his conception. But because Kikuchi Kan was concerned with how literature helped society, when he saw no role for literature when society itself was at risk, it had an impact on his thinking. To return to his infamous statement:

In the boundary between life and death, existence and extinction, this thing called literature . . . is nothing more than useless luxury. Although we must have already known this, to have it shown with such clarity is truly depressing.<sup>20</sup>

By already exploring the need for literature to engage with life, Kikuchi had seen that art was the “decoration” added to something of social value. He could see the value in art in and of itself, but that aesthetic value had little importance to society. Because his theory was rooted in the audience (in other words the reception of the work) and the social role of literature, Kikuchi Kan could not but reassess his thoughts on literature after the earthquake. For Kikuchi, the disaster showed how little “art” mattered.

Kikuchi Kan and Satomi Ton soon came to stand for opposite poles in the discourse on art and literature following the earthquake, just as they had in the debate over “content value” earlier. In a dialectical essay published in November, Akutagawa examined the stances of Kikuchi Kan and Satomi Ton and was dissatisfied by both. This essay, written in the format of a dialogue between a master and a disciple, began with the disciple asking what the master thought about Kikuchi Kan’s theory. On the one hand, the master says, “if your head is on fire, you will not think of how to represent the flames,” thus seeming to support Kikuchi. But on the other hand, the teacher claims to see art in even the words of refugees.<sup>21</sup> This would suggest that art—or at least as he puts it unintentional artistic impulses—did not die in the flames. But by seeing art in these *jitsuwā* Akutagawa also rejects the elitism of Satomi’s art as genius argument. Akutagawa saw art as informing expression of any sort and though the industry might be affected and though the elite may continue to produce insular personal works, art can still be found in the masses.

So what happened after this exchange in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake? Satomi Ton remained mostly silent. He did not directly engage Kikuchi Kan as he had done over a year earlier. Instead he wrote a work of fiction, “Tsubaki” or “Camellia.” In this work, as Edward Seidensticker has pointed out, Satomi attempted to show by example that “formal beauty was possible” after the quake.<sup>22</sup> It is a simple story about an aunt and her niece who discuss the ominous fall of a camellia blossom late at night. There is nothing to connect the work to the

<sup>20</sup> Kikuchi, “Saigo zakkā,” 116.

<sup>21</sup> Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Mōmon mōtō,” *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1995), 166-169. Here Akutagawa is probably referring to the *jitsuwā*—emotional and “true” stories of refugees and other survivors.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Seidensticker, “Translator’s notes” in Ivan Morris, ed., *Modern Japanese Stories* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1962), 138.

immediate aftermath of the quake. Uno Kōji, in a 1956 essay, singles out "Tsubaki" in praise for its formal qualities with no reference whatsoever to the context of publication.<sup>23</sup>

Kikuchi Kan continued to defend and elaborate on his "uselessness of literature" assertion for the following few months. He castigated writers who made little of the effects of the earthquake on the arts without having experienced the brunt of the disaster. In an amusing play, an oyster who had avoided the inferno is shown checking to make sure that his pearl was not broken.<sup>24</sup> In any case, though his was a pessimistic view, as we all know, Kikuchi did not abandon literature. In a later edition of *Bungei shunjū*, Kikuchi bemoaned his inability to leave the literary world to do something more productive, but he continued to write plays, popular fiction and edit one of the most prestigious literary magazines of the time.<sup>25</sup> Though he never recanted his belief that ultimately literature was useless luxury, by 1925 Kikuchi had regained his hope in literature and its ability to be relevant. In an essay on "Literature and Life," Kikuchi wrote that literature was useful in that it opened minds to the lives of others. He went so far as to say, "The person who knows no literature is confined to nothing more than his own life."<sup>26</sup> Kikuchi found a humanistic connection between literature and life—it told stories that connected humanity together.

It's hard to say what ended with the earthquake and what began. Many looking back on it saw the quake as a break in time. *Shirakaba* ended publication with the earthquake, but Shiga Naoya and Satomi Ton continued to produce new works. Shiga's masterpiece, *An'ya kōro* (Dark Night's Passing) first appeared in 1921 and continued appearing in spurts up to 1937. Even Naturalism continued its course, with authors such as Tayama Katai publishing into the thirties. But it is really in the work of two new groups of writers that we see the legacy of this debate. Modernist writers such as Kawabata Yasunari took up the torch to defend art for art's sake and the proletarian writers asserted the necessity of art to be of "value" to the greater society. Neither Satomi nor Kikuchi would see themselves as part of these groups, but it is in the new post-quake literature that we can see the further development of their ideas.

<sup>23</sup> Uno Kōji, "Satomi Ton" in *Satomi Ton Kubota Mantarō shū* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1972), 418-422.

<sup>24</sup> Anon. (probably Kikuchi Kan), "Shinsai no ato," *Bungei shunjū*, vol 2, no. 1 (January, 1924), 38-39.

<sup>25</sup> Kikuchi Kan, "Saigo zakkan," *Bungei shunjū*, vol. 1, no. 11 (November, 1923), 71-72; not to be confused with the earlier essay by the same title.

<sup>26</sup> Kikuchi Kan, "Bungei to jinsei" in *Kikuchi Hiroshi zenshū*, vol. 14 (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1937), 345.