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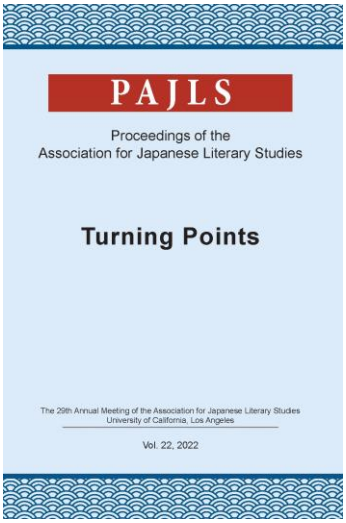

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TURNING TO THE PAST: TANIZAKI JUN'ICHIRŌ'S "THINKING OF TOKYO" AND THE AFTERSHOCKS OF THE GREAT KANTŌ EARTHQUAKE

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The 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake marked a turning point in the life of the writer and Tokyo native Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886–1965). Following the disaster, Tanizaki famously moved from Yokohama to the Kansai region, where he lived for the rest of his life. More than a decade after the earthquake, Tanizaki reflected on this rupture in an extended essay entitled "Thinking of Tokyo" (Tōkyō o omou, 1934). First published in the journal *Chūō kōron* from January to April 1934, "Thinking of Tokyo" explores the significance of urban space in terms of memory, modernity, and cultural identity. My paper considers Tanizaki's essay in relation to Tokyo's symbolic importance as the capital of the Japanese empire, identifying moments of tension between local and imperial conceptions of the city. In one sense, Tanizaki's essay is an effort to recall the Meiji-era Tokyo of his childhood, centered on the *shitamachi* neighborhood of Nihonbashi. Yet even as he summons up these fading memories of the past, Tanizaki also writes of Tokyo's rapid development, including the post-earthquake reconstruction project that reached its formal conclusion in 1930. For Tanizaki, these transformations of the city inspire comparisons to the metropolises of the West, the Kansai cities of Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, and the cities in China that he visited on his travels there. To think of Tokyo, as Tanizaki does, is both to remember and to reimagine the city.

In considering the relationship between literature and historical change, I argue that literature has the potential not only to describe the city at a turning point in history, but also to open up new possibilities for reimagining urban space. In his essay, Tanizaki advances an expansive idea of Tokyo, showing that a city is more than its physical form. His vision encompasses the changing customs, language, and fashions of the city's inhabitants, attending to the cultural shifts that followed the earthquake. Neither is Tanizaki's Tokyo limited to a conception of the city as the Japanese imperial capital. It is also his hometown, a repository of local culture, a place of memory and belonging. Tanizaki describes Tokyo from a point of physical and temporal distance, and it is this distance that

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brings the city into focus. His essay demonstrates that the Great Kantō Earthquake should be understood not only in its immediate impact, but also in its aftershocks over the years that followed.

"Thinking of Tokyo" begins with an extended act of recollection. On September 1, 1923, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō found himself in the mountain resort town of Hakone, having taken refuge from the summer heat. That morning, Tanizaki was traveling by bus from his hotel on the shores of Ashinoko to Kowakidani when the earthquake struck. He describes the conflicting emotions that he experienced in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, as he continued on foot along the mountain road. On the one hand, Tanizaki was deeply concerned for his wife and daughter, who had returned to the family's home in Yokohama just days before to prepare for the start of the school year. As his thoughts turned to Yokohama and his hometown of Tokyo, images of devastation rushed through his mind. At the same time, however, Tanizaki could not help but feel a certain sense of excitement as he envisioned Tokyo's future. "Finally," he remembers thinking, "Tokyo will become a decent place."[2] Tanizaki's optimism for the city's future arose from his dissatisfaction with its present. Decrying the unevenness of the modernization that had left Tokyo in a disordered condition on the eve of the earthquake, Tanizaki viewed the capital as emblematic of the cultural confusion plaguing the nation: "The old Japan had been discarded, and the new Japan had yet to arrive. A horrible state of chaos extended in every direction. The extremity of the disorder was plainly visible throughout the city of Tokyo."[3] In this sense, at least, the widespread destruction wrought by the earthquake represented a moment of boundless possibility, a chance to rebuild and reimagine the Japanese capital. For Tanizaki, Tokyo's reconstruction would not be limited to new buildings; it would mean nothing less than the transformation of everyday life.

