

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Makino Shinichi, Sakaguchi Ango, and Oda Sakunosuke: Modern Japanese Literature as a Joke

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8937g8ch>

Author

Fargo, Matthew Thomas

Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Makino Shinichi, Sakaguchi Ango, and Oda Sakunosuke:

Modern Japanese Literature as a Joke

By

Matthew Thomas Fargo

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Japanese Language

in the

Graduate Division

Of the

University of California Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Alan Tansman, Chair

Professor Andrew Jones

Professor Daniel O'Neill

Professor Greg Niemeyer

Fall 2011

Abstract

Makino Shinichi, Sakaguchi Ango, and Oda Sakunosuke:

Modern Japanese Literature as a Joke

by

Matthew Thomas Fargo

Doctor of Philosophy in Japanese Language

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Alan Tansman, Chair

This paper undertakes a survey the creation and reception of Japanese comedic literature in the period leading up to World War 2. Much of the analysis is conducted through the lens of Henri Bergson, and explores the power dynamics of humor. Particular attention is paid to the ways that writers during this period made literature itself the object of their comedies. In the process of scrutinizing how a medium like writing can make light of itself, the essay also examines how critical analysis of humor can be turned into its own form of comedy. The work of Japanese folk scholar Yanagita Kunio is central to this discussion, both because his research into the roots of Japanese humor provides some of the earliest work on the subject, and also because it serves as an exemplary piece of work that is self conscious of the ways that comedy refuses serious analysis.

By focusing on a distinctly anti-establishment coterie of authors, known as the *burai-ha*, or “ne’er do well” school, issues of canonization are brought into question. This leads to a discussing of how humorous literature can pose a threat to the very idea of serious literature, and the role of literary critics. Particular attention is paid to historical context, and the militarization of Japan as a background for these authors’ parodies.

The analyses of these texts also involves a great deal of critical introspection on the part of the author, as questions arise about how to justly approach a text whose sole wish seems to be to avoid seriously analysis. Finally, the role of translation in conveying humor between different languages and eras is illuminated, in order to echo how the texts themselves are problematizing the analysis of humorous literature. Ultimately, the paper aspires to be an embodiment of the sort of critical approach to humor to which its texts allude.

This dissertation is dedicated to Professors Alan
Tansman, Dan O'Neill, and Andrew Jones, from whom I
have learned a great deal.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Makino Shinichi: Bergson in the Mirror
3. Sakaguchi Ango: Of *manzai* and *banzai*
4. *Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus*
5. Oda Sakunosuke: Regardless of the Stink
6. *Xeron*

Introduction

Nakamura Mitsuo's "Modern Japanese Fiction" contains a passage that is almost always cited, when the subject of modern Japanese literary humor happens to arise—which is infrequently, at best:

Thus it was because literature was so influenced by the West—itsself becoming just another manifestation of the “enlightenment” phenomemon— that comedy and satire disappeared. Literature went from being a spectator of the comedy to actually playing one of its characters.¹

The paragraph contains a lot—which is probably why it is so regularly referred to—but in the broadest terms it suggests two distinct and conflicting things.

Namely:

- 1) that modern Japanese literature was no longer funny or satirical, and
- 2) that modern Japanese literature was now funny, as an object of satire.

The first idea is commonplace enough: one hears from Japanese and foreign scholars alike that, after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and up until the 1950s, humor was all but absent in Japanese literature—especially in the dark decade leading up to the war; and that if it is laughter for which one looks, one will have to make due with the flaccid chuckles of a Tanizaki Junichirō or an Ibuse Masuji.² By 1927, the situation was apparently already so dire that folklorist Yanagita Kunio was moved to write an inquiry into “The Roots of Humor”:

Japanese people laugh an awful lot—and yet modern literature is absolutely anemic for laughter. It's gotten to the point where we have foreigners asking us ridiculous things like, “Do Japanese people have a concept of humor?” Questions like this, of course, inevitably come from people who haven't even tried to learn Japanese and are naïve enough to think that anything can be translated—and yet when actually posed this query I had a difficult time assembling enough material to adequately respond.³

¹ 中村光夫、「日本の近代小説」、岩波新書、1955, pg. 19. All translations herein are my own.

² 井伏鱒二、(1898-1993). Ibuse is probably best known abroad for “Black Rain,” his book about the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing.

³ 柳田国男、「笑いの文学の起源」、『柳田国男全集』、筑摩文庫、1990, vol. 9, pg. 208.

This presumption would have been particularly frustrating to anyone familiar with Japanese literary history, not only because Japanese people are so naturally fond of the myriad varieties of japery but because the erstwhile Edo period (1603-1868) was still fresh in the national memory as a period of unparalleled production of comedic literature. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, printed literature of all stripes had flourished, and no genre of writing was as prolifically edifying as comedy. For both poetry and prose, Edo was a rare era in which humor took precedent over pretense, and laughter was king. As Howard Hibbett paints it:

Vulgarization, rising to virtuoso levels in rakugo,⁴ was also demanded in the publishing marketplace, to the regret of the more serious-minded suppliers of popular writing. In an 1818 letter to a friend, the disgruntled Bakin observed that a work 70% vulgar and 30% elegant would always sell, but one 30% vulgar and 70% elegant would not sell very well—and a work that was 100% elegant would not sell at all.⁵

This appreciation of the vulgar and satirical seems to be the mirror image of the post-Meiji⁶ literary landscape, where thirty-percent vulgarity would have been brash. In his introduction, Hibbett expresses feelings of lament that “the leading novelists since Meiji (with the exception of Tanizaki) seemed to lose their sense of humor under the influence of nineteenth-century Western novels.”⁷ In his chapter on the modern writers, he makes the case that there are “few modern writers of satirical fiction—writers who tried to maintain an ironic distance from their subject,”⁸ before confusingly going on to cite Akutagawa and Tanizaki as the rare exceptions.

This postulation—that post-Meiji literature was characteristically unfunny—is shared by a fairly decisive number of scholars, on both sides of the Pacific. Marguerite Wells, in describing theories of comedy in modern Japan, notes that “in the Meiji era the lament had been that humour was disappearing from Japanese literature but now in the Taishō era⁹ it was perceived as disappearing from daily social intercourse, as well.”¹⁰

Or as Joel Cohn politely couches it:

⁴ *Rakugo* (落語) is a form of solo stand-up comedy, as opposed to the more traditional *manzai* duos (see note 11).

⁵ Hibbett, Howard. *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish*. Kodansha International, 2002, pg. 133.

⁶ The Meiji era (1868-1912) was something like a Japanese Victorian era, in terms of time period.

⁷ *ibid.* pg. 41.

⁸ *ibid.* pg. 188

⁹ The Taisho era (1912-1926) was a period of increased democracy in Japan, before the militancy of the Showa era.

¹⁰ Wells, Marguerite. *Japanese Humor*. St. Martin's Press, 1997, pg 112.

Suspensions about the non-existence, or at least invisibility, of a comic strain in modern Japanese fiction are not limited to readers with only a passing familiarity with the subject.¹¹

In all cases, “western” naturalism seems to be the culprit: the abrupt introduction of European literary mores into Japanese discourse resulted in an immediate and irreversible shift of paradigm: literature had become a mimetic art, and humor was not mimetic. The burlesque and baroque entertainments of yore required a certain amount of mechanism and affectation; laughter was merely artifice. Aristotle had arrived in Japan, along with Perry’s black ships, and comedy would thenceforth take a subservient role to the tragedy of imperialism—or so the argument went.

*

Moving from the Taisho into the Shōwa era, the situation ought to have been even more acute. Tokyo was still rebuilding from the great Kanto earthquake of 1923; the stock market had just crashed; Japan was mobilizing for war with China and the multifarious tentacles of state censorship were beginning to creep into all facets of political and artistic life. Humor, subversive by nature, would have been particularly subject to suppression, as the nationalistic shouts of “banzai” overwhelmed the laughter of *manzai*.¹²

And yet the *manzai* that we enjoy today was, to some extent, a product of the 1930s. It was certainly more popular than ever, as Barack Kushner notes in his own study of wartime comedy:

Attendance at cinemas, the new teahouses, and dance halls all increased. According to a Tokyo City investigation committee, annual cinema attendance rose between 1937 and 1939 from 4,900,000 to 9,800,000.¹³

For literature, as well, the 1930s were a decade of fervently renewed interest in humor and comedy. 1938, in particular, proved to be “The Year of Comedy Theory,” as Henri Bergson’s “On Laughter” was translated into Japanese and the literary journal *Literature* (文学) dedicated an entire issue to essays on humorous writing. Yangita Kunio, it seems, was no longer alone in expounding the primacy of laughter.

The “Humor” issue of *Bungaku* is fascinating in its focus: twenty of the twenty-four articles deal with pre-modern literature—twelve discussing classical

¹¹ Cohn, Joel. *Studies in the Comic Spirit in Modern Japanese Fiction*. Harvard University Press, 1998, pg. XI. Cohn’s introductory history of Japanese humorous literature is fantastic, which makes the subsequent overview of modern humor all the more disappointing.

¹² Japanese stand-up comedy is known as *manzai* (漫才), a word that is actually an older etymology of *banzai* (万歳). For a discussion of the richly ironic relationship of these two words, please refer note 19 of chapter 3.

¹³ Kushner, Barak. “Laughter as Materiel: The Mobilization of Comedy in Japan’s Fifteen Year War.” *The International History Review*, Vol 26, No. 2 (June 2004), pg. 303.

Japanese works (reflecting the nationalistic bent of the era), and seven devoted to Edo-era comedy (a proportionally large amount, in terms of history). There are articles about a gestalt theory of laughter, about British humor, and many discussions and citations of Bergson. Yanagita Kunio pens the lead-off article, which sketches a folk history of comedy, ending with an assertion that “the most important thing is that we recognize that both literary and non-literary humor have both been terribly impoverished.”¹⁴

Tellingly, only one article in the entire volume addresses the touchy subject of modern Japanese comedy.

Written by Honda Kenshō, the essay begins with a now-familiar question:

Supposedly, the most widely-read books in all of Japan right now are Soseki's *I am a Cat* and *Botchan*. One might assume that this is because, in dark times such as these, readers demand something more lighthearted, and these books provide the requisite lightheartedness—but the truth is not as simple as this. Even in brighter days than these, healthy human beings desire laughter and lightheartedness as a matter of instinct; and for as long as these two books are not eclipsed by some other masterpiece, they are not likely to relinquish their place at the top of the best seller list. Readers demand laughter—and yet very few authors appear capable of responding to this demand. Why is this?¹⁵

That this question was being asked, so vehemently, in the sole article on the subject of contemporary Japanese belles lettres, seems only to confirm the reigning assumption that modern Japanese literature was inherently unfunny—or the even more debasing idea that Japanese authors, writ large, had lost their comedic virility. Tellingly, the best that Honda can conjure as definitive proof that comedy is part of the modern Japanese canon is the very same author that Joel Cohn analyses in his own book: Ibuse Masuji.

Ibuse is most certainly not a characteristically “funny” author, at all—a fact that Cohn’s chapter will quickly instill in a reader. Ibuse’s prose style, alone, precludes any sort of audible laughter, and his subject matter is still largely Naturalistic. Historically, his work from this era is categorized as “Erotic/Grotesque/Nonsense” (エログロナンセンス) writing—a movement of young, urban writers who were self-consciously at odds with the stodgy introspection of their predecessors. Cohn describes the movement as follows:

It’s setting is the city, preferably one of the more fashionable quarters in Tokyo. Its characters, both male and female, are impeccably youthful, modish, and unburdened by parents to obey or dependents to support. It celebrates the freedom of apartment life, or the then-novel delights of cafés, dance halls, and department stores. The seriousness of purpose so conspicuous in the previous generation, and in its literature, seems to have become lost on the

¹⁴ 柳田国男、「戯作者の伝統」、『文学』、August, 1938, page 12.

¹⁵ 本田顕彰、「現代文学における笑い」、『文学』、August, 1938, page 105.

way to the pleasure domes, but under the surface runs a darker current of *carpe diem* hedonism.¹⁶

And while some of these authors did allow for a certain amount of wry, nasal laughter, it would be a disservice to call any of their work inherently “comedic.” By the end of the 1920s, the general consensus was that “nonsense” literature was, itself, something of a joke; a situation that Kobayashi Hideo, writing in 1930, cleverly describes in terms of Bergson’s theory of the comically “mechanized”:

The phrase “nonsense literature” itself has been mechanically encrusted upon the living body of literature—for example, if you were to speak of “debating contemporary nonsense literature,” you would undoubtedly solicit a chortle from due to the sheer mechanical sound of the phrase.

Literature itself—and in this case criticism, too—has become a character in the comedy. From this Bergsonian standpoint, Kobayashi finds that “nonsense” literature is more of a literature of “small wry smiles” than laughter, and concludes with the wish:

I only hope that the new “nonsense” literature feels morally motivated toward expressions of outright laughter, rather than the odd wry smile that has escaped its lips in the past.

Sakaguchi Ango, who was also quite familiar with Bergson, tried to explain the shortcomings of “nonsense” literature in his 1931 essay, “The Clown Evangelist”:

They say nonsense literature is dead. This, itself, is nonsense. Japanese “nonsense” literature hasn’t even achieved real nonsense yet. I’ll be the first to recognize the incredible work that Ibuse [Masuji] and Nakamura [Masatsune] have done, as pioneers. And they are both very gifted artists. But strictly speaking, their writing is not nonsensical at all.¹⁷

Ango has in mind a much more acute form of nonsense—the sort of absurdity that could foment the guttural and “outright laughter” that Kobayashi desires. He will eventually get a much clearer idea of what this implies, but for now he makes due with a broad sketch of his ambitions:

The word nonsense implies a “lack of sense.” In modern Japanese, however, the term has come to simply mean “sad laughter.” And maybe for modern Japanese readers, with their modern understanding of the word, this “sad laughter” reads like some beautiful magic trick. Maybe the “nonsense” of writers like Nakamura really makes them sad. But dragging out laughter in

¹⁶ Cohn, pg. 35-36.

¹⁷ 「ピエロの伝道者」 For my translations, I am using 「坂口安吾全集」、筑摩書房、vol. 01, 1999, pg 43.

order to make people sad—that's an insult to the art. Real laughter is more frantic. Chaplain, even in his two-reel years, was a true artist.¹⁸

For all of its confrontational language, Ango is expressing more or less the same sentiment as Yanagita Kunio or Nakamura Mitsuo or Kobayashi Hideo: that, in spite of a rich tradition of high-quality comedy, modern Japanese writers were simply too poignant to create funny work. The “sad laughter” of writers like Ibuse and Nakamura was a far cry from the sort of pure farce that Ango sought.

Unlike these other writers, however, Ango managed to go a step further. In 1932, he followed “Clown Evangelist” with a much longer, more carefully argued essay, with the less sensationalistic title of “On Farce.” And while the central thesis of this second polemic is nearly identical to that of the first, it does possess one striking characteristic: the essay, itself, is a farce.

Farce is, indeed, the highest form of art—this is, of course, *not* the sort of contrarian argument I would feign to make; but at the same time, I certainly do not agree that farce is somehow the product of a less lofty spirit than that of comedy or tragedy. Unfortunately laughter has always played second fiddle to tears: since antiquity the assumption has been that laughter is but a byproduct of tears, an assumption which has served to put farce and its ilk in constant danger of extinction—banished, for the most part, from the hallowed halls of art. This said, I am not here before you to burn with righteous indignation like some Napoleon with an inferiority complex; nor do I particularly care whether my arguments find purchase in your hearts, for I will go on burning with this same crazed passion, all by myself, if need be—this, of course, I mean in the spirit of farce.

Nevertheless—

(and here I ought to express a caveat, which is that I am very poorly read, and that in writing this piece I have not properly studied any of the authoritative scholarship left by my predecessors, and am unable to give even an uninformed opinion about the origins and development of farce, much less any kind of general definition of the term, and thus have gone out of my way to adopt this extremely deceptive form of argumentation—which, if you would be so kind as to interpret as something said in the spirit of farce, I might be so overjoyed that my heart would stop beating and I would go keeling over onto the floor)¹⁹

Ango is being ironic: like Socrates, he claims to know nothing about the subject on which he wishes to expound—a form of self-effacement that is excessively humble, and thus explicitly cheeky, even in the Japanese context. If, however, this irony

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pg 43.

¹⁹ 「FARCE について」 originally appeared in the third issue of 「青い馬」、a journal that Ango helped edit with friends from Athénée Français, a foreign language school where Ango studied French literature after graduating from Tōyō University. For my translations, I am using 「坂口安吾」、筑摩文庫、1991, pg 44-45.

mutually understood, Ango may himself to become a farcical character, toppling over in giddy cardiac arrest. That the humorous can be literature, he argues; that literature can be humorous, he performs.

“Literature had become a character in the comedy”—this seems to be exactly the idea at work in Ango’s theory of farce, executed as farce. He is keen enough to see that merely theorizing the lack of quality comedic literature is, inadvertently, adding to the burgeoning pool of evidence to the contrary—a paradox which, as paradoxes go, it is something of a funny one. It is a fact that Ango’s essay both asserts and exemplifies.