As Tanizaki made his way on foot along the mountain road towards Kowakidani, he began to think about the Tokyo of the future, harboring little doubt that it would soon become a "magnificent metropolis" (*kōsō na dai toshi*).[4] This was to be a purely modern city, a city no longer burdened by its past. With the 1906 San Francisco earthquake as a point of reference, Tanizaki imagined how Tokyo would be rebuilt over the next decade. He pictured "a solid expanse of towering buildings like the

[2] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Tōkyō o omou," in vol. 21 of *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1983), 12.
[3] Ibid., 9.
[4] Ibid., 13.

Marunouchi Building and the Marine Insurance Building," two of the city's iconic office buildings that survived the earthquake, and that together would define the modern appearance of the city.[5] Tanizaki's vision extends to the "customs and manners" (*fūzoku shūkan*) of Tokyo's inhabitants: men and women alike would all wear Western clothing and adopt a "pure Western lifestyle" (*jun ōbeifū no seikatsu*), in keeping with the modern appearance of the city.[6] "Fragments of the new Tokyo passed before my eyes," Tanizaki writes, "numberless, like flashes in a movie."[7] His cinematic simile presents Tokyo as an alluring visual spectacle, provoking something akin to a state of intoxication in the viewer. A succession of seductive images, by turns erotic and grotesque, shows Tanizaki's fantastic imagination at work. He writes of the "enticing smiles of streetwalkers appearing and disappearing in the flickering lights of Ginza, Asakusa, Marunouchi, and Hibiya Park; the secret pleasures of Turkish baths, massage parlors, and beauty salons; and bizarre crimes."[8] These unsavory elements are objects of fascination for the observer, who finds himself beguiled by the city's hedonistic pleasures and perverse curiosities.

Here I must emphasize, as Tanizaki does, that this dazzling vision of modern Tokyo appeared to him on the day of the Great Kantō Earthquake, even before he was fully aware of the extent of the destruction. By the time that he composed "Thinking of Tokyo," more than ten years had passed since the disaster. Consequently, there is a temporal gap contained within the essay, and a resulting tension between Tokyo as Tanizaki imagined it at the time of the earthquake and Tokyo as it actually developed in the decade that followed. When Tanizaki writes of "the Tokyo of the present" (*genzai no Tōkyō*), it must be understood that he is describing the rebuilt capital of 1934.[9] Tanizaki regards this new Tokyo with no small measure of disappointment. The excitement that he experienced in the earthquake's immediate aftermath has given way to resignation in the face of the city's subsequent development. Already having lived for more than a decade in the Kansai region, Tanizaki finds himself at a distance from Tokyo, both physically and emotionally. "I was born in Tokyo," he writes, "but I have

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[5] Ibid., 13.
[6] Ibid., 13–14.
[7] Ibid., 14. See also Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City*, reprinted in *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867–1989* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2010), 34, and Ken K. Ito, *Visions of Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 108.
[8] Ibid., 10.
[9] Ibid., 18.

no lingering affection for the present-day Tokyo."[10] Rather than regard Tanizaki's disappointment as a reaction to his thwarted desire for Tokyo's future, however, I wish to suggest that the fantastic Tokyo of the future that Tanizaki describes is always already unattainable, just as the lost traces of the city's past can never be recaptured. Nor is it accidental that Tanizaki so often employs the language of cinema to describe the city. His imagined Tokyo exists outside of reality, mediated by the literary text.