This is a very modern form of criticism, but it is not without theoretical precedent. In 1928, drama critic Kishida Kunio published an essay on “The Modernity of Farce,” in which he seems to presage the very sorts of things that Ango would be writing a few years later:

If medieval farce was born at the very height of religious fervor, from the sheer boredom of listening to zealous sermons, then what better time for modern comedy to emerge than in an era of social ideology, amidst the clamoring of academic argumentation?²⁰

If Kishida’s wish was for a comedy of academic argumentation, then he certainly would have found its analogue in Ango and his peers, who all explicitly make the mechanics of literature the subject of their comedies. Their narrators are constantly conversing with their audience, worried about their own role, wondering whether their tale is really funny, or simply reductive. And inasmuch as this question is posed in an entirely Socratic manner, it is not hard to detect the implied response: “Well obviously it’s funny; but what is really funny is way that you seem to flinch at the very question.”

It would be, however, entirely farcical to try and argue that this sort of self-conscious farce was anything new, in Japan. The Edo era was a golden age of farcical fiction, broadly called *gesaku*,²¹ and its narrators were of a uniformly self-referential sort. So assertively performative are the narrators of Edo fiction that Robert Leutner takes great pains to account for them in the introduction to his book on Edo litterateur Shikitei Sanba:

Whether he announces his presence directly in asides to the reader or indirectly in eruptions of wordplay or flights of seemingly irrelevant erudition, the later *gesakusha* are at constant pains to remind the reader that the world he has created in his fiction is his creation and his alone, one from

²⁰ 岸田国士、「ファルスの近代性」、compiled in 「現代演劇論」、白水社、1953, pg 359.

²¹ *Gesaku* (戯作) literally means “playful compositions,” and encompasses the wide variety of Edo humorous writings, including poetry, biography, fiction, and nonfiction. Significantly, Ango would later insist on being called a *gesakusha*—a writer of *gesaku*.

which he can remove himself at will, by ceasing to be simply a narrator and taking on some wholly different persona. This refusal on the part of the writer to take himself wholly seriously, or even to pretend to do so, is one of the charms of *gesaku* fiction; it is also a barrier to its appreciation by modern readers whose expectations of fiction have been shaped by the Western novel and short story.²²

While Leutner imagines a modern reader being nonplussed by the facetious tellers of medieval Japanese tales, this would not have been the case in Edo Japan, where unreliable narrators were the norm rather than the exception. The inconsistent and self-reflexive narrator that James Wood poses as central to modern European humor—based on the “modern” idea that the self is ultimately unknowable²³—was already firmly entrenched in to the Japanese tradition. Conversely, the dispassionate first-person narrator had only arrived on Japanese shores fifty years earlier, and what would be a traditional narrative voice in Europe was still, to risk a pun, somewhat novel.

Sakaguchi Ango, of course, was well aware of this fact (although his erudition belies his narrator’s claim of being “poorly read”):

As Europe has grown more modern, its farces have become more scientific—well, perhaps “scientific” is an overstatement—I mean to say that the structure of its farces has become exceedingly *logical*. It is as though they are attempting to produce a sensation of confusion through the extensive and logical twisting of the rules of grammar. In terms of prose, this sort of farce wasn’t perfected until the time of Edgar Allan Poe (who counts the likes of “Lionizing,” “X-ing a Paragraph” and “Bon-Bon” among his bizarre creations); while in terms of theater, the contemporary French playwright Marcel Achard has brought the form to its fullest in “Won’t You Play With Me.”

But Japan is the polar opposite of the west—its oldest form of humor, *kyōgen*, is the most logically structured form, and is almost identical to modern western humor, especially in its treatment of characters. And modern western farce is all based upon some very simplistic sorts of logical trick, such as “Is an x, in fact, an x?” and “An x is not, in fact, an x.”²⁴

In Ango’s case, however, the “x” in question corresponds to humor itself—“Is humor humorous?” No, humor is not humorous, a fact which makes for a very comical situation.

Polemics about humor, such as the one you are reading right now, are not, in fact, humorous. They are painfully serious—to the point of being downright comical,

²² Leutner, Robert. *Shikitei Sanba and the Comic Tradition in Edo Fiction*. Harvard University Press, 1985, pg. 4.

²³ James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.

²⁴ 「FARCE について」、pg. 45. Magritte’s “*Ceci n'est pas*” works are all from around the same time as this essay.

if executed with enough aplomb. For this reason it would be an injustice not to follow Ango's lead, in the following chapters, by assuming a progressively experimental form, in the hopes of finding a critical method that effectively illuminates the humor in a work without killing it.

By "progressively experimental," of course, I mean progressively irresponsible, and progressively irrelevant to the ordinary aims of theory. I will begin with a proper close-reading of a Makino Shinichi²⁵ story (「鬼涙村」—"Devil's Tear Village"), then attempt to write about a short Sakaguchi Ango²⁶ story (「村のひと騒ぎ」—"A Village in Uproar") through footnotes alone, so as to preserve the continuity of the narrative. Next I will attempt to perform a translation of Ango's farce masterpiece (「風博士」—"Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus"), in the voice of a dubious translator, so as to echo the dubious sorts of narrators that appear in all of these stories. Finally, I will settle back into standard academic diction for a look at the relationship between puns and violence, in a wartime comedy (「猿飛佐助」—"Sasskay the Flighty Chimp") by Oda Sakunosuke,²⁷ before leaving you with an entirely unglossed translation of Makino Shinichi's "Xeron" (「ゼーロン」), subjecting it to brief analysis in the afterward.

It is because these works direct their laughter at literature itself—because they cast it as the unwieldy antagonist—they have been chosen for analysis herein. None of the authors themselves would be considered intrinsically "comedic," however. For his part, Ango's obsession with "farce" only sustained him for the duration of the 1930s; by the time the war was over, he had devolved into something of a Japanese existentialist, preachy and neurotic and multiply addicted to substances. Dying of a stroke at the ripe age of 48, Ango lived by far the longest of the three. His mentor, Makino Shinichi, had been writing baroque burlesques for almost a decade before "On Farce." Makino's funniest work, like Ango's, all seems to occur right around the early 1930, with 1931 and 1932 marking a highwater, perhaps due to the synergy between these two new friends. As Makino's alcoholism overcame him, he lapsed into a darker sort of humor before hanging himself 1936, at age 40. It is his penultimate work of fiction that I will analyze in my first chapter. Finally Oda Sakunosuke, to whom Ango himself was something of a mentor, would go on to write his comedic masterpiece in the first months of 1945, during the violent climax of World War Two, as if, like the penis of Pynchon's protagonist, his sense of humor was somehow linked to the lethally falling bombs. He would die a year later, from a combination of methamphetamines, chain smoking, and tuberculosis, having effectively written himself to death.

While the narratives of these authors' lives were all distinctly tragic, the works I have chosen are funny in a manner that requires no qualification. No excuses need to be made for the translations—humor is no more sensitive to the process of translation than any other abstraction, despite claims to the contrary, and

²⁵ 牧野信一 (1896 to 1936)

²⁶ 坂口安吾 (1906-1955)

²⁷ 織田作之助 (1913-1947)

the culture of Ango's Japan is much closer to that of my contemporary New York than Rabelais' France or Sterne's England. Humor is humor—much easier to render than love or friendship; and literature, unlike cinema, has the advantage of needing no subtitles: it gets elaborate footnotes, instead.

With a single footnote—or often none at all—we are always capable of understanding the humor of antiquity. In the 1930s, the vast body of humorous writings from the Edo period would have been as accessible to a writer like Ango as the farces of Poe are to me, today. This only made the sudden shift in the focus of Japanese literature all the more poignant, to the curmudgeonly likes of Yanagita Kunio:

With comedy, these days, you find stories that certainly wouldn't be funny to people from the Edo era, much less people from classical times. Sometime you even see an elderly person bitterly asking a group of young people, who are laughing their heads off, "What is so funny?" And yet a joke from the old days, barring language barriers, will always make sense to us.²⁸

This was not a far cry from Ango's own assertion that "our most ancient comedic form, *kyogen*, has always employed this very style of logically farcical structure."

To find out what had changed, Yanigita employed the only research methodology he ever employed: he went to the villages and hamlets of rural Japan, in search of the feudal throwbacks who still laughed like our ancestors did. What is fascinating to me, however, is that Sakaguchi Ango, Makino Shinichi, and Oda Sakunosuke all did the very same thing in their work: the stories you will read are uniformly set in mountains villages, amidst a silly reimagining of what should have been idyllic antiquity. Whereas the literature of the "Erotic/Grotesque/Nonsense" had been set in the bars and dancehalls of Tokyo, these writers turned their collective attention to the rural, in an extremely self-conscious manner. And rather than idealize rural life, or parody it, or even attempt to capture it in mimetic terms, these authors instead took the very act of depicting rural life as their subject. The attempts of literature to make human beings anything *but* stock characters is, in these tales, is the real joke. The thing that is truly brutish and backwards—the awkwardly mechanical clown—is literature, oration, and representation. It is only a shame that, today as much as then, the works of all three of these men are uniformly overlooked in a discussion that paints modern Japanese literature as anything but funny—if only because they were too funny to be invited to the conversation.

²⁸ 柳田国男、「笑いの本願」、『柳田国男全集』、筑摩文庫、1990, vol. 9, pg. 209.

Makino Shinichi: Bergson in the Mirror

Let's begin with a bucolic scene. It's the opening paragraph of a short story called "Devil's Tear Village"²⁹—one of the last things that Makino Shinichi published before hanging himself, in 1936:

The shrieks were shrill and clamorous, their calls clear and piercing, as though coming from directly overhead, rather than from Mampo's chestnut orchard. I threw open the window, wondering aloud about the weather. Though the morning mist still huddled beneath my sill, weak sunlight already filtered through the orchard and onto the far side of the potato field, illuminating the children who ran about gathering chestnuts. I could see the sunlight slowly spread its wings over the potato field, reaching toward my windowsill. The potatoes had been harvested long ago, the empty field an ashen swamp where white fog danced against the sunlight that shimmered through it.

The narrator, in this story, is staying in a wine cellar on the estate of the aforementioned Mampo, where he is assisting the local maskmaker in preparing wooden masks for the upcoming spring festival. From the outset, the language is figurative in a manner atypical of early Showa writing: Makino tropes the sunlight as a winged bird, the potato field a mist-filled swamp. The language is lyrical and lined with auditory, visual, and tactile sensations. As for Mampo, the landlord, he is drawn as the exaggerated caricature of any stingy land baron:

Mampo gave us only the lumber that the cobbler had rejected. When we had asked him the price, he had only grinned and said, "Don't worry about it," only to subsequently demand a percentage of our earnings, which he calculated, along with the rent, as half of our profit—a fact that featured largely in the maskmaker's gripes. Mampo³⁰ was always loath to say anything that could be construed as a clear commitment to anything, and

²⁹ 牧野信一、「鬼涙村」、originally published in Bungei Shunjū (文芸春秋), in 1934. This was the same year that Yanagita began work on his aforementioned treatise on laughter. All citations are from the public-domain version, which due to the efforts of some glorified soul, is available, along with Makino's entire corpus, at <http://smakino.sakura.ne.jp/download.html>. The public availability of these materials is living evidence of the power of the public domain; but to be honest, it also pays poignant testament to Makino's lack of popularity, even today.

³⁰ In Japanese, "Mampo" (萬豊) is a rather bizarre name, looking and sounding more Chinese than anything. It means "extremely rich," and thus seems rather gaudy in a Japanese context, where family names usually involve something more organic, like a tree or a mountain or a river.

when he was alone, sometimes, strolling around, he would break into a strange sort of half-grin, as though he were in on some sort of joke. But that was by no means his natural facial expression, for when he came leaping out from behind the fence to chase the kids from his chestnut orchard, he was a wolf, through and through, leaping over ditches and hedges, three at a time (although when it was his turn to help with village bridgework or construction, he would claim an exemption due to “rheumatism”).

The narrator lives with the maskmaker, who is referred to simply as “the maskmaker,” because he is embarrassed of his name, “Driftboat.”³¹ And much to both of their pleasure, it is their masks which suddenly make an appearance on this peaceful morning scene:

All of a sudden, the kids went squirming under the orchard fence before scattered out over the potato field, as Mampo came barreling after, arms flailing about, unable to decide whom to chase after and screaming every which way:

“Drop them! Drop them right now! I know who you are, you bastards!” The kids, for their part, had gotten together and decided that they would be wise to bring masks with them on their raid of Mampo’s chestnut orchard, and it was now that they pulled these masks over their faces and turned around to sneer at their chaser. A demon, a fool, a fox, a goblin, a shogun: they all spread out around Mampo—who didn’t need a mask to look like red-faced devil, at this point—and begin throwing stones at him from a safe distance, transforming the potato field into a sort of absurd battlefield. “Ahaha, this is rich! This is rich!”

I clapped my hands together and opened my heavy eyelids wide. I was constantly in a strange state of half-inebriation, back then, making the whole scene appear almost dreamlike and surreal to me.

The initial image of Mampo’s estate, which Endo Shinji calls “a gorgeous, Romantic pastoral”³² scene, has been abruptly transformed into a playground, where a slapstick game of tag is being improvised. Tag, in Japan, is known as “playing Devil,” and in this particular game of tag, Mampo very much looks the part.

We have already been told that Mampo’s face, which has now assumed the ruddy grimace of a demon, is naturally inclined to “break into a strange sort of half-grin.” In Bergson’s words, his “whole moral life has crystallised into this particular cast of features.”³³ He is either a leering, self-satisfied bourgeoisie, or else he is an

³¹ 「水流舟次郎」、pronounced 「つるたんじろう」、it literally means “a boat drifting in the current. The way that the last name (“Drift”) and first name (“Boat”) pun on each other is embarrassingly quaint.

³² 遠藤伸治、「鬼涙村論」、『近代文学試論』、vol. 22, pg. 26.

³³ Bergson, Henri, “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,” trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. Opting to use public domain materials,

incensed junkyard dog—the “wolf” that he was depicted as, earlier. Mampo is reduced to a characterization, much like a harlequin, and it is for this reason that even the narrator finds him comic. “Where did the comic come from in this case?” asks Bergson. “It came from the fact that the living body became rigid, like a machine.”

“The literature of Makino Shinichi,” Muta Nobuaki argues, “is a literature of masks, so rife is it with dominoes and facial expressions.”³⁴ This characterization of Mampo is no exception, as Makino’s employs the same technique as Bergson’s caricaturist, in that

he makes his models grimace, as they would do themselves if they went to the end of their tether. Beneath the skin-deep harmony of form, he divines the deep-seated recalcitrance of matter. He realises disproportions and deformations which must have existed in nature as mere inclinations, but which have not succeeded in coming to a head, being held in check by a higher force. His art, which has a touch of the diabolical, raises up the demon who had been overthrown by the angel.

That Bergson detects “a touch of the diabolical” in such characterizations is critical; for nobody was more aware of this than Makino’s good friend and fellow author Sakaguchi Ango:

An author of farce must never have sympathy for his characters (or even himself, for that matter). As a rule, he may use people as wooden statues, as fenceposts—as telephone poles!—but never may he open them up and expose their hearts. The indifferent cruelty of the farcist—the rejection of everything human—this is the golden rule of his sad technique.³⁵

Ango’s description of farce makes a point that is rather applicable to the scene in Mampo’s potato field: it makes us aware of the subtle undercurrent of cruelty, running through the scene—in the way the children all seem to turn on their heels at once, to confront Mampo with a whole array of mythical creatures and comedic grimaces.

“Laughter,” Bergson says, “is incompatible with emotion.” Taken as a whole, the scene is a humorous one—the slapstick discombobulation of an otherwise peaceful morning; but one senses something sinister lurking in the wings, as the masks are turned, in unison, to focus inwardly on Mampo. This subtly disconcerting

when possible, I will be referring to the Project Gutenberg eBook, July 26, 2009 (EBook #4352). Bergson’s book was published in Japanese in 1938, and was an influential part of the intellectual zeitgeist that I am describing, herein.

³⁴ 武田信明、「羞恥する『私』」、as collected in 『宇野浩二と牧野信一』、有精堂出版、1988, pg. 209.

³⁵ 坂口安吾、「FARCE について」、pg. 60

image is something that recalls Izumi Kyōka's Grass Labyrinth,³⁶ and functions in a fundamentally different way from Bergson's comical grimaces. If the harlequin's makeup is meant to render the face absurd, the children here wear their masks ironically; the child doesn't wear the mask to say, "Look, I have turned into a shogun;" but rather, he wears it to say "For all you can tell I am a shogun, even though you know that I am not."

And Mampo has employed this very same method in representing himself. "Don't worry about it," he says to the worried maskmaker, in a way that is as ironic as it is aggressive. This slightly sinister connotation is soon given a full expression, as we learn that Devil's Tear Village is home to a tradition of lynching that they call "hoisting," in which an individual whose behavior is at odds with the general village gestalt is accosted by a masked and anonymous mob.

The narrator describes "hoisting" as follows (the victim, again, is Mampo):

"Mampo got hoisted," he whispered, incredulous.