As he observes how Tokyo has changed in the decade after the Great Kantō Earthquake, Tanizaki realizes that he too is no longer the same person that he was at the time of the disaster. His earlier fascination for Western culture had given way to a deeper appreciation of traditional Japanese aesthetics, articulated most famously in his 1933 essay, *In Praise of Shadows* (*In'ei raisan*). While the Tanizaki of 1923 dreamed of a modern metropolis that would arise after the earthquake and compare favorably to the great cities of the West, the Tanizaki of 1934 is more likely to turn back to the past, to those vanishing elements of local culture that defined his childhood in Tokyo's *shitamachi*: "Rather than cherish hopes for the Tokyo of the future, I am now more inclined to yearn for the Tokyo of my childhood. Can it be said about such things that, as the saying goes, inscrutable are the ways of heaven [*ningen banji saiō ga uma*]?"[11] This capacity for change makes it difficult to define Tanizaki's views in absolute terms. Ken Ito has noted the numerous oppositions that Tanizaki employs in "Thinking of Tokyo" and other essays of the early Shōwa period in his efforts to define cultural identity: East and West, past and present, Kantō and Kansai. Ito describes how these dichotomies are "shuffled and reshuffled" as Tanizaki searches for a sense of belonging, and I too wish to underscore the extent to which this instability is a key element in Tanizaki's thinking on culture and urban space.[12] Even as he acknowledges the changes in his own aesthetic sensibility, Tanizaki continues to reimagine Tokyo across time and space, suggesting the inherent multiplicity of both city and self.

This multiplicity can be seen in Tanizaki's alternating use of the terms *kokyō* (hometown) and *teito* (imperial capital) to refer to Tokyo. While the former suggests the city's importance in the life of the individual, the latter denotes its symbolic status as the center of the Japanese empire. Tanizaki's feeling of anguish arises from the loss of his hometown of Tokyo, a loss that is felt not only in the physical traces of the city that have disappeared,

[10] Ibid., 12.
[11] Ibid., 23.
[12] Ken K. Ito, *Visions of Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 112.

but also in the people close to him who are now gone. And so, even as Tanizaki acknowledges the splendor of the rebuilt metropolis, he cannot help but remember the city of his childhood:

> My disparagement of Tokyo may simply be the complaints of a man whose hometown [*kokyō*] has been devastated by an unprecedented natural disaster and by ill-mannered modern civilization, a person whose relatives and oldest friends have been destroyed. In any case, when I notice the wretched appearance of the people from my birthplace, the sight of the remodeled city streets does not cause me to feel joyful, but instead brings forth tears of misery. Looking at the imposing domes and towering roof tiles that restrict the sky above the imperial capital [*teito*], at the same time that I think, "ah, what a splendid city this has become," I also harbor a feeling of dissatisfaction, as though my town had, without my knowing, been occupied by others and remade in accordance with their wishes.[13]

In contrast to the grandiose vision of modern Tokyo that Tanizaki imagines earlier in the essay, here the remade city is haunted by the specter of the past. As a Tokyo native, Tanizaki holds in his memory this local, intensely personal past, making it impossible for him to look upon the newly refurbished city streets without experiencing a deep feeling of sadness. If the Great Kantō Earthquake served as the catalyst for much of the city's redevelopment, Tanizaki also identifies modern civilization as a destructive force, suggesting that the devastation of the old city was already ongoing when the disaster struck. Moreover, there is a sense that these changes to the urban fabric have been imposed from the outside, a process of dispossession that has rendered Tokyo unfamiliar to its longtime residents.

If Tanizaki found himself increasingly alienated from Tokyo, he felt more and more at home in the Kansai region as the years went by. Already in "City Scene" (Toshi jōkei), a brief essay from 1926, Tanizaki articulates an idea of Kyoto as a counterpoint to Tokyo: a city whose cultural heritage remained intact. In his praise for the old capital, Tanizaki followed his friend and fellow Tokyo native Nagai Kafū (1879–1959), who had written of Kyoto in *Chūō kōron* after visiting the city for the first time in several

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[13] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Tōkyō o omou," in vol. 21 of *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1983), 70. See also Ken K. Ito, *Visions of Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 107.