It was a hazy spring night. I watched as the whole group of them pouring out onto the main road, en masse, with all the momentum of a wild boar. Nobody was so much as even looking in their direction, but my curiosity had been thoroughly piqued, and so I slipped out, determined to solve the mystery of this strange mob, diving into a nearby wheatfield and going belly-down, like a fox, before striking out in a beeline across the field. The road they were on ran in an arc, allowing me to outstrip them on their way to the roadside Hayagriva shrine, behind which I remained in prostrate position, awaiting their arrival with bated breath. Almost immediately, I begin to hear the rumblings of this Secret Organization, which shook the very ground like a cavalry on the charge, until all at once they were right there, in front of me, raising a tremendous cloud of dust in their wake. They moved with remarkable speed, although no one shouted any sort of directions, as they consumed my entire field of vision—the only sound being their eerily synchronized panting, like the chugging of a steam engine or the rhythm of a geminated consonant. I could see now that they were all wearing masks—devils and goblins, warriors, foxes, squinting, pouting harlequins—rendering everyone bizarrely unrecognizable to me. The only exception was one maskless figure, who had been foisted up above them and was flopping about like a carp out of water, grasping wildly at the air and screaming as he writhed: it was none other than Mampo himself. Apparently his apparel had been blown away by the rumpus and tumult, because he was distinctly, poignantly naked, shrieking with every last drop of life left in him. And these shrieks were clearly intended to convey something, but to me they sounded like a tribal language of China or Africa. Or rather, it was the mad shrieking of an animal in its death throws—whether it was begging for salvation or for mercy was anyone's guess—as it built into the shrill caw of a night heron, the kind of scream that can tear a man's throat straight open, a scream that

³⁶ 「草迷宮」、Kyōka's novel contains a wonderfully creepy scene where masked village children approach a traveler on the road.

ripped straight through the mist of a peaceful spring evening. And with each scream, the arms of the mob would hoist Mampo higher and higher up into the air, Mampo striking a different profile against the sky, with each toss. Now he assumed the formidable pose of a killer whale,³⁷ flopping wildly about, now a puppet prancing a Bohemian jig, and now he was hunched over like a mosquito, somersaulting through the air. And then he fell back into their arms and was carried away on that rickety boat, which raced along as though caught in violent current.

This scene employs a similar technique as the opening scene in the potato field, where the idyllic spring evening is “ripped” open by Mampo’s screams. Rather than a devil, however, he is a carp out of water; his screams are those of a night heron. And then Mampo begins to undergo a transformation, appearing first as a manly killer whale, then a baroque puppet, and finally a pitiful mosquito, always frozen in a ridiculous posture against the stars. The progression of this transformation is quite linear: with each toss, he becomes more rigid and inanimate—and therefore comical. This progression is what Bergson sees “at the root of a good many comic suggestions, especially in the coarser forms of the comic, in which the transformation of a person into a thing seems to be taking place before our eyes.”

“We laugh at Sancho Panza tumbled into a bed-quilt and tossed into the air like a football,” Bergson notes. “We laugh at Baron Munchausen turned into a cannon-ball and travelling through space.” And we also laugh at Mampo, stark naked, silhouetted against the stars.

In both cases, he is maskless. He is also naked, and this nakedness is part of the joke. Nakedness, as well, has a part in Bergson’s rubric of the comedic, which require that excessive attention be drawn to the body of a comic subject. In the image of “a person embarrassed by his body, looking around for some convenient cloakroom in which to deposit it,” we see the mechanical and humorous, because our attention is directed to the physicality of the person, rather than what Bergson calls the “moral side.”

What this amounts to is a distinctly pre-modern form of laughter (the comparison to Sancho Panza and Baron Munchausen pays testament to this). If Yanagita Kunio was concerned about our humor not making sense to the people of antiquity, then he would take great solace in the image of Mampo being “hoisted.” Devil’s Tear Village itself seems to have changed little from medieval times—the protagonist seems to be witnessing folklore, firsthand. Yanagita, I assume, would have been furiously taking notes.

But Yanagita would also have been aware of the cruelty of this laughter, as a clear member of the “superiority” school of laughter theorists. Yanagita sees laughter as “the feeling of pleasure and surprise at one’s own superiority, in the light

³⁷ The word is *shachihoko* (鯨虎), which the closest approximation I could find is an Ichthyocentaur. A *shachihoko* is a mythical sea creature with the body of a fish and the head of a tiger. The same character is used for killer whales, ostensibly because they bear a resemblance.

of another's foolish behavior,"³⁸ which makes satisfying the desire for laughter in a humane manner a very complicated problem, indeed. I will address Yanagita's solution to this problem in the following essay, but for now let it suffice to say that the narrator is aware of the fundamental cruelty of laughter, as well, as his fascination turns into unabashed horror and the Secret Organization disappears into the night, their victim still in tow:

For a moment I was overcome with a sense of righteous indignation, and tried to chase after them, only to find that my legs were giant icicles, frozen to the ground, so that I could only stand and stare as they proceeded with their cruel immolation. It was all I could do to bite my lip and shed a tear for that pitiful human figure, which had grown smaller in smaller, in the distance, until it almost appeared to be a little bird, flying through the night air. It was all so bizarre—I felt as though I had been placed in some unknown, barbaric land.

I was later informed that, should the "hoisted" party still be conscious after these repeated hurlings into the air, they are taken to the river outside the village and tossed, arse over elbow, into the water. Members of the Organization always carried out their punishment wearing masks, so victims had no mean of reporting anyone; and since everyone in the village turns a blind eye to the practice, a victim's only recourse, afterward, is to cry themselves to sleep.

According to an essay on "Village Justice" by Takeuchi Toshimi—a contemporary of Yanagita and Makino whose essay was published in 1938, right alongside the Japanese translation of Bergson's "Laughter"—"hoisting" was indeed an actual practice in parts of rural Japan, although it went by a slightly different name:

In villages all over the Shinano region, even up until recent times, you would often hear tales of a practice called "bathing" or "river-tossing," in which a local villager with bad drinking habits or an otherwise contrary attitude is abducted by members of the village co-op and either thrown into a river, or dropped in a large tank, as punishment for their behavior. Oftentimes, rural policemen were the victims of this penal practice.³⁹

The name that Makino gives to the practice—"hoisting" (担ぎ、*katsugi*)—is an interesting choice, assuming that it was his own embellishment. The word does in fact mean to "to hoist," but it also has darker connotations of superstition and paranoia—a "hoister" (担ぎ屋、*katsugiya*) can mean "someone who hoists," as well

³⁸ 柳田国男、「不幸なる芸術」、『柳田国男全集』、筑摩文庫、1990, pg. 406.

³⁹ 竹内利美、「村の制裁」、published in 「社会経済私学」、volume 8, issue 7, October, 1938. As quoted by 和田博文、「視線の回帰」、in 「国語と国文学」 July, 1987.

as “an extremely superstitious person.”⁴⁰ It can also mean “a swindler,” although I’m not sure it would have had this connotation when Makino was writing.⁴¹

Makino, himself, may have harbored a certain fear of this custom, as he was, in fact, a notoriously bad drunk. One is hard up to find a story of his that does not revolve around sort of drunken revelry—the word “saké” appears in 160 of his 190 stories, and among his titles alone we find: “The Saké Theives” (「酒盗人」), “In the City Saloons and the Fisheries of R” (「R 漁場と都の酒場で」), “Dead Drunk Diary” (「痴酔記」), “Tipsiness” (「軽い酔」), and “A Note on Quitting Drinking” (「断酒片」).

In an essay simply titled “My Alcohol” (「僕の酒」), Makino laments:

It’s a bad drink. It’s a hateful drink, a barbaric drink. And while there is nothing wrong with drinking, in and of itself, my own drinking is bad, and hateful—and extremely barbarian. Alas, I cannot count the number of times that I’ve burned with shame and regret, and even lost to very roof above my head, all due to my bad drinking habits.⁴²

The protagonist of “Devil’s Tear Pond,” of course, is living in a wine cellar, where “the very smell of all the sake would make me drunk,” and it isn’t long before he starts to get the sense that he and the maskmaker next in line to be “hoisted:”

At any rate, it was around this time that the winds began to shift, and I slowly got the sense that something terrible was about befall me.
“I heard that this time, on the night of the big dance, they’re gonna hoist the guy from the wine cellar.”

“He’s got it coming—that’s for sure.”

It was as though this general sentiment had taken shape, on the wind, and formed into real human voices, which the wind carried into my ears. I knew that this gruesome lynching might just as soon be carried out before the festival even arrived, in the darkness of night, while their victim slept. It had already happened three times since we had arrived in the village, last spring.

This paranoid wind, which carries the protagonist’s fears into his own ears, adds a dimension of anxiety and suspense to this story—a sense of unease that would not have graced Edo comedy, much less the comedy of antiquity for which Yanagita Kunio so clearly pines. This is symptomatic of the very sea-change that Yanagita, Nakamura, and every other literary historian sees taking place in Japanese literature, around this time.

⁴⁰ From 「御幣担ぎ」、which is the part of Shinto ritual where a priest wields a tree branch with white strips of paper tied to it, in order to purify an area.

⁴¹ In the dark days following World War 2, swindlers and other black market entrepreneurs often walked around with their wares “hoisted” up on their backs.

⁴² 牧野信一、「僕の酒」、originally published in 「モダン日本」、January, 1934.

The object of the narrator's fear is, of course, the institution of "hoisting," with its mob of eerily comedic masks. While these festive masks are inchoately a comedic apparatus, this is clearly the sort of ironic disguise that we saw in to the opening passage. "Here we find that the children's use of masks in the comical, slapstick opening," Moriyasu Toshihisa notes, "was actually foreshadowing the violent lynching to come."⁴³ More than the masks, however, the most disconcerting aspect of the narrator's description of the lynch mob is their "eerily synchronized panting, like the chugging of a steam engine." Like their victim, who is slowly transformed into a wooden puppet with each toss, so the mob itself is strangely mechanized, even though "no one shouted any sort of directions." This steam engine then assumes the form of a "rickety boat," "caught in a violent current," as though to suggest the cold water into which Mampo is about to be hurled. The image is all the more inauspicious in that it rhymes with the maskmaker's hidden identity: Driftboat.

According to our primitive Bergsonian formula, this mechanization of the hoisters ought to be funny, as the human mass is reduced to a rhythmically chugging locomotive, and then a shabby wooden vessel, carried away on the stream of local custom.

But instead it is slightly horrifying, in the same manner that their masks only contribute to the feeling of menace. What theoretically ought to be comic is, to the narrator, so absolutely frightening that he himself becomes comedic, frozen in the grotesque pose of an ice sculpture.

It is here that another layer of ironic subterfuge is introduced, as the maskmaker realizes something important about his unique position, in the community:

Apparently the maskmaker had been feeling out the general mood of the neighborhood, and gave me the following report:

"All the people that are supposed to perform at the autumn festival need to order masks, right? If we are here to make the masks for them, they're up a creek. Plus we've been getting more and more orders lately—and not because the performers need masks—there are really just a bunch people with guilty consciences. They figure that if they wear masks to the festival, they won't have to worry about being hoisted..."

The maskmaker begins to feel that, as the only one with the power to provide these masks, and the protection they offer to people with "guilty consciences," he is above lynching. It doesn't hurt that the maskmaker himself suffers from a guilty conscious—this is why he doesn't like being called by his real name:

"It's a normal name where I'm from in Nara," the maskmaker mumbled, looking away. "It embarrasses me to no end, how my names go together like

⁴³ 守安敏久、「バロックの日本」、国書刊行会、2003, pg. 44. Moriyasu's general thesis is that the combination of humor and grotesque exaggeration in Makino's work makes for a Japanese version of the European "baroque" aesthetic.

some kind of joke. And it's got all sorts of bad karma associated with it, with my past..."

The narrator, for his part, is not at all convinced that he and the maskmaker are not targets. As the sole witness to a previous hoisting, he feels that he has earned the wrath of the Secret Organization; his paranoia is such that he has been "holed up in the wine cellar for ten straight days."

The maskmaker, however, insists that they are safe, and invites the narrator to come deliver their completed masks with him. The narrator is nervous—perhaps the maskmaker only wants him to come because he is afraid to go out alone—but eventually he is convinced by one simple turn of phrase: "Why don't you come out and have a drink? A couple drinks and you'll feel a lot better about all this...."

And so they head out into another beautiful spring evening, the narrator feeling "as though I was walking on clouds, as though some sort of wellspring in my heart had come bursting back to life." He sees the villagers, through their windows, all gathered around their dinner tables, playing with their new masks:

Here we saw a father, wearing a shogun mask and sending his whole family into uproarious laughter; here we saw another family taking turns trying on their new mask, each remarking on its beauty; and here we saw children running around in goblin masks, trying to act tough. The matching kimonos had all been prepared, floats and umbrella made of flowers hung from the walls—looking at any of these homes, it was clear that the festival was approaching.

It is a festive, rural scene that would warm the heart of any folklorist, we finally see the masks in their appropriate role. It is precisely the role that Yanagita Kunio describes in his study of folk maskmaking, which is "to make the young look old, and the men like women," to make one look "as unlike oneself as possible."⁴⁴

When the narrator comments on how overjoyed the kids seem with their masks, the maskmaker points out that "these families can't afford to get their kids toys, so for the kids it's really exciting." Here, as they go about their rounds, is the last time we hear of these masks in action: a little boy, wearing the mask of an old man, chasing giddily after a teenage girl.

Makino is allowing us one last, simple, "premodern" smile.

*

The story ends with drinking. The narrator and maskmaker, on their rounds, have been talked into having drinks with a few of the villagers, all of whom turn out to be rumored "targets" for this spring's hoisting. The first villager, Sugijūrō, has just gotten his new mask, and has some ominous advice for the maskmaker:

⁴⁴ 柳田国男、「仮面に関する一二の所見」、『柳田国男全集』、筑摩書房、1990, vol. 18, page 488.

“You better be watch your own ass, buddy. I heard it from Marujū no Shige that you’ve been playing favorites with all these masks—that some folks are getting better ones than others.”

Sugijūrō took the mask and began inspecting all of its knots and wormholes. “I’m not saying I’ve got a problem,” he continued, “but people are saying things, you know?”

Sugijūrō had, at one point, been mayor of the village, but was the sort of person who never stated their opinions directly, opting instead to express them through hearsay: namely, by gossiping that so-and-so had said something about so-and-so, thus hurting the feelings of two parties at once. And in doing so, he assume the airs of someone who ought to be thanked, for sharing such sensitive information with you. This habit of his had earned him the nickname “The Ingratiator,” as well as a spot of the short list for potential hoisting targets.

As a source of paranoia, as well as one of its prime producers, The Ingratiator adds to the uneasy relationship between fear and humor, in this story. He himself wears the ironic mask of a helpful friend, behind which he hides a much more complicated political reality. And to make him even harder to parse, he is accompanied by the doppelganger of his son, Peepholes:

Sugijūrō’s son Matsujirō, meanwhile, was the spitting image of his father, and had the unfortunate nickname “Peepholes.”

This was probably because Matsujirō’s eyes were weirdly small and round, like they had been bored into his head by a peeping tom—although an alternative explanation was that the adage came from the fact that he liked collect gossip, secretly, and then spread it all over the village, which had made him as unpopular with the villagers as his father, over the years—rumor had it that one of the two of them would be hoisted—and while the two were so identical that the hoisters would run the risk of mistaking father for son, they were both equally worthy of the effort.

Peepholes’ face is, quite literally, mask-like, with his eyes being holes behind which his real face—the face of a peeping tom—lurks. And the uncanny resemblance to his father makes both of them all the more absurd:

Sugijūrō and Matsujirō even spoke to each other like brothers, rather than father and son, constantly whispering into each other’s ears, nodding and sneering at some inside joke, and slapping one another on the back. It was the intimacy of a pair of monkeys. As father and son, one expected a requisite difference in age between them, although they both appeared to be around forty years old, and both had the same habit of mumbling, chewing on their words while little flecks of spittle foamed up at the corners of their mouths.

As paranoia in Devil's Tear Village accrues the critical mass necessary for a witch trial, the narrator's characterizations of the villagers accrues its own critical mass of grotesquery. They are undoubtedly humorous, as characterizations; but one would be hard put not to detect the notes of cruelty in them, as well: "As the narrator reveals the guilt of each villager," Moriyasu Toshihisa notes, "we experience a creepy sort of laughter that places this story in the gruesome world of the 'baroque.'"⁴⁵

Of course, an element of the grotesque is always present in any comedic portrayal, as Bergson is careful to point out: "[the caricaturist] realizes disproportions and deformations which must have existed in nature as mere inclinations... His art, which has a touch of the diabolical, raises up a demon who had been overthrown by the angel."

But there is a clear change in the narrator's tone, in this last chapter of the story: his lens begins to focus in on the tiniest idiosyncrasies in the villagers' faces; he obsesses over noses, ears, and teeth—"those elements of the face which are incapable of movement"; their gestures become clownish and overwrought. His paranoia amplifies the intensity of his critique.

And so when two other villagers with similarly pejorative nicknames show up—"Bullshit Tada" and "Snapping Turtle"—his descriptions assume an entirely cartoon quality:

As for Bullshit Tada, he had a way of laughing ("ahh haa haa") in which he would bare his yellow, horselike teeth shortly before breaking into a series of belches ("braaack braaack") that boiled up from his diaphragm like steam, and about which he hardly seemed apologetic, dismissing the whole phenomenon with a casual, "I got me an excess of stomach acid" while he rubbed his molars with his thumb. His nose was the classic pomegranate: not only ruddy in hue but all aglimmer with grease and pimples, so that when he opened his mouth, the butt of this protrusion would clench like an angry fist, his nostrils flaring wide on either side. One moment he would appear to be laughing, only to suddenly stop and stare condescendingly at you, as though you were a blight upon the earth.

Bullshit Tada's visage is not only completely masklike in its grotesquery, but also in its guised jumps between laughter and condescension. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the narrator is now drunk, but to him the villagers all suddenly appear much more guilty than he:

No wonder these guys would be on the docket for a hoisting—they all shared a level of insincerity, in word and deed, that none of the other villagers could even come close to matching. And even more than their awful behavior, what made them even clearer targets was the sensations adversity, and even resentment, that they evoked, with their mere presence. I could understand how seeing someone like Bullshit Tada or Snapping Turtle

⁴⁵ 守安敏久、「バロックの日本」、国書刊行会、2003, pg. 43.

hoisted in the air, screaming like a dying animal, would be absolutely hilarious—and the image of that father-son duo of peeping toms being juggled in the sky like a pair of beanbags, and the smile that it would bring to my face—the whole image was so appealing that I stopped listening to their conversation at all, and let myself be taken away by this silly fantasy.

The narrator begins to smile, as he pulls farther and farther away from the actual conversation at hand. The villagers that he has been caricaturizing have now been reduced to a pair of beanbags, juggled by some invisible clown. All the narrator sees of the villagers, sitting around the table, is their facial expressions: “mouths puckered, or surprised, or clenching their jaws.” They have formed an anonymous body, with grotesque parts protruding haphazardly, here and there. In Bakhtinian terms they form a “body of mixed parts and the strangest anatomical fantasies.”⁴⁶

His revelry, at last, is interrupted by his companion:

“So what do you think?” the maskmaker whispered. “You think it would be poor form to settle the bill for the masks? God, I hope they didn’t plan on getting out of paying for the masks by buying drinks...”

“Don’t ask me,” I ignored him. I was too busy gawking at the fact that so many horrible people were all gathered here, in one place, bragging about themselves. If the Organization were to show up right now, they’d be able to clean house in one masterful stroke—and what a gorgeous sight that would be. Snapping Turtle had his head cocked to one side, feigning ignorance, until some subtle change in the maskmaker’s aspect caught his attention, causing him to jump up and refill the maskmaker’s glass:

“Please, please—take your time, settle in. You don’t want to risk going home all by yourself. We should all go home together, behind the safety of our new masks...”

“Aah haa haa,” Bullshit Tada burst out laughing. “I dare any of you to try and get home alone!”

And then he abruptly stopped laughing to stare, intently, at the maskmaker. I couldn’t bear to watch, any longer, so I let my eyes settle on a mirror that hung from the pillar behind Snapping Turtle. And as I looked, I felt a sensation akin to cold water being poured over my back, causing me to freeze in place. I had seen myself, in the mirror: the picture of a man who blows off friendly strangers, a man with the cold, self-obsessed visage of a crow or a goblin or both—and I could only gape. I had no real jaw, to speak of, while my eyes and nose and mouth were all disproportionately large; and I never seemed to move my head, only furtively shifting my eyes left and right, one of which was small and slightly twitching, as was the corresponding side of my mouth. A bushel of nosehair thrust its way out of

⁴⁶ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984, Pg 347.

my nose and down against my upper lip, which rose up like a dike, and beneath which my lower lip cowered—in spite of my repeated efforts stretch it out, like a rubber band. For a while now, Bullshit Tada had been looking over in my direction, from time to time, looking me up and down with an expression of pure scorn on his face; and I now realized that this was no simple facial tick, on his part. He was simply unable to tolerate my condescending face. And the way I spoke: it was a frantic falsetto, in the abrupt manner of someone who has not been heeding a single word of the conversation at hand.

And as I finally, truly looked at myself objectively in the mirror, the clearer it became that this asshole in the mirror was—more than Snapping Turtle or Bullshit Tada or any of them—the most loathsome, spiteful person in the room, and that he ought to be the first in line to be hoisted. As I imagined this man in the mirror, shrieking madly as he flew through the air, I experienced a feeling of pleasure that was unparalleled—a sense of joy that came from somewhere deep within me.

It is this mirror, at the end of “Devil’s Tear Village,” that turns the entire narrative on its head. The pervasive paranoia that had painted every last villager in the manner of a Rabelaisian grotesque has suddenly been pointed back upon the narrator—as when the children all turn around, in unison, to leer at Mampo from behind their masks. The mirror forces the author to see himself not in the heroic terms of the emblematic *watakushi*, but as a condescending crow, speaking in frantic falsetto. The real joke is not on Mampo, or the villagers, or even the barbaric institution of hoisting. The joke is on the narrative itself: the pastoral setting is actually Salem, Massachusetts; the playful masks are actually nefarious disguises; the narrator’s humorous depictions are little more than the shifty defense-mechanisms of a paranoid little man.

If only for a split second, literature has become a character in the comedy. The narrator recognizes his own dislikable aloofness, but more importantly he realizes that he’s been telling the tale all wrong. If the mechanizations of literature were guilty of villainizing and hoisting Mampo, then the narrator was party to it. The narrator’s face is always masked, from the reader; we only see it by chance, by some accidental glance in a barroom mirror.

Hatori Tetsuya, in his Freudian analysis of Makino’s canon, comes to the following conclusion about this scene:

Self-deprecation is one of the fundamental components of any work of modern Japanese literature containing some level of humor—Soseki’s *I am a Cat* being the exemplary work of this sort. The modern era demanded, of its authors, an intense level of meticulous self-scrutiny—a level of self-scrutiny under which any sensitive writer would to become acutely aware of their own shortcomings. Such literature is the inevitable outcome.

But the simple fact is that most of these sensitive and self-deprecating writers, upon turning their relentless gazes upon the world at large, largely forgot all about their own inadequacies, and ended up going after the rest of

the world with the same oppressive attitude. Authors such as these needed to be chastised. And so this literature of self-deprecation turned the satire of oppressive authors back on themselves, in a comical fashion.

That is the general picture of how it worked for most authors—but with Makino, there is none of the satire. What little you get is very weak. Makino's protagonists were always very unconventional characters, and so inevitably there is a certain amount of satire regarding all things conventional—but this satire is by no means central. What does this mean?⁴⁷

When satire is no longer the central engine of a story, he asks, to what do we attribute the humor?

The answer has to do with the mirror. At the moment that the narrator is completely derailed from his own narrative by a fleeting glance of the real world, we readers are also startled, fooled as we are by our own reading habits. We see ourselves as complicit in the same sort of literary “hoisting”; the snarling aloofness of his mug is our own eagerness to laugh at the creepy, vindictive traditions of these country people. We realize, with a jolt, that we the bloodthirsty readers deserve to be hoisted before anyone else.

And the tale could have ended in this cathartic moment. As a reader, one wants it to. We have all been enlightened as to our inadequacies, and would now like to enjoy a good self-deprecating laugh along with the narrator. How cleverly we have all been tricked into admitting our shortcomings! We were a fool—a poor, lamentable harlequin!

But instead, the narrator snaps immediately back into character, turning his oppressive gaze upon the maskmaker.

And then I shifted my glance over to the maskmaker, who sat next to me, flat-faced and slant-eyed like a fox, desperate to get his money and go back home, but too cowardly to simply come out and say so, impatiently trying to get me to say something for him, staring impetuously at the side of my face. I realized, all at once, that he deserved to be targeted for hoisting, with his stingy, passive-aggressive attitude—and for once, I didn't feel like defending him.

So I simply said:

“Hey, Driftboat. I'm going to stay here a while longer. If you're so anxious to get home, why don't you just go on ahead?”

“Drift Boat?” Bullshit Tada burst out laughing. “Ahahaha! What a perfect name for you!”

⁴⁷ 羽鳥徹哉、「牧野信一の文学と笑い」、collected in 『笑いと創造』、勉強出版、1998, vol 3. Hatori goes on to conclude that Makino uses humor order to overcome the complicated feelings he had for his mother, who he saw as an obstacle to his sexual freedom (this is somehow construed to be “Nietzschean laughter”). W

Snapping Turtle, meanwhile, was cupping a hand to one ear and saying “Huh? What was that?”

Then Bullshit Tada started to stand up, as though he was going to the bathroom. I could hear him uttering the following words:

“You act like hot shit, but you ain’t even paying attention, too busy making fun of all of us. If you’re so in love with yourself, why don’t you go home and fawn over yourself in the mirror—you can pull on your goddamn lip all you want, there. And you better fucking hurry up, cause I’m about ready to hoist you myself, just to hear you squeal...”

Thus the tale ends; our chance for catharsis has passes, the humor replaced with threats of violence.

So it is quite understandable, that a critic like Nakamura Mitsuo or Honda Kenshō might fail to find the humor in this. Even more so because this was one of the last things that Makino wrote before hanging himself from in a cellar not unlike the one from this story. Kaneko Masao sees “Devil’s Tear Village” as a reflection of “Makino’s paranoia toward the complicated realities that pressed in on him, as his fiscal problems increased.”⁴⁸ “What is this strange feeling?” asks Yanagisawa Kyōko. “This weird feeling I get that death is right there at the doorstep, whenever I read the late works of Makino Shinichi?”⁴⁹

There is real, genuine anger, in this penultimate outburst. It’s startling. The violent threat is directed toward the narrator, but this time we can’t laugh at it. For the first time in the story, the effect is downright chilling. The same mirror that served to reflect Makino’s self-deprecating laughter onto us somehow makes this threat register as though were spoken directly toward us, the laughers: “Who are you to laugh at me,” this country bumpkin asks. “When you’re too busy laughing to even understand?”

Hopefully, we readers are circumspect enough to pause here, taking a moment to recover, before enjoying a second laugh at our own expense.

⁴⁸ 金子昌夫、「牧野信一と小田原」、小田原ライブラリー、2002, pg. 63.

⁴⁹ 柳沢孝子、「青ざめた夜の夢」、『宇野浩二と牧野信一』、236

Sakaguchi Ango: Of *manzai* and *banzai*

Having once heard it said that all comedy has its roots in the bottomless despair of primordial man, as he journeys down that unnervingly and even painfully lonely path, through the endless fog of the impermanence that plagues all things, I penned a tale entitled “On Comedy,”⁵⁰ which was an expository narrative called the village in which I lived, a village where things like “comedy” and “tragedy” still exist in their inchoate states, where one can neither laugh nor cry, but finds oneself so horrified by the grandeur of the universe and the pathetic pettiness of existence that one can only sing hymns of tribute and praise.⁵¹

There is perhaps no more definitive a trait of Makino Shinichi’s literature than its rural landscape. More than alcoholism or mirrors or masks or even Greek philosophy, the mountains and seascapes of Odawara occupy a position at the center of his work. In the essay “On Comedy,” described above, Makino pays tribute to this fact by playing with Aristotle’s notorious etymological musings on the word “comedy”:

The outlying villages, they say, are by them called *komai*, by the Athenians *demoi*: and they assume that comedians were so named not from *komazein*, ‘to revel,’ but because they wandered from village to village (*kata komas*), being excluded contemptuously from the city.⁵²

Tellingly, Makino’s canon consisted largely of musings on Greek philosophy wanderings between the villages of and hamlets of the Shinano mountains—it was the only setting about which he was truly comfortable writing. It is for this reason that “the majority of Makino’s works are set in mountain villages,” writes Kaneko Masao, “including his most representational and influential works.” The word “village” (*kata-komas*) alone appears in the titles of several of his stories,⁵³ the word some 1,316 times in his fiction alone, and the theme almost universally:

⁵⁰ 牧野信一、『喜劇考』. Published in 「作品」、May, 1930.

⁵¹ 牧野信一、『真夏の夜の夢』. Published in 「時事新報」、August, 1931.

⁵² Aristotle, *Poetics*. Translated by S. H. Butcher and available at the Internet Classics Archive (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>).

⁵³ *Spring in F. Village, The Stoics of the Village, Devil’s Tear Village, A Village with a Waterfall, The Village of the Gorge*

All the way back in the early ages of Greek culture, the etymology of the word *komoidas*—meaning “comedic” or “comedian”—had already been traced to the word *kata-komas*, which meant “wandering from village to village,” and given birth to the word *komazein*, which means “drunken revelry.”

In bed, one morning, in a shack in the village, I had a vision of these three words. And ever since then, I’ve been beset by all kinds of wild fancies about the relationship between these morphemes, so that at last I myself am in a constant state of fleeing from one village to the next, in pursuit of a desperate drunkenness, frequently clutching my chest in pain.

This was not an inaccurate portrait of Makino’s life at the time, which involved frequently relocating his home, either due to fiscal difficulties or the repercussions of drunken behavior. Like Yanagita Kunio—and like Aristotle himself—Makino ventured out into the country, in order to locate the roots of the comedic. But to do so would require him to forgo parodying the people of the villages he visited, or ironicizing them, or idealizing them in the way that Yanagita was inclined to do.

In the July, 1931 issue of *Bungei Shunjū* (文芸春秋), Makino Shinichi published a brief, rather bizarre, but decidedly effusive literary review. His subject was a short story by a hitherto unheard-of author named Sakaguchi Ango, who had published a short story named “Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus” in the journal he helped edit. Makino’s unbridled praise proved to be the catalyst for young Ango’s career, and the two quickly became close drinking companions.

The review begins with the following description of Ango’s story:

It is an outlandish verbal astrakhan, fermented in the pessimistic provinces of the baroque: it should infuriate you, and yet you find yourself incapable of fury; you want to laugh, and yet it is far too idiotic to laugh at, either; and so you cock your head to one side, perplexed, and continue reading.⁵⁴

This is typical Makino fare: as flamboyant as it is enigmatic. As with any adulatory peer-review, you get the sense that the Makino is describing himself as much as the actual peer in question: “Is not the narrator a monster,” he asks, with a flourish, “—a monster possessed with passions abounding with grotesque mirages?”

The fact was that grotesque mirages were much more the providence of Makino Shinichi than Sakaguchi Ango, whose prose rarely employed metaphor in the extreme manner that Makino did. What the two authors did share, aside from a taste for a drink, was a deeply ironic sense of humor, which flourished during these “unfunny” years of the early nineteen thirties.

Like Makino’s comic work, Ango’s takes place entirely in the provinces, amongst the *kata-komas* of the countryside. His stories of the period are also Makino-esque in that they take drunken *komazein* as a central mechanism of their plots. His characters, like Makino’s, are entirely Bergsonian in that the narrator

⁵⁴ 牧野信一、『「風博士」』。Published in 「文芸春秋」、July, 1930.

seems to take pleasure in objectifying them, tossing them around and crashing them into things. Everyone is in a constant state of either panic or bafflement.

The element of the baroque or grotesque, however, is completely absent from Ango's farces. What we get instead is a sort of grotesquerie of diction, awkwardly mechanical turns of phrase that sound as though they were translated from Chinese. Ango's dialogues are semantically overwrought, as well: every trivial assertion a grand intellectual pronouncement, each speaker fancying themselves a grand reincarnation of Demosthenes—the narrator most of all.

Because the primary device of the comedy is in the very rhythm of the language, the sort of "close-reading" performed in the last chapter seems a little too intrusive for this particular text. The narrator is, himself, extremely self-consciousness about the tale's presentation, and so I have opted to defer to him in the following, delegating my notes and interpretation to footnotes, so that the reader may become enjoy the humor of the text firsthand.

A Village In Uproarⁱ

There were two well-established, aristocratic families in the village. And unfortunately both of these families – well, actually, they were the only two aristocratic families in the village. But it just so happened that on the morning of the Coldwater family's wedding, the Coldfield's elderly matron passed away. She had died; there was no choice in the matter; it was not as though somebody had engineered the event. I would like to be clear about this fact: In that peaceful little hamlet, not a soul harbored any sort of animosity toward another. As my astute readers have undoubtedly surmised, the suggestion that any sort of trouble could ever exist between the Coldwaters and the Coldfields is clearly a seditious misconception, and so I will leave it at that.ⁱⁱ

The head of the Coldfield household was still in his early twenties, and a notorious pushover. His lack of spine was so pronounced, in fact, that before his mother could finish exhaling her penultimate breath he was already sweating over how today (of all days!) was supposed to be a joyous one for the entire village. Namely, he was preoccupied with the thought of Mr. Coldwater – who was the father of the bride, and a fiercely superstitious old codger.

Having brooded over the implications of all of this, Hanzaemon Coldfield suddenly turned around and – in a timid little voice – summoned his wife:

“Hey Meenay!”

Meenay, for her part, could immediately infer from the color of her husband's face, from the slope of his shoulders, from the odd quiver of his lips, that he was even now attempting to arrive at some monumental decision.