years. Kafū was impressed by Kyoto's peacefulness, a quality that he had found increasingly difficult to appreciate in Tokyo. Tanizaki describes a similar reaction after he too visited the city after a long absence, which induced in him an uncanny sense of familiarity: "It occurred to me then that I was moved by the Kyoto of the present because it reminded me of the Tokyo of a decade ago. Old ways and practices no longer found in Tokyo, things we have forgotten, remain preserved in Kyoto and catch our attention, even when we aren't looking for them."[14] Like Kafū, Tanizaki discovered an enduring local culture in the Kansai region, and the loss of his hometown of Tokyo made him all the more enthralled by it. As Nomura Shōgo argues, Tanizaki found in Kansai a place that was both exotic and nostalgic, attracting his curiosity while also reawakening his memories.[15] Though he was destined to remain an outsider, he still felt a strong affinity for the culture of Kansai, which reminded him of the Tokyo of the past. By the time that he composed "Thinking of Tokyo," Tanizaki was able to affirm: "at present, no longer do I consider myself to be a Tokyoite [*Tōkyōjin*]. While I do not believe that I can assimilate completely to Kansai, having moved here after reaching middle age, it is a fact that I wish to assimilate as much as possible. I have no lingering attachment to Tokyo."[16]

In Tanizaki's fiction after his move to the Kansai region, urban space frequently plays a decisive role in forming the identity of individual characters. Kaname, the protagonist of Tanizaki's 1929 novel *Some Prefer Nettles* (*Tade kuu mushi*), hails from Tokyo's *shitamachi* and carries with him the values and sensibilities shaped by this milieu: "He had grown up in the merchants' section of Tokyo before the earthquake destroyed it, and the thought of it could fill him with the keenest nostalgia […] but the very fact that he was a child of the merchants' quarter made him especially sensitive to its inadequacies, to its vulgarity and its preoccupation with the material."[17] This internal conflict leads Kaname to eschew the materialistic tendencies of the merchant class, aspiring to a transcendent aesthetic experience: "It was not enough that something should be touching,

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[14] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Toshi jōkei," in vol. 22 of *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1982), 183. See also Ken K. Ito, *Visions of Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 105–106.

[15] Nomura Shōgo, *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō: Fūdo to bungaku* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1973), 72.

[16] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Tōkyō o omou," in vol. 21 of *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1983), 26.

[17] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Some Prefer Nettles*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Vintage, 1995), 36.

charming, graceful; it had to have about it a certain radiance, the power to inspire veneration. One had to feel forced to one's knees before it, or lifted by it to the skies."[18] Kaname's desire for the sublime is transmuted into a worshipful attitude towards women, one instance of many in which a confluence of the urban and the female appears in Tanizaki's writing. While Kaname does not go so far as to debase himself in the manner of Jōji, the besotted protagonist of Tanizaki's 1926 novel *Naomi* (*Chijin no ai*), he still longs for an ideal that is destined to remain elusive.[19] For both of these men, it is cinema more than any other art form that expresses an idealized vision of female beauty.

Tanizaki makes numerous references to cinema in "Thinking of Tokyo," where the art form functions as a mediating force between city and self, inspiring the imagination and exciting the desires of the individual. This is particularly true when it comes to the cities of the West, which Tanizaki was only able to experience through films. Like the beautiful women who so often occupy his attention on the streets, the cinematic spectacle of urban modernity exerted a powerful influence on Tanizaki, who as a young man found himself in thrall to illusory visions of the West. Recalling his younger days, when he was in the habit of attending films at theaters such as the Teikokukan and the Odeon-za, Tanizaki describes how his aesthetic sensibility was shaped through cinema: "Looking at the finished appearance of the cities that appeared in Western films, I felt more and more antipathy towards Japan, and I lamented that I had been born in this remote corner of the Orient."[20] With such comparisons hovering in his mind, he found it difficult to think of Tokyo without being cognizant of its shortcomings. Over time, however, Tanizaki arrived at a more nuanced perspective as he observed Tokyo's post-earthquake development firsthand:

> People returning from abroad say that the splendor of present-day Tokyo is not inferior in the slightest to the first-class cities of Europe and America. Indeed, the city that I dreamed of in my younger days after watching Western films was never so magnificent as this. Even that daydream that caused me to forget the misfortune of my wife and child as I walked along that mountain road on the first of September in the twelfth year of

[18] Ibid., 36.
[19] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Some Prefer Nettles*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Vintage, 1995), 37.
[20] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Tōkyō o omou," in vol. 21 of *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1983), 9.