“Meenay...” he finally managed. “I know you're the expert on formalities and such, but I'll be darned if I ain't heard of good folks like us delaying their funerals a day or two...”

Being the shrewd woman that she was, Meenay immediately formed a rather negative idea about her husband's intentions. And for the most part, she was right on the money. You see, Hanzaemon Coldfield was a feckless drunk. In particular, he was fond of the free beverages that were served at festive occasions in and around the village. And perhaps even more telling was the fact that Hanzaemon, who otherwise possessed no redeeming qualities to speak of, was in fact capable of performing one party trick: a weird “Hand Dance” that he would exhibit, from a sitting position, at social gatherings – the exhibition of which was the pride and joy of his life.ⁱⁱⁱ Yes, in that glowing moment when the entire audience's applause came washing over his body – without this moment to look forward to in life, Hanzaemon would have long since found a rope and “made himself taller,” as they say. Whoops – I apologize. It seems I've employed a vulgarity with which many of my readers may not be familiar.^{iv}

“Are you out of your mind?” Meenay pinned him with a frightening stare. “Put your hand to your heart, sir! Are we not more than mere ‘good folk?’”

Being the pushover that he was, Hanzaemon caved in sans protest.

Now, down in the village, the general consensus was that this was all the doctor's fault. And this wasn't a critique of the doctor's medical competence. Of course, this particular doctor was already notorious for the damage that he could do with a needle; and it was said that no matter how fevered a patient might be, amidst their mumbling and hallucinations, they would still attempt to wiggle and writhe away from the doctor's syringe. But this sort of thing wasn't the problem in question. The problem was his mouth.^v

Specifically, even as the aforementioned dialogue was being performed back at the Coldfield manor, news of their loss had already infected the entire village. Had it not been for the doctor's mouth, perhaps even the spineless Hanzaemon, with his inordinate passion for drinking and weird hand-dances, might have been able to whimper and gripe and push the funeral service back one short, crisp autumn day.

*

Of course, nobody was more scandalized by this news than the Shaolin monk. This was because, by any estimate, nobody had a larger stake in the evening's festivities than he. I probably needn't tell you that he was, in fact, a hopeless drunk. And perhaps nobody was more integral in this sort of ceremony than the bonze – a position which the monk in question liked to exploit in order to rustle up an "alm" or two of saké by dropping subtle hints like:

"By golly – this is quite the delicious sacrament you're serving, here. Alas, it seems that by the irony of karma I am destined never to taste this particular saké again..."^{vi}

Of course, nobody in the village was more generous a host than the superstitious Mr. Coldwater. So much so that the mere thought of reading sutras all night at the Coldfields' funeral – well, as my astute readers have doubtlessly deduced, Coldfield Hanzaemon was unrivaled, in the annals of history, for stinginess. Fie! Fie upon't! For curséd was the Shaolin monk who, bound by the incomprehensible rules of custom, was obliged to forgo a wedding bacchanal in order to read sutras all night at a wake! Indeed, one can only imagine the anguishing depression into which our monk immediately fell.^{vii}

Born with an aversion to anguish of any sort, the monk found it impossible to disguise the throes of angst that even now wracked his ample frame. Namely: he commenced to beat his breast with powerful hands, thrusting his tongue outward from his mouth, as though desperately wrestling with the karmic implications of his plight.

And then, finally, after a great deal of this strenuous effort, some sudden enlightenment sent the monk into an abrupt little victory dance. His whole body had grown lighter, with enlightenment. Not wasting a moment, he summoned his apprentice, and announced:

"Numskull! You, there! Sit your ass down. And be glad. For tonight is be your first night in the big leagues! (At this point the apprentice allowed himself

an enthusiastic grin.) I've got some really important business to attend to, tonight. So what I'm going to do is this: I'm going to pay my respect to the Coldfields this afternoon – and *you*, my friend, will have the honor of taking my place as the head monk for the all-night ceremonies. Well? How 'bout it? Yeah? What? You too excited to talk or something?"

The apprentice in question was only fourteen. And that was fourteen years since being born – not fourteen years of Buddhist apprenticeship. *Those* years he could count on one hand. Nevertheless he was a clever boy, and his grin quickly dissolved into the opposite thereof. He furrowed his brow, and began kneading one cheek through his sleeve, as though deep in thought.

"Gosh, I don't even know my sutras or nothing..."

"Fear not! For you may read them out of your prayer book!"

"But I haven't really learned to read yet..."

"Numskull!" the monk shouted, although he immediately realized that the situation at hand was too serious to allow for anger. Instead, he assumed a pedantic air:

"It is the fate of all apprentices, to recite sutras that they themselves have yet to memorize. Ahem. Um, nevermind – just keep repeating the sutras you've already memorized. Ack! We don't have time for this! Ack! Here – hold these robes!"^{viii}

Thus screaming, the monk began frantically changing his robes.

"Look, kid. Tonight you get to eat like a king. Don't worry about cooking dinner or nothing."

And leaving these words of wisdom in his wake, the monk went scrambling out the temple door. And in the next moment – the very next fateful moment! – an elderly councilman named Gonjū came bursting through that very same door.

"Where is the monk! This is an emergency! Ack Ack Ack! The entire village is in danger! Mooonk! Where are you! Get me a glass of water! No! Make it tea!"^{ix}

The apprentice, by now, had completely seen through the monk's little plot, and it took him no time at all to leak the entire ill-conceived scheme to Gonjū. The apprentice's explanation of the monk's sudden disappearance registered immediately in Gonjū's visage, his surprise melting into unbridled fury:

"What!? Do you jest!?"

And then, without so much as an "Ack," Gonjū went barreling out the door, in hot pursuit.

It is here, in a state of suspense, that we must take leave of this particular part of our tale, so as to eavesdrop upon the uproar in a different area of the village.

*

It was around ten in the morning. An hour which, in the villages scattered throughout the mountains of our empire, was so pristinely tranquil that its mere evocation is enough to lend us a certain joy. But we mustn't forget that it was autumn, and that the mountains, along with the tiered patty at their feet, were even now stained with yellow and crimson, the empty tree branches grasping at an icy sky. One might even be inclined to describe the scene as "stark," although the countryside is always too peaceful to warrant a word like that. A distant rainstorm might come rumbling over the mountains, rustling the dry leaves, only for its low-slung, black clouds to suddenly split apart and reveal the deep blue of an autumn sky. And while the side of one mountain briefly gleamed with the light of a dull autumn sun, another rainstorm would come frantically flailing over another. That is the hour I am speaking of. The very hour in which our hardworking farmer Bumpkiss^x was tending to his three-tiered patty at the feet of Mount Tranquility. When suddenly, from the bottom of the valley, a dark mass came shooting straight up the road like a lit fuse, before tackling Bumpkiss at the waist, sending the both of them tumbling soundlessly into the patty, in one discombobulated heap. The wind had been thoroughly knocked out of Bumpkiss, and so he decided to just let himself pass out, beneath that gorgeous autumn sky.

But he was interrupted by a voice:

"Poppy! Sorry if I done hurt you, poppy! When everyone hurts together, the hurt gets spread around – the whole village is in an uproar!"

Yes: it was none other than Bumpkiss' son Gumpkiss, consoling him in his agony.

These painful throes of revolution, in which Bumpkiss was even now writhing, had already made their way beneath the newly-harvested straw roofs, past the lumberjacks' shacks, and over the narrow mountain passes with the haste of electricity. And this electricity carried a single telegram: "Oh what shall become of our village?" The entire population had transformed into a veritable choir, joining in unison to send one seismic groan up from the soil: "Oh what shall we do? Oh what shall we ever do?" And thus the whole village became part of the same nervous vibration, pacing and halting, staring holes into walls, shivering like funeral pyres, unable to shake their collective anxiety. Thus it was no surprise when all the possums in the hills and the crows in the forest suddenly took flight from their respective nests, en masse, having sensed something amiss through that honed sixth sense unique to animals.

I trust that my benevolent readers are even now shedding a tear over our villagers' plight, and indeed these poor folk were even now being faced with the loss of such delicacies as could only be savored once in a year – nay, oftentimes even less frequently than that! And what a tragedy that would be! Were the villagers to attempt to attend the wedding on their way home from the funeral, why certainly the superstitious Mr. Coldwater would have his servants beat them back with clubs, even if it meant killing them. And likewise if anyone from the wedding party were to attempt to contaminate the sanctity of the Coldfields' funeral with their drunken presence, then the hysteric Meenay would

doubtlessly send someone to settle all pending debts before the corpse was even cold in the ground, and a whole army of debt collectors would be making their home in the village by first snowfall.

At some juncture, an anonymous party called for everyone to gather in the school gymnasium. These words proved to be inspired wisdom. For all the hundreds of villagers (there were actually only two-hundred thirty six of them, by official consensus) collectively took these words to heart (or rather, to their stomachs!) and went dashing through the rainstorm with bloodshot eyes, as though the storm had never even happened, converging in one great body upon the local Halls of Learning. From the peaks of a nearby mountain, they would have appeared as a farm of ants: moving silently, thoughtlessly, efficiently toward their shared destination. They were the very example of the “punctuality” which is so oft impressed upon people much like themselves. For the entirety of these grey and black dots that came blurting from the hillocks and valleys of that village had, within five minutes time, entirely disappeared into the school! Not a soul in the village was visible from outside that gymnasium. All that remained behind was a bleak autumn day.^{xi}

Now, the day in question happened to be a Sunday. And Sunday, of course, is a day on which the fine educators of our children are by nature desperate to avoid the schoolhouse; and yet these selfsame educators were even now just as desperately hurrying toward the school – what a sight to see!

When at last all the villagers had gathered in the gymnasium, a hush fell over the entire group, as the village elders emerged from their conference in the teachers’ office, their faces like bronze deathmasks in the fading autumn light. The first person to ascend the podium was, of course, the school principal. He was bright red with anxiety, his entire body shaking slightly. To some extent, he was always like this; but it was also due to the fact that, while he didn’t have any students from the Coldwater family, there was at least one Coldfield in all of his classes, and was therefore obliged to honor this relationship by ordering all the teachers to attend the funeral – indeed, to the funeral they must repair! The circumstances demanded it!

“Ladies and Gentlemen! What can I say! (Here he promptly began pounding the lectern so hard that he even startled himself, and took a moment to recover.) Indeed! What can one say! (Here he took a sip of water.) She has died! Is this not shocking?! (Inadvertently shocked by his own proclamation, he shot a desperate glance over at the village elders. The elders, for their part, were already so worked up by the principal’s oration that they could only stare back at him wildly. Frustrated, he attempted to subdue his panic by closing his eyes and shouting:) My beloved Ladies and Gentlemen!! How can it be, that a person could die on a wedding day?! It cannot be! Be, it cannot! And yet it is! Is, it is! Are you not scandalized?! You are scandalized! I ask you! Do you wish to die on a wedding day?! You most certainly do not! Indeed, you most certainly do not wish to die on any given day! But she has died! Is this not frightful strange?! Frightful strange, this is! I am aghast! Thirty-plus years of studious scholarship

could not suffice to prepare me for an event of this magnitude! How could I be prepared?! Nevertheless, ladies and gentlemen! This is indeed the sort of happening that could happen but once in thirty-plus years! How could something like this happen, in only thirty-plus years!? I do not know! Notwithstanding, ladies and gentlemen! Since the dawn of man, has such a happening ever happened?! Ack! Ladies and Gentlemen! Japan is in danger! Even now, the nation of Japan is in terrible peril!"^{xii}

At this news, the entire audience panicked. Of course, nobody was more panicked than the principal himself. Overcome by the dramatic conclusion at which he himself had arrived, he clutched his chest, tumbling from the podium into a nearby chair, and collapsing into sobs. Yes, the magnitude of events was such that even the proud principal had been overcome by emotion before he could dispense any practical advice. The audience began to murmur nervously. A national crisis of unprecedented magnitude was simply too daunting a task for two hundred and thirty six heads to handle. It was too daunting a task to even bother with for very long, and their attention soon returned the village crisis at hand.

It was at this juncture that an artsy-looking schoolteacher climbed up onto the podium, radiating calm. His serene expression, in the midst of the crisis, was shocking in and of itself, and seeing him up on the podium like that sufficed to evoke a sense of purpose and confidence in the audience.

"Everybody! (He spoke casually.) As we have all heard from the principal, today's events represent an unprecedented crisis to our village. But it is an indisputable fact that old Matron Coldfield has passed away on the very day of a wedding, as it is a fact that there will be a wedding and a funeral today. The problem facing us now is how to manage having a wedding and a funeral on the same day. (Here the audience became worried, all over again.) But I have an idea, Ladies and Gentlemen! (He assumed a more formal tone.) A wedding, of course, is a service honoring both a man and a woman, and therefore presents no gender-based distinctions; however, the recently departed Matron Coldfield was the mother of Hanzaemon, as well as the wife of the late Ichizaemon, and therefore I would like to establish, as a matter of fact, that she was indeed a woman. Thus, in the wholesome custom of our venerable nation, we must require that all women attend the all-night funeral services. Why must the women attend the funeral, when the dearly departed happens to be a woman? Namely because, had she been a man, the men of the village would have been required to attend. And had she indeed been a man, the men of the village doubtlessly would have attended the funeral! Notwithstanding, she was a woman. And therefore the women must attend. In short, all women need to attend the all-night funeral services, while the men shall repair to the wedding."

And having come to this conclusion, he stepped down from the podium, even as the men in the audience began slapping their foreheads, overjoyed, erupting into unanimous applause. But before the teacher had even gotten one foot off the podium, the lectern was assaulted by a whole legion of

schoolmistresses. Cursing the male teacher aloud, they all began making speeches at once, a conflict of interest that quickly devolved into an all-out shoving match. At once, everyone in the gymnasium was on their feet, and for a moment a scene of extreme savagery seemed certain to break out. Who knows what would have happened, had the wise old doctor not arrived at that very moment?

Now, the doctor (yes: this is the selfsame doctor who had instigated all of this trouble) has hitherto been painted as a sort of traitor, a Benedict Arnold brought doom upon an entire village with his careless tongue. But I would like to clarify that he was by no means a bad human being. True, there was the matter of his injections. But that was a problem with the injections, themselves, and not a matter of any malicious intention on his part. Aside from the injections, he was an utterly innocent man. One might even describe him as a saint. Sure, he'd given up on the study of medicine, but he was earnestly determined to serve some non-medical purpose to the village. And so it was that this hero raised both his hands in the air to calm the tumultuous masses, before climbing up onto the podium. With the adept hands of an artisan, he carefully peeled the skirmishing schoolmistresses apart. There was something so spiritually appealing about these solemn hands that the wild Amazonesses atop the podium immediately released each other and relaxed into submissive positions.

And with a shake of the hips, the doctor went into his oration:

"Everyone! I beg you to quiet down! With your permission, I—a licensed physician—would like to have the floor! Excuse me! A certified doctor would like your attention, and so you must quiet down! You may all assume a calm demeanor! (I should be noted that the doctor did not actually possess a physician's license; he merely said this in order to calm everyone down.) As a doctor, you are obliged to respect me. This is because medicine is a noble science. Therefore you must respect practitioners of medicine! None of you are practitioners, and therefore you are not noble. But I, your humble servant, am indeed a practitioner, and therefore my humble words must be believed.^{xiii} And so (He raised his voice again.), according to the powers invested in medicinal science, we have proven beyond a doubt that Matron Coldfield has come back to life for one more day! (It took a moment for these words to actually register with the audience.) Ladies and Gentlemen! The extremely noble auspices of medicine have shown, beyond dispute, that human beings are often wont to fall into a state of suspended animation! This morning, Matron Coldfield passed away. This is a fact. And now, she is alive again. This is likewise factual. And tomorrow, she will die again. This, as well, could not possibly be anything other than fact. Ladies and gentlemen, medicine is noble and therefore it is criminal to doubt that which is medicinal. Inasmuch, practitioners of medicine are to command your respect. The recently departed has delayed her departure, for one more day! The funeral must be postponed until tomorrow night!"

I think that I am justified in saying that nobody, in the history of Japan, has ever experienced the sheer nobility of medical science so acutely as those

villagers on that day. Some of them sobbed. Others became dizzy. The school principal simply grasped the doctors hand and wept aloud:

“Oh noble science! Respect be with thee!”

Half-crazed with joy, the villagers rushed to the Coldfield manor to inform them of their matron’s sudden resuscitation – but how would Hanzaemon deal with this sudden prognosis?

*

“Hey Meenay!”

It was some time later that Hanzaemon noticed the commotion outside the gate, and called his wife.

“Meenay! They can’t be here for the funeral already, can they? If they expect us to feed them dinner... well, I suppose we could throw something together, but... Meenay?”

“And how should I know?” Meenay snapped, as the commotion began to spill out into their garden. “Do I look like the man of the house? Whether or not we feed them up to your discretion, and your discretion alone.”

Some of the people outside were shouting “Banzai!”^{xiv} Others yelled “Huzzah!” Others employed slogans that, under the circumstances, were even harder to understand, such as “Oh noble science!” and “Our blessed medical practitioner!”

This last slogan was particularly confusing to Hanzaemon, as the medicinal sciences had never once, in the history of that village, achieved anything remotely noble. The only explanation that he could think of was that they had gotten the wedding party mixed up with the funeral. The whole day had been rather offputting. And when at last he summoned the courage to crack open the front door and stick his head outside, he was startled to find himself suddenly bathed in the adulatory cheers of the crowd that had gathered there.

Hanzaemon grabbed the nearest man to him and said:

“I don’t really get what’s going on here, with all this hollering ‘Huzzah’ and ‘You’re alive’ and whatnot. Are ya’ll huzzahing me just for being alive? Cuz if that’s the case I got news for you – I ain’t nearly as happy about it as ya’ll are.”

“I won’t argue with you, there,” said one of them. “There ain’t a damn thing to celebrate about you being alive. We’re all just happy that your ma came back to life! Medicine is a damned noble science, after all – ain’t that right, Doc?”

“Indubitably!” the doctor stepped forward. “Your dearly departed mother has delayed her inevitable departure for one day! You must trust in the noble science of medicine! Furthermore you must trust the practitioners of this noble science!”

“Ma’s alive again?” Hanzaemon did a double-take. “Ah! Ma’s alive again!” he shouted, and began dancing about. “Ma’s alive for one more day! Huzzah! We’ll have the funeral tomorrow – Ma’s come home for one last day!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” the disembodied head of Meenay came jutting out of the front door. “You are all a bunch of stark-raving,

malevolent drunkards! My mother-in-law has been lying in the tearoom, cold as ice, since early this morning."

"That's *your* opinion, non-practitioner!" the villagers all yelled. "Medical science is noble! It's noble because non-practitioners don't understand it!"

"Meenay," Hanzaemon said softly. "Get a hold of yourself. This medical science that they're talking about is a big deal. There's no way the likes of us can understand it. You just gotta trust the doctor's prognosis."

And while Hanzaemon's voice was a gentle one, his words possessed a tangible force and momentum. Most likely, in his excitement, he had forgotten all about the retribution that he would most certainly face later. But in this particular moment, old Meenay had been clearly vanquished. And so she assumed the typical posture of a vanquished party, which involved hurling careless insults at her vanquishers before vanishing into the night:

"You crazy quack! What could possibly be noble about a doctor who murders people with his shots?"

"Settle down, dear, you're misunderstanding the whole situation. (Somehow, Hanzaemon was still on the offensive!) This is a professional doctor, you're talking too – are you trying to say that Ma was better off dead?"

At this, Meenay turned devil-red and disappeared into the depths of the house. For Hanzaemon, the days to come were certainly not going to be wine and roses. There were even a few people in the crowd who felt a certain amount of sympathy for his plight. Hanzaemon, on the other hand, was on top of the world. He was so overjoyed that he was having a hard time controlling his own body – and like a car with failing breaks, he finally gave himself over to the joy. Wringing his hands frantically, he made the following declaration:

"I had been hoping we could find a way to push the funeral back for a day, but I guess I didn't know how darn noble all this medicine stuff was! I myself didn't get much education. In fact, I had no idea a person could just come back to life like that! Oh happy day..."

"It's because you're such a loyal son!" shouted one farmer, tears welling in his eyes. "This calls for a celebration! First of all, we need some saké to make a toast with!"

This announcement sent the villagers into a panic:

"Saké!"

"Ahoy!"

"How could we have forgotten!"

"A toast! Today is Madam Coldfield's second birthday! Saké!"

"Saké!"

"Saké saké saké saké saké saké!"^{xv}

"But – " Hanzaemon was visibly flustered by this sudden turn of events. "But my Ma's dead, ain't she?"^{xvi}

"What's a non-practitioner like you know!" scoffed the same obstinate farmer, with what could only be construed as sincere anger. "What's your problem? You want to kill your own mother off a day early?!"

The village patrolman chose this moment to come sauntering out from the shadows, rattling his dagger as he walked. Hanzaemon began to stammer:

"I wasn't gonna kill her off or nothing! Plus, she been dead since the morning..."

"Says who!"

"Well, the doc... said... so...?"

"Ahem," the doctor cleared his throat, looking up at the sky. Hanzaemon went quiet, and then tears began silently cascading down his cheeks. He was trapped. Frantically casting his eyes in every direction, surveying all who had gathered there, he finally located Jirosuke, the liquor store owner, and uttered those fateful words:

"Jirosuke. Bring me a bottle of booze. Just one — the cheapest you've got."

The villagers, however, were collectively very hard of hearing, and so this message had to be conveyed to Jirosuke through their shared good will:

"He said to bring a whole keg of the best stuff you got!"

Ladies and Gentlemen — you can now clearly see how sincere anguish is a means to its own end. These most sincere villagers were thus able to tuck in to two separate kegs within the space of one evening. Even poor Hanzaemon, who was footing one of the bills, was not entirely in the red at the end of the night: for amidst the glamour of that bacchanal, he managed to perform his one party-trick: the Hand Dance. For a moment, he was able to put the darkness of the day behind him and simply bathe in that incomparable joy which was his, and his alone.

I was as nervous and pale as a dead tree, when I first heard about this incident, in Tokyo — it blew me right off my barstool. Never had I heard a story so full of emotion and vitality. It was as though a window was being opened afresh, in my heart, as the tale unfolded. I watched as my soul passed through this open window, into the endless dream of an open sky, free at last to roam. What a fantastic thing it was to live — and to keep on living through adversity! Life was as motley and variegated as the garb of a harlequin!^{xvii} I knew at once that I had to change my lifestyle. And so I set out on a journey, intent on leaving my depression behind. With a bottle of cognac in my rucksack. Toward a little village, deep in the mountains.

And when I got there, all I saw was the stepped patties, and the farmers standing there, as bored as scarecrows. I saw those horrible tragedians, the very source of my perpetual ennui! Indeed, the whole village stretched out before me in one unstifflable yawn.

And here my astute readers may stop to wonder. Is this all there is to life? Was that whole story impossible, after all? But no! No — and furthermore, no! That story had to be true! It was a real event; it happened! Search deep within your prudish heart, for the guilty conscious that sleeps there — ah, but now I am projecting my own immoral soul upon those of my pure-hearted readers. I apologize! At any rate, the long and the short of it is that I immediately returned

to my old roost, disappointed by what I had found there. And ever since then, fool that I am, I've been unable to tell which of these lives is real. Alas.^{xviii}

(i) 「村のひと騒ぎ」、First published in the October, 1932 issue of *Mita Literature* (『三田文学』).

(ii) The narrator immediately establishes himself as the performative sort of narrator that Ango employed in “On Farce.” But the role that this particular narrator plays is slightly different: while the narrator of “On Farce” behaved farcically so as to instill upon readers the appeal of farce, the narrator of “A Village in Uproar” is an ironic one. That is, like the characters in his tale, he himself is overwrought and unbelievable: he begins the tale by expressing his readers’ opinions for them (“As my astute readers have undoubtedly surmised...”), and labeling any dissenting opinions “seditious.” An overbearing rhetorical trick, we are meant to take this as pushy; his vehement assertions about the peaceful nature of the village only reinforce our suspicion that the very opposite may be true.

(iii) As in Makino’s “Devil’s Tear Village,” farcical characters are usually some combination of drunk, stingy and vain. And none of the characters are so severely ridiculed as Hanzaemon, who is not only drunk and cheap and vain, but also fatally indecisive.

Unlike Makino’s “Devil’s Tear Village,” however, the narrator of Ango’s tale is not one of the characters, allowing him to treat all of his creations as purely farcical, rather than grotesque. While two stories share numerous similarities—and while Makino’s influence on Ango has allowed me to segue conveniently from one to the next—the baroque and grotesque aspects of Makino’s literature are almost entirely absent from “A Village in Uproar.” Ango’s characters are largely Bergsonian: wooden stereotypes that he slams into each other in amusing manners, exaggerated to the point of puppetry, but not to the extent of monstrosity.

However—and in spite of Ango’s idealization of a “pure” form of farce—one does detect a slightly sinister undertone to this story, which the narrator is careful to point out, but then quickly dismiss. And the manner in which the narrators alluded to, and subsequently elides, these particular tragedies will make him begin to seem quite farcical, himself.

(iv) As in previous narrative interjection, this deference to some hyper-sensitive readership is meant ironically. The phrase the narrator uses (首をくくる) is hardly slang—any Japanese reader, then or now, would be familiar with it. What seems to

be “vulgar” is the suggestion that this sort of violence could exist in a “peaceful little hamlet, not a soul harbored any sort of animosity toward another”—which again we are meant to doubt. This subject is “hanging oneself,” after all—the very phrase that would be applied to Makino Shinichi, a few years later. Which is perhaps why the narrator is so emphatic about the vulgarity of the phrase: it clearly has no place in a pure farce such as this—and like the oppressive nature of Hanzaemon’s wife, it is simply waved away.

(v) Just as the narrator sidesteps the invocation of “suicide,” the very intimation that medical malpractice—murder by injection, specifically—occurs with striking regularity in this peaceful village is, of course, summarily ignored. Insinuated, but calmly forgotten.

By now it is impossible to take the narrator seriously at all. Like the wooden characters in his story, his single-mindedness about making this into a comedic satire of village life is, in its own way, comedic. The narrative, itself, is being satirized, somehow.

We have looked at Ango’s essays “The Clown Evangelist” and “On Farce,” but apparently he continued to harbor a burning dissatisfaction with the state of Japanese humor, because in 1939 he added a third title to the series, entitled “To All the Bit Comedians” (『茶番に寄せて』、「文体」、vol. 2 issue 2, April 1939). In it, Ango says some very relevant things about satire:

Pointlessness is the mother of laughter. The rich lavishness of laughter is due, it seems, to its pointlessness and lack of meaning. And yet some human beings can’t help but have a point to everything they do, and for them even laughter has to serve some purpose. They can’t enjoy simply laughing at meaninglessness. These are the sort of people who demand parody in their comedy.

But parody is cheap, compared with the richness of laughter. Because parody is always built on the parodist’s sense of superiority, it stands on inevitably shaky foundations, and is always cheap. This is why parody can never be on equal footing with that which it parodies—inasmuch as it relies on the unjust device of ridicule to lift itself higher than it deserves, it can never be as good as the voiceless thing it parodies.

But sometimes parody manages not to have a superiority complex. This happens when either the parodist themselves participate in the parody, or when the parody simply links to nothingness. In both cases, the subject of parody is pointless to ridicule, making it no longer parodic at all.

This passage, which accounts for a good portion of the essay, sheds some light on what Ango may be attempting in “A Village in Uproar.” The narrator is clearly parodying village life, Buddhism, medical science and (later on) academics. Nobody seems to be invested in anything but booze, and certainly nobody is admirable. But the narrator appears to have an agenda of his own, which is manifest in his habitual glossing over of the more sordid details of the tale. He is a prime example of how “the parodist themselves participate in the parody”—although it is not yet clear to what end.

In Makino’s “Devil’s Tear Village,” all it took was a mirror to deflect the satire back onto the narrator; from that moment onward, “satire was no longer central” to the narrative. But in the case of “A Village in Uproar,” this narrator is supposed to be an omniscient third person—no mirror will catch his reflection. Instead, we get these hints at the artifice, and references to audience, at regular intervals.

(vi) The mocking of monks has a rich tradition in Japanese literature, most notably in the Sakuden’s *Seisuishō* (醒睡笑), a 1628 compilation of humorous stories, many of which are at the expense of the Buddhist clergy, of whom Sakuden was a prominent member. Ango, himself, was such a devoted practitioner of Buddhism in his youth that at one point, as part of his meditation practice, he spent nearly two years sleeping a mere four hours a night. In his fiction, this youthful devotion has been transformed entirely into snark, and a great number of his stories feature drunken and/or pedophilic clergy (『黒谷村』などを参照).

(vii) The outrageous curses, here, are of course meant to cast further irony on the monk’s own lamentations. But more pronounced is the exaggerated manner in which the narrator sympathizes with the monk. “Fie upon it” is quite the epithet (Here is the archaic 「咄！」、glossed as 「とつ」 and meant as an onomatopoeia for the sound one makes when one violently disapproves of something. “Bah,” might be a good equivalent, in another context).

But what should we make of the narrator, here, who appears to sympathize with the monk on a very visceral level? Is he merely trying to represent the monk’s stream of consciousness, or is this meant facetiously? Or could it be that the narrator actually relates to the monk on a very visceral level?

(viii) The “ack” employed by Ango is actually a romanized, all-uppercase “WAH!”—thus standing out from the text like a sore thumb, and representing a Japanese ejaculation of similar urgency. The phrase, verbatim, looks like this:

知っとるだけの経文を休み休み繰り返しておきなされ。WAH！　こう
していられん！　WAH！　これよ。衣をもてよ。

Thus I am indebted to Berkeley Breathed for providing what is essentially the perfect English analogue for “Wah” in “Ack.” Ango’s characters, in this piece, are in the same state of constant panic as Bill the Cat. Or in to borrow Bergson’s phrase: “Behind this exclamation, which recurs automatically, we faintly discern a complete repeating-machine set going by a fixed idea.”

(ix) Panic, it seems, is another key mechanism of farce. It caused characters to should “Ack” at odd intervals; it incites a shaking of the body, the sticking out of tongues, and other oddly mechanical gestures. By virtue of panic (or the titular “Uproar”), characters are overwhelmed by feelings that they are too rushed to express entirely. They cannot be but Bergson-esque automatons, for the urgency of their crisis precludes any sort of circumspection. Ango puts it in the following way, in “To All the Bit Comedians”:

Farce doesn’t laugh at yesterday. And it doesn’t laugh at tomorrow, either. It doesn’t laugh at the next moment, or at a moment ago; but in the present tense of a farce, there is nothing but laughter.

(x) Ango uses the name Hyakubē (百兵衛), which is a stereotypical rural name, with connotations of “peasant” (百姓) and a hickish suffix (兵衛). I have opted for a combination of “Bumpkin” and “Bupkis,” although I’m sure that more thought could have been put into the matter.

(xi) The same panic that transforms Gumpkiss into a “dark mass,” assumes the form of “electricity,” uniting the collective village with a shared nervous energy. From a ground-level view of the expressions of this unwieldy leviathan (pacing, staring, shivering), we quickly zoom out, assuming a perch on a nearby mountain, from where they are but silent, thoughtless, efficient ants. It is distance, narrative or otherwise, that increases the appearance of a subject being mechanized. From too far away, however, the scene becomes too mechanized to be funny: all that is left is an autumn scene that is described with the very same word that the narrator was uncomfortable with initially: “stark” (荒涼).

(xii) That Ango saw Edgar Allan Poe’s “X-ing a Paragraph” as the pinnacle of farce was already cited in the introduction to this volume. This particular soliloquy provides a particular clear example of Ango’s debt to Poe: take the following excerpt for “X-ing a Paragraph” for example:

“Oh yes!—Oh, we perceive! Oh, no doubt! The editor over the way is a genius—O, my! Oh, goodness, gracious!—what is this world coming to? Oh, tempora! Oh, Moses!”

Poe’s story is (vaguely) about sensationalistic journalism; but for the most part it is a series of increasingly nonsensical uses of English idioms to progressive nonsensical effects. It is the shivering, frantic manner in which the newspaper articles are written that appealed to Ango, and are what are so appealing about his own farces. Ango had already perfected the art of the frantic monologue in “Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus,” which is the subject of the proceeding chapter, but the principal’s monologue here is a tour de force in its own right.

As for Poe’s story—it is certainly funny, if by no means as funny or as farcical as Ango’s own forays into the genre. However, subsequent readings of the “X-ing a Paragraph”—through Ango’s eyes—have made the story much more enjoyable, to me. All of which raises some very complicated questions about whether farce, as a genre, is somehow funnier when read in a second language, due to the further mechanization of the translation process. Could the fact that the likes of Ango and Makino have always been ignored, in conversations about pre-war Japanese humor, merely be because they are only funny when read by non-native Japanese speakers such as myself? Do you, as the reader of authoritative criticism, want to be confronted with your critic’s level of intimacy with the language of inquiry?

This is as interesting of a question as it is a subjective one (my Japanese is clearly perfect), but it also leads me to an even more complicated question: which was that Ango was a French scholar—he had been reading Poe in translation.

Specifically, he had been reading Baudelaire’s translation of Poe—the same translation which spawned all of the myriad derivations and refutations of Lacan’s readings of “The Purloined Letter.” And had Lacan applied his Gaze to Baudelaire’s translation choices themselves, he probably would have been the first to notice that the most characteristic of Baudelaire’s selection was what it was *missing*: namely, the farces.