> Taishō [1923] cannot possibly compare to the beauty of these great buildings before my eyes. And yet, to what extent have these changes in external appearance influenced the tastes, customs, manners, language, and behavior of the citizens? In all honesty, my imagination had gone too far ahead, as they have not Westernized to the extent that I had foreseen.[21]

With the passage of time and the changing appearance of Tokyo, Tanizaki revisits the cinematic fantasies glimpsed in the past and his own visions of urban grandeur. If the external appearance of the city underwent a profound transformation in the years that followed the earthquake, its cultural shifts were not nearly so pronounced. In his understanding of urban space, Tanizaki displays an enduring interest in questions of cultural identity that accompanied his attention to the built environment.

Although Tanizaki was unable to travel to the West, his travels in China fulfilled his desire for the exotic other, while also providing him with glimpses of a more harmonious balance between tradition and modernity.[22] Tanizaki visited China on two occasions, in 1918 and 1926, and wrote of his journeys in such travelogues as "Account of a Journey to Suzhou" (Soshū kikō, 1919), "Lushan Diary" (Rozan nikki, 1921), "Observations of Shanghai" (Shanhai kenbunroku, 1926), and "Friends in Shanghai" (Shanhai kōyūki, 1926), which details his raucous gatherings with members of the Chinese literary establishment, including Tian Han (1898–1968), Guo Moruo (1892–1978), and Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962). In "Thinking of Tokyo," Tanizaki looks back on these travels in China as he seeks a comparative understanding of Japanese modernity. Recalling his first journey to China, Tanizaki writes of his desire to assuage his "taste for the foreign" (*ikoku shumi*) that had been stimulated by Western cinema.[23] In China, he discovered "peaceful, tranquil cities and suburbs" along with "modern cities like Shanghai and Tianjin that were in no way inferior to the metropolises of the West that I had seen in films."[24] This "coexistence of civilizations old and new" (*shinkyū ryōyō no bunmei*) impressed Tanizaki, while at the same time causing him to experience a

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[21] Ibid., 19–20.
[22] For an extended discussion of representations of China in Tanizaki's oeuvre, see Atsuko Sakaki, *Obsessions with the Sino-Japanese Polarity in Japanese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 82–102.
[23] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Tōkyō o omou," in vol. 21 of *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1983), 9.
[24] Ibid., 9–10.

feeling of distaste towards Tokyo.[25] In Tanizaki's eyes, Japan was in a period of transition, having discarded the old while still attempting to embrace the new. In this sense, Tanizaki's travels in China were journeys through time as much as space. The cultural affinity between China and Japan lent a sense of familiarity to many of the sights that Tanizaki encountered. Meanwhile, the semicolonial status of Chinese cities such as Tianjin and Shanghai gave Tanizaki the uncanny feeling of having traveled to the West: "when I saw the orderly blocks of Tianjin and Shanghai, the clean pavement, and the rows of beautiful Western-style houses, I experienced the joy of having set foot on European soil."[26]

As a critical response to both the trauma of the Great Kantō Earthquake and the destructive effects of modernity on local culture, "Thinking of Tokyo" articulates a vision of urban space that privileges the memory and imagination of the individual. While I have translated the word *omou* in the essay's title as "to think of," this word can also mean "to recall," and Tanizaki's many acts of recollection in the essay reveal a close connection between city and self. Even after the loss of his hometown of Tokyo, Tanizaki carried with him a sensibility shaped by his native place, and in literature he made sure that this sensibility would endure.

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[26] Ibid., 10.

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