In a later reflection on being “27 Years Old,” Ango writes:

I submitted a story called “Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus” to our private-press magazine. It was a prose farce—I had been enamored with Poe’s ridiculous tales “X-ing a Paragraph” and “Bon Bon” for some time, and thought I’d give one a try myself. These “ridiculous tales” of Poe’s had been purposely left out of Baudelaire’s translation, so there was no way that they would appeal to the average reader. I had no intentions of it being read. I did it more for the thrill of thumbing of my nose at Baudelaire, to make fun of the terrible taste that led him to leave these farces out of his translations, preoccupied as he was with *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

(「二十七歳」、originally published in 『新潮』、volume 44, issue 3, March 1947. I am referring to the public domain text available at aoyama.gr.jp)

A young, precocious Ango was already aware that farce requires a special taste, a taste that even the likes of Baudelaire didn't possess. And if, even among a French audience, the comic works of Poe required a particular kind of reader, then so much more so his own, in the purportedly comedy-anemic literary landscape of prewar Japan. He had been lamenting this same fact for a decade and a half, beginning with "On Farce":

This thing called "farce" is a specialized genre of literature—but it's such a happy-go-lucky, un-self-conscious form of literature that it tends to be almost *overly* specialized, so that even readers with a specialized interest in literature tend to misunderstand it.

(坂口安吾、「FARCE について」、p. 54)

In retrospect, these words seem aimed directly at Baudelaire. It would be easy to ascribe this to a clinically Freudian revenge against Baudelaire: Ango loved French farce, but he also felt that he could do much better. Japan, after all, was home to a whole family of Rabelais, and yet French people knew nothing of Japan. It certainly didn't help that, all around him, writers were only working to confirm the stereotype that Japanese writers were excessively serious.

For these reasons, among others, Ango was moved to write his first work of fiction: "Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus."

What Baudelaire's translation lacked, it just so happened, was exactly what Japanese literature lacked, at the time. Thus it was no coincidence that, although it was published in an obscure, private-press periodical, Makino Shinichi wasted no time picking up on the humor in "Professor Zephyr." In Makino, Ango had the very "specialized" kind of reader that he required. Makino's own perpetual exclusion from the Japanese canon has been due, by and large, to his farcical nature: his stories are of drunken romps through the surreal mountain landscapes—the sort of thing for which Baudelaire and his Japanese analogues simply did not have the patience. A letter had been purloined, from amongst Poe's works—and from Japanese letters writ large—a letter which, Ango was convinced, contained nothing but the comic.

(xiii) It should be pointed out that Ango by no means harbored a dim view of medicine. One of his greatest tales, "Doctor Liver" (肝臓先生), features a village physician not dissimilar from the one in "A Village in Uproar," who is portrayed as something of a quirky national hero. But Ango is merciless with the doctor in this

tale, not out of anything so cheap as parody but as a rule of farce. Or as he describes it in “On Farce:”

For example, the characters in a farce all think conceited things like “I am noble” or “She is in love with me”—when in fact it is quite clear that they are neither noble nor knowledgeable nor even loved at all. The writer of a farce enjoys nothing more than being merciless with all characters, of all backgrounds, regardless of whether they are vain or not, so that nobody who seems noble or knowledgeable at the beginning of a farce will seem so by the end. That one character might be more clever than another, by however slight an increment, is something that a writer of farce will never instill upon a reader. Although they certainly won’t call anybody stupid, either.

(xiv) Why is this cry of “Banzai!” so funny?

Partially, it has to do with the era in which “A Village in Uproar” was written. As a child, Ango was doubtlessly taught to salute the emperor with three shouts of “Banzai!” By the 1930s, soldiers were being sent off to the mainland with the same shout. In Ango’s hands, of course, this nationalistic fervor is completely subsumed by the more hedonistic fervor of simple rural folks; this alone is slyly subversive, in an era of escalating wartime censorship.

But “banzai” also alludes to the roots of the Japanese comedic arts—to the stand-up *manzai* comedy about which Ango wrote: “In Japan, the only true farce that has ever existed is *yose*. Even *rakugo*, in the hands of a talented enough comedian, could be considered high art.”

Yose was the first form of *manzai* to give up its nomadic ways and set down roots in the city. Until then, *manzai* had been the providence of itinerant entertainers, who would perform outside the gates (and in the gardens, and sometimes even in the homes) of the townspeople, especially at New Years, when they would bless a family in the coming year with a wish of “manzai”—may you live ten-thousand years. The performers largely came from outcast groups—it is likely that much of the dances and puppetry and other performances came over with Korean immigrants. The very word “manzai” is, of course, a Chinese one that took root in Korean and only later came to Japan. On March 1st, 1919, even while a young Ango was being taught “banzai” salute, a series of protests known as the “Mansei Incident” (or 삼일 운동—the “3/1 Movement”) broke out throughout Korea:

Protesting the cruelty of the Japanese occupation, thousands of people gathered in Seoul’s Pagoda Park, where they gave speeches calling for independence, and then began to march down the street with shouts of “Independence, Mansei!” In Seoul alone, participation in demonstrations grew to some 300,000 people. The Japanese army sent soldiers to quell the

demonstrators with bullets. Some 1,491 such demonstrations broke out across Korea between March and May, and the Japanese army responded with startling violence. It is estimated that more than 100,000 Koreans were shot dead. [華房良輔、「天皇陛下万歳とお笑い漫才」解放出版社、2003, pg. 25]

By this time, the theater-based *yose manzai* had become the staple of the genre, in Japan. By the 1930s, it was more popular than ever, as attendance skyrocketed. The characters with which we write the word *manzai* today (漫才) were, in fact, first used in 1930 by Yoshimoto Kōgyō, which remains the undisputed king of standup talent agencies today. The popular conceit is that the use of the characters “漫才” rather than the traditional “万歳” of “banzai” was a clever marketing ploy on behalf of Yoshimoto Kōgyō, for a *manzai* contest in 1930, but the truth is probably less glamorous—in a time a war, it was not good business to joke about fidelity to the emperor.

The irony here is that, while the collective demand for *manzai* was higher than ever, the state Indeed the 1930's saw thousands of comedy phonograph records confiscated, and popular Yoshimoto *manzai* comedians Achako and Entatsu were charged with “disturbing the military order, and blasphemy against the Yasukuni shrine” [Kushner, Barak. “Laughter as Materiel: The Mobilization of Comedy in Japan’s Fifteen Year War.” *The International History Review*, Vol 26, No. 2 (June 2004), pg. 311].

But Yoshimoto later sent the pair to the mainland, to entertain the troops. Under the punning flag of “The Comicorps” (笑わせ隊), this troop entertainment mission was as effective at boosting Yoshimoto’s image with the government as it was at boosting sales. Several more tours were scheduled.

And it is here that we find ourselves at a strange impasse, as Achako makes his way to the mainland, where Japan has just invaded China. August 1938 was the month that *Literature* (文学) magazine published their seminal “comedy” issue. August 1938 was also the same month that comedic poet Tsuru Akira was arrested, chained to a hospital bed, and left to die, for writing poems like:

The hand he raised to shout “banzai!” got left on the mainland.
By the time the bones arrived, I felt movement in my womb.

And now poor Hanzaemon has a body of his own, to deal with, amidst fervent shouts of “Banzai!” that contain a lot more baggage than the thirsty villagers could even begin to imagine.

(xv) One could, of course, reduce the motivations of the entire populous to this single, almost religious, incantation. The monk, the bereaved, the artsy

schoolteacher—perhaps even the town doctor—but most of all the faceless masses of Bumpkisses and Gumpkisses seem to care about little other than tapping a fresh keg of the local brew.

But one suspects that the narrator himself might be humming a similar slogan under his breath, as if to say: isn't it time we really cut loose with the whole enterprise of literature? Isn't it time we just tapped the ripe kegs of stand-up comedy (落語) and enjoyed ourselves a little? Or in the clearer words of "On Farce":

Watching stand-up comedy I've often noticed how, in the hands of a skilled comedian, the sort of lowbrow jokes that could hardly be considered "literary," somehow become something more lofty, when performed on stage—something that can only be referred to as "art."

But one must begin to wonder about the other performers involved in this particular comedy: how does the translator feel about this? Are they attempting to perform the original comedy, to act out each character as best they can, or are they more concerned with individual words and phonemes? And what of the studious critic, the obsessive author of these footnotes, who would probably rather allow the reader to relax for a moment, and enjoy a deep draught of unfiltered text.

And what of the bemused reader, who might even now be shouting:

"Saké saké saké saké saké saké!"

(xvi) If it was not clear from the outset, it should be clear by now that the sole protagonist of this story (if you could call him that) is none other than the *pierrrot* Hanzaemon, whose fists seem curiously tight for anyone so fond of "weird hand dances."

Strangely, the entire outcome of this story rests upon the presumable frail shoulders of this young (he is "in his early twenties," as was Sakaguchi Ango) man. It is "up to his discretion, and his discretion alone," in Meenay's words, whether he must go to his mother's tragic funeral or the comedic bacchanal of the Coldwaters. Of course, being the wishy-washy exhibitionist that he is, Hanzaemon would doubtlessly prefer the frivolity of a foreign comedy to the weight of his own domestic tragedy.

—and here is where the inevitable correlation begins to assert itself:

We have young Ango, fresh on the literary scene, busily writing farce in a country that is moving slowly toward a worldwide war. Well aware that the "specialism" of farce made it so much chaff to the vast majority of readers, he opted to make it his genre of choice, anyway. It would not win him accolades (save for Makino's effusive review) and decades later people would still be writing about how the 1930s were

absolutely lacking in humorous literature. Eventually Ango would give up on comedy, just as Makino had before him. The piper, it seems, had to be paid; Meenay was always lurking in the background, waiting to collect debts.

But it is clearly his desire to write something truly frivolous—something akin to a weird Hand Dance, performed entirely sitting-down, for nobody's joy but his own—that informs these early farces of Ango's. The reception that he expected to receive was lukewarm, at best. But at least it was worth one good bacchanal.

(xvii) Ango uses the loan word for “harlequin” (ハアリキン), here, which makes me wonder whether he wasn't recalling the following passage from Bergson, which addresses the same issues of comic exaggeration versus the mimetic aspirations of realism:

We are strangely mistaken as to the part played by poetic imagination, if we think it pieces together its heroes out of fragments filched from right and left, as though it were patching together a harlequin's motley. Nothing living would result from that. Life cannot be recomposed; it can only be looked at and reproduced.

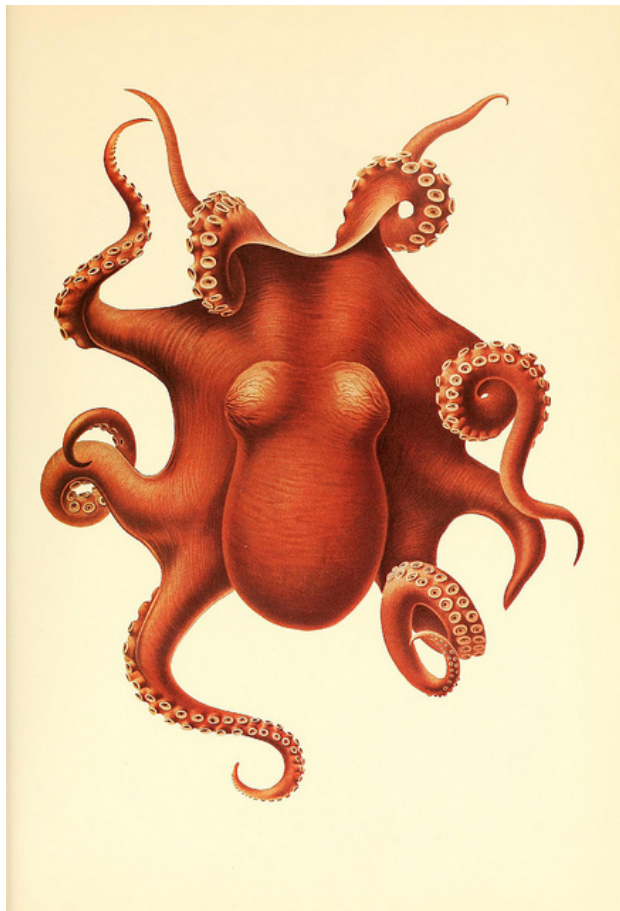
(xviii) And I can't help but feel the same way that Ango does: which role is the true role of the critic? Am I to simply take the text as text, enjoying its textures in a semi-erotic Barthesian fashion? Or would that all be a lie? Do I need to engage it, question it, sometimes from oblique and even perpendicular angles? Is there a place for Korea, and *manzai*, and the infinite and horrifying subtexts of history, in an essay such as this? The text at hand is a comedic one, and I for one would rather not take it so seriously, but allow the humor of the text to dictate my critique.

Which is exactly what is attempted in the following chapter, in which Ango's “Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus” is footnoted by a critic of decidedly Ango-esque temperament.

Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus

By Sakaguchi Ango

(Translated and annotated by Matthew Mistral)



This translation is dedicated to Charles Kinbote

il miglior fabbro

Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus

O gentlemen! Art ye acquainted with the villa of Professor Zephyr^{xix}—Avenue A, District B, Ward C, Tokyo, Japan? Ye art acquainted not?^{xx} This is most regrettable. But perhaps, dear gentlemen, ye art familiar with the magnanimous Professor Zephyr? Nay. Alas! Then ye are not aware of the fact that the magnanimous Professor Zephyr hath disappeared sans trail or trace, but for a last will and testament? Nay. Alack! Then ye cannot, dearest gentlemen, know all the unwonted suspicion that I have suffered regarding this matter. The police, however, know all about it. For they remain convinced that the magnanimous Professor Zephyr and I were in collusion, fabricating the Professor's will and feigning his suicide in order to besmirch the name of the invidious Doctor Octopus!^{xxi} O gentlemen, this clearly a mistake. Wherefore? For the simple reason that the magnanimous Professor Zephyr did indeed commit suicide. Did he in fact commit suicide? Indeed! The magnanimous Professor Zephyr hath dissipated unto the air. Dost ye, dear gentlemen, intend to rashly ignore the Truth?^{xxii} Avast! For in doing so ye may suffer an array of misfortunes for the remainder of your lives. Truth is a thing which one needs must trust, and consequently, dear gentlemen, ye needs must trust that the magnanimous Professor Zephyr's hath expired.

O dearest of gentlemen, the invidious Doctor Octopus—art ye not acquainted with the invidious Doctor Octopus? Nay. Avaunt! This is regrettable, indeed. Then I suppose, dear gentlemen, that we must begin by reading through the last will and testimony of the pitiable Professor Zephyr:

The Last Will and Testimony of Professor Zephyr

O gentlemen!^{xxiii}

He is bald. Bald, indeed, is he. One could not, in fact, deign to construe him as any other thing than bald. He employs a wig in order to disguise this baldness. Woe, the utter farce! Farce, indeed, is this! Alas, the sheer farcicality! Imagine for a moment, dear gentlemen, that thou hath chanced a cuff 'crost his pate, and in doing so hast stripped him of his toupee. Instantly thou swoonest! For thou could not deign to do any other thing than swoon. Videlicet thou

hath been stunned to the very depths of thy soul by the sight of an unmentionable, lewd, hairless and ruddy protuberance. The ghastly effluvium alone shall cause thee to lament the rest thy days. I present ye with the unadulterated Truth^{xxiv}, dear auditors: he is an invidious octopod.^{xxv} Yea! He is but a mollusk^{xxvi}, donning the mask of a human in order to hide his evil huggermuggery.

O gentlemen I beseech thee! Reproach me not, for I swear upon Truth itself that he is indeed bald.^{xxvii} But if ye still mistrust me, I invite ye to seek out one Monsieur Chauve, *Bis, Perruquier*, Montemartre District #3, Paris. It was two score and eight years ago, he will remember, that he provided a periwig to a pair of exchange students from the land of *Japon*. He will recall how one of these students possessed the opaque expression of a shoat, glabrous and plump—whilst his companion was a black-maned, clear-eyed, jaunty young man. This black-maned/clear-eyed companion was none other than myself; but lo, gentlemen: *his* pate was already appreciably bald some forty-eight years ago! Fie, canst ye bear to tolerate the utter deplorability of this? O gentlemen, who art lofty as the mighty oak, why doth ye refrain from ordaining that this miscreant be wiped from the face of the earth? For he attempts to dissimulate his baldness beneath the façade of a toupee!

O gentlemen, he is my invidious rival in scholarship. Is he merely a rival? Nay, nay nay! A thousand times nay! For he is my invidious archnemeses in all aspects of life. Is he indeed invidious? Indeed! He is of consummate invidiousness! Gentlemen, I profess unto ye that his scholarship is of a shallowness most exorbitant! O gentlemen, learned as the world atlas, canst ye conceive of the notion of erudite octopodæ?^{xxviii} Nay, nay, nay! Neigh, even! For I shall present ye with evidence of his ignorance herein.

Art ye familiar, O gentlemen, with a tiny province known as Basque? If ye should happen, O gentlemen, to be wandering about the Pyrenees, along the border betwixt Francia and España, ye might hap across a province called “Basque,” secluded in the bosom of the mountains. The breeding, customs, and language of this curious land are so isolated from those of their surroundings lands that only after taking a one-hundred and eighty degree trip around the planet, to the Far East—indeed to the land of *Japon*!—wilt ye locate a culture of notable similarity. Indeed, had I not concluded my research, O auditors, this conundrum would doubtlessly have continued to plague thy waking minds as one of the great mysteries of the modern world. But fear not, dear auditors, for my research hath been completed, and a

magnanimous contribution hath been made unto World Peace. Lo and behold: 'Twas the great Japanese samurai Minamoto Yoshitsune who transformed into Genghis Khan.^{xxix} And subsequently, as Ghenkis Khan, Minamoto invaded Europe and disappeared somewhere around Spain. Ultimately, the samurai and his clan were inclined to spend their latter days in seclusion, among the halcyon clime of the Pyrenees mountains. This, you see, marks the dawn of Basquian history. But alack, indeed! For the dankish Doctor Octopus, in all his irreverence, sought to contradict my monumental achievements. According to him, the Mongolian invasion of Europe was the handiwork of Genghis Kahn's successor and eldest son Ogedei, occurring some ten years after the death of Genghis Kahn. What groundless, philistine sophism!^{xxx} What are ten years, within the deep bowels of lost history! Such blasphemy toward the profound enigma of antiquity!

You see, O gentlemen—it is only with the greatest hesitation that I expound his evil deeds. For inasmuch as his crimes are so fantastical as to confound the very intellect,^{xxxi} they are also malicious attempts to defame me. Verily, O gentlemen, that peel of *banane* casually planted outside my door was none other than an attempt on my life, concocted by him! Fortunately I suffered only a bruising of the buttocks and shoulderblades and avoided the potential concussion to my brain^{xxxii}; however, the world has responded to my testimony with nary but ridicule.

O gentlemen, broad and wise as the Pacific Ocean! Dost ye intend to ignore this tragic and bizarre series of events? For I tell ye: he hath made a cuckold of me. O gentlemen, who art as discerning as an insect's antennae! My wife's beauty, like high alpine vegetation, was so much more than mere vegetation!^{xxxiii} Aye! O gentlemen, whose coolness is such as to be comparable to an electric fan^{xxxiv}—the invidious Doctor Octopus, who knows nothing of love, hath stolen my wife. Dearest gentlemen I prithee shudder at all organisms cephalopodous—fie uponst them!—for I profess unto you that my wife was a Basquian lass. Indeed, her contributions to my research made her the light of my world, the salt of my earth. And it is this very fact that attracted Doctor Octopus' lynx eye. Alack, for I made but one fatal error! One fatal error, indeed! It was my oversight not to reveal the naked truth of Doctor Octopus' baldness to my wife. And due to this lapse, he was able to seduce the poor wench.

At that juncture, O gentlemen, I was verily hemorrhaging with rage. Bring out the molluscicide! Send Doctor Octopus to his grave! Indeed! Strike down the

invidious whifflebat!^{xxxv} Indeed indeed! And it was to this end that I spent my every waking hour, mulling over my means of recourse. As ye art already well aware, tender gentlemen, no straightforward and honest attack would befit the wiliness of his ploys. And so I was left with but one choice. Indeed the options available to me were but one! Tempering my resolve, I concealed my visage beneath a deerstalker cap, stealing out into the twilight murk toward the villa of Doctor Octopus. I had spent a long night reading approximately every single tome ever written on the subject of locksmithery. Consequently I was able to spirit into his room like the very air itself.^{xxxvi} Without so much as hesitating, I took his invidious toupee up into my hands. O gentlemen! When that ruddy hairless monstrosity emerged before my eyes, a million sundry emotions beset my chest, and it was all I could do to forbear tears. O dearest gentlemen! Come daybreak, that invidious octopus would at last be forced to reveal his true molluscan colors! Clenching his wig against my beating breast, I sidled back into the shadows.

In faith, gentlemen, O gentlemen, Ah gentlemen—I failed miserably. It would seem, indeed, that crime does not pay. Fie upon’t! Fie! For octopi are the wiliest of the wily. How could one ever feign to fathom the depths of his skullduggery! For on the following day his scalp was once more enshrouded in a toupee. Forsooth, O gentlemen! He had slyly squirreled away an extra wig. My kingdom cometh. My tail betwixt my hams. It is written: thy power alone cannot thwart his treacherous guile. Dearest gentlemen, what hero might bring justice to this octopod? Thou shalt send Doctor Octopus to his grave! He must be vanquished from the face of the earth! Love ye not justice and truth? Alack, for I have but one recourse. I have chosen to end my own life.^{xxxvii} Alas, the sorrow...

O auditors! As you perused this, the last will and testament of the magnanimous Professor Zephyr, what sort of intense emotions o’ercome ye? And what violent sense of outrage did ye experience? I believe I can conjecture. For thus the magnanimous Professor Zephyr hath committed suicide. Pardie! The magnanimous Professor Zephyr hath indeed expired. And he hath done so in an exceedingly mysterious manner—a manner which left no corpse!^{xxxviii}—a fact which hath incited certain people to doubt his death. Alack, this is a most regrettable state of affairs! Consequently, as the sole witness of the Professor’s demise, I shall provide you herein with a thorough narration of those final hours.

The magnanimous Professor Zephyr was a notoriously high-strung individual. Let us say, for example, that he was perched upon a settee in the southwestern corner of the room, deeply engrossed in a book. In the very next instance, the magnanimous Professor would be hunkered down in an armchair in the northeast corner, wheeling through pages like mad. And when the magnanimous Professor went to sip his water, he inevitably swallowed the entire cup itself, in one fell gulp. At moments such as this, O gentlemen, we cannot but feel the pang of regret that befell this study, and the dusky silence accompanying it. And for this reason there was nary an object in the room not influenced by the Professor's hyperactive proclivities. Behold: the clock is restlessly striking thirteen-hundred hours. An over-decorous visitor is shifting his weight on his feet, too timid to sit down on his own accord—when suddenly a chair begins squeaking violently, impatiently, the shadow of a body suddenly rushing toward the sun! And thus the sum of these skittish motions begins to conjure linear gusts of wind which fuse and garble, a multitude of arrowed vacuums dartling about the room, strewn sparkles of light this way and that in their wakes. Until at last all of this skirring and skittering brings the funnel of a whirlwind whipping to life in the center of the room. On such occasions the magnanimous Professor was oft sucked up into the ensuing tornado, somersaulting through the air with one fist held out before him.^{xxxix}

Now, the day of the incident coincided with the magnanimous Professor's wedding day. The bride-to-be was, at the time, a seventeen year-old girl of consummate beauty.^{xl} Indeed, one must recognize the Professor's magnanimous wisdom in choosing such a girl—for she was a flower girl, vending flowers along the wayside. And she was possessed of such a childlike innocence with regard to misfortune that although she had not sold a single floret in over three days, her reaction largely consisted of gazing off at the clouds, gazing off at the neon signs... You see, a young lass in such perfect contrast to the magnanimous Professor Zephyr and all the other magnanimous Professors, enshrouded in their furious whirlwinds, was a rare find indeed.^{xli} Now, in order to give my blessing to this blessed marriage, I had agreed to serve as the priest while simultaneously performing the duties of the chef de cuisine. I had fashioned an altar in my library, whereupon I sat with the bride-to-be, patiently awaiting the magnanimous Professor's arrival. Morning came. The bride-to-be, in all her innocence, did not betray any discomfit; I, however, was not altogether composed. What if the magnanimous Professor had mistakenly gone off and proposed marriage to some other maiden? And if this was the case, what sort of frantic whirlwind would he cause to encompass the face of the earth when he realized his gaffe? Leaving the bride with a provisional excuse, I leapt into my automobile and raced toward my master's study as fast as it would carry me. And I was deeply relieved! For there the magnanimous Professor Zephyr sat, hunkered down in the settee on the southeast corner of the room, completely preoccupied by some book. And as proof that he had just relocated there from the northeastern armchair, a gust of wind was still whipping about in a northeast-southwestern direction, transcribing divers arrows of blinding light.

"Professor, the hour of thy engagement hath elapsed."

I had relayed my message in as calm a manner as possible, so as not to further fluster the magnanimous Professor; nevertheless, my words were more than sufficient to throw him into a state of disarray. For behold: the Professor was bedecked in a faded but tailed tuxedo, a silk tophat perched upon his knee and a splendid tulip lodged in his buttonhole! This betrayed the profound anticipation with which the magnanimous Professor had awaited his wedding, as well as the urgency of the matters which had subsequently caused him to forget it.

“POPOPO!”

The magnanimous Professor returned the silk hat to his head. For a few seconds he merely gazed at me, in disbelief. Then a poignant expression came over his face as he recalled his forgotten promise.

“TATATATATAH!”

In that very same instant, I was overwhelmed by a piercing scream as the study door flew open and the magnanimous Professor disappeared through it. Utterly agog, I ran after him. And it was at this very moment that the miracle occurred. For the magnanimous Professor Zephyr vanished in a trice.

O gentlemen! A human being is not capable of passing through a door which shows no trace of being ajar. Thus we can conclude that the magnanimous Professor did not leave the premises. Nor was the magnanimous Professor to be found inside his villa. I stood stock-still in the middle of the staircase, listening to the remnant echoes of the Professor’s flurried footsteps and watching as a lone gust of wind reeled about at the foot of the stairs.

O gentlemen, the magnanimous Professor Zephyr hath turned into wind. Hath he truly turned into wind? Indeed, he hath turned into wind. For hath he not disappeared sans trace? And is not that which lacks traceable appearance called “the wind”? Indeed, ‘tis called “the wind.” And hath the Professor not disappeared? He cannot conceivably be anything other than wind. He is the wind. He is the wind is the wind is the wind.^{xlii} Doth ye intend to doubt me further, gentlemen? This is most lamentable indeed!^{xliii} So be it, I shall append one further piece of indisputable scientific evidence. On that very same day—indeed, in the very same instant!—the invidious Doctor Octopus contracted influenza, having stood out in the wind too long.^{xliv}

NOTES for “Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus”

(1) the magnanimous Professor Zephyr

He is the hero of our story. He embodies the wind, lofty and vaporous. He whisks about in dustdevils, perusing through entire literary canons in an evening's time. A more literal transcription of the his Japanese title (風博士) would be something along the lines of “Professor Wind”; however, inasmuch as a direct transliteration deprives this appellation of its original lyric connotations (the *α*: and *ε* assonances that evoke the very æther with airy and open-mouthed vowels!) I have opted to employ a relatively coterminous alternative: Professor Zephyr.

Throughout these notes, in this manner, I intend to bring to my reader's attention any such “creative liberties” that I have taken as I brave the broad linguistic Pacific betwixt the American and Japanese idioms. I pray that my reader trust that I have their best interests in mind in all of my discriminations herein; however, if the reader *does* have a complaint or expostulation, I beg that they PLEASE use my post office box and *not the University mailing system*, as the pimply (and I suspect narcotized) PhD candidate in charge of the Department mailroom has long harbored a grudge against me and tends to hide my mail in embarrassing and often incriminating places.

(2) Ye art acquainted not?

I would like my reader to consider the nature of this odd interrogative. It is, of course, a ludicrous question, for how could anyone identify a Professor whose address is only given to us in code (A, B, C)? Indeed, we cannot—and consequently must interpret the narrator's question as a distinctly *rhetorical* one. By asking whether we know the Professor, in terms of an unspecified address, the narrator is actually making a guised assertion—namely: “You do not know who Professor Zephyr is!” And in faith, we do not. Thus with a simple question we are led to understand that the narrator is desirous to inform us of our own ignorance.

What, then, are the implications and connotations of this peculiar mode of query? Why the insistence upon rhetorical questioning? It would be difficult to categorize the narrator's opening sally of questions as anything but an homage to the oratory style of Socrates. This mode of catechization (known as *elenchus*) is perhaps Socrates' most famous legacy, and is put to great use in the first paragraph of Professor Zephyr:

1. Art ye acquainted with the villa of Professor Zephyr...?
2. Ye art not acquainted?
3. But perhaps, dear auditors, ye art familiar with the magnanimous Professor Zephyr?

5. Then ye art not aware... that the Professor Zephyr hath disappeared...?
6. Wherefore?
7. Did he in fact commit suicide?
8. Dost ye, dear gentlemen, intend to rashly ignore the Truth?
9. Art ye not acquainted with the invidious Doctor Octopus?

In the original Japanese text, these wild questions are given dual emphasis with an actual western tone mark “?”—an entirely unnecessary bit of punctuation in the Japanese idiom. Why, then, does the narrator bother to employ them? Well, quite simply, the redundant emphasis acts as a sort of exclamation mark. How? For one, they give the narrator’s queries a manic forcefulness, presupposing any answer and underscoring their rhetorical status. This emphatic confirmation of the audience’s ignorance is identical to Socrates’ own oratory method. I refer to Kierkegaard:

Socrates’ questioning was essentially aimed at the knowing subject for the purpose of showing that when all was said and done they knew nothing whatever.

Kierkegaard calls this “ironic questioning,” a form of query in which the asking “becomes identical with answering.” Take, for example, a typical passage from *Phaedo*:

“Is [death] simply the release of the soul from the body? Is death nothing more or less than this, the separate condition of the body by itself when it is released from the soul...? Is death anything else than this?”

“No, just that.”

Here, Socrates asks the same question in three different ways for the sole purpose of soliciting an implied answer. It is excessive, overwrought, and ironic by definition. Compare this with our narrator’s own silly catechizations towards the end of the story:

Hath he truly turned into wind? Indeed, he hath turned into wind. For hath he not disappeared sans trace? And is that which lacks traceable appearance not called “the wind”? Indeed, ‘tis called “the wind.” And hath the Professor not disappeared?

This ironic oratory styling is by no means the only characteristic that the narrator shares with Plato’s gadfly (a point I shall expound upon later)—but for now who can argue with me when I say that these two orators share a penchant for questions that are not really questions at all...?

(3) Doctor Octopus

This translation is quite literal; although instead of Zephyr's "Professor," I have opted for the synonymous "Doctor" along with "Octopus" for its audible properties (Ah!, the bodily and bawdy o's of "raunch," "paunch," and "bonch"⁵⁵).

For a discussion of Doctor Octopus's metaphoric/symbolic role in the story, please refer to notes 7 and 9.

(4) Dost ye, dear gentlemen, intend to rashly ignore the Truth?

This is another example of the sort of rhetorical questioning that we explored in note 2. Once again, the narrator poses a query while assuming that his audience will reply with a resounding "Nay!"

Additionally, there are three more aspects of this particular turn of phrase that will serve to tie our narrator to Plato's Socrates.

1) First, we must be aware of the narrator's relationship to his audience. He has been accused by the police of some wrongdoing, and is making an impassioned plea to an unnamed audience—faceless jurors like those of Nabokov's *Lolita*, or the jury of the Franz Kafka Prize for Literature.

2) Secondly, the narrator frequently addresses his audience with the plural second person "gentlemen"—a conspicuously oratory characteristic which immediately evokes Socrates' own *Apology*:

My accusers, then, as I maintain, have said little or nothing that is true, but from me you shall hear the whole Truth; not, I can assure you gentlemen, in flowery language like theirs.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ "bonch" is a slang term used by the youth generation to covertly signify the "taint." "Taint," incidentally, was used by the preceding youth generation to covertly signify the "grundle," while "grundle" is southern dialect for the "maple bar," a very childish term for the "choade"—that notoriously 1980's term for the perineum.

Like Socrates, the narrator of *Professor Zephyr* is not writing so much as speaking aloud, in real time.

3) Thirdly, our narrator speaks to his jury of the Truth in a manner identical to Socrates. “A Truth is a thing which one needs must trust,” the narrator cries, “and consequently, dear gentlemen, ye needs must trust that the magnanimous Professor Zephyr’s hath expired.” Of course, we do not intend to “rashly ignore the Truth,” but in the mere asking, a very viscous irony has overtaken the narrative.

This irony is equally thick in Socrates’ above-quoted prologue, which “has seemed to most commentators to be a parody of forensic rhetoric.”⁵⁷ If Ango did compose *Professor Zephyr* as a parody of Socrates’ own parody, then the story contains some fascinating implications with regard to the nature of irony—a subject which I intend to address throughout these notes.

But for now I must leave this particular gloss as open-ended as our story itself: it is lunchtime, and my quiche is calling. Jambon!

(5) Avenue A, District B, Ward C, Tokyo, Japan

News Flash!

Incidentally, a colleague of mine from the Department of Japanese Cartography was kind enough to post a dispatch with regard to note 2—which, unfortunately, he addressed to my Department mailbox, and was consequently not received until last *Tuesday*, when it was discovered it at the bottom of a Phi-Delt hamper, buried amidst the ripe undergarments of the University’s defending-champion swim team. More eyebrows, I fear, will be raised in my direction. (And all this during the year I am up for tenure! Woe is me!)

At any rate, my colleague’s letter raised the following question with regard to my interpretation of the narrator’s mode of questioning:

...at which point I almost blew the bowl because I realized that the phrase “Avenue A, District B, Ward C” from your translation might not be an obfuscation after all, but a simple

⁵⁶ Plato, “The Apology,” trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant. *The Last Days of Socrates*. Penguin Books, 1993.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 32. Or see Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony* for a more involved discussion.

abbreviation! For back in my college days I often prowled the alleys of one Asakusabashi Avenue, Bakuro District, Chūō Ward, in search of underage—⁵⁸

Ahoy! A real Tokyo address!

My reader may imagine my fervor at the possibilities this letter raised. “Avenue A, District B, Ward C” might actually be a real address! Indeed, the puce Sanrio Stationary shook in my hands as I flew from my office and onto the first Tokyo-bound train. I was on my way to Professor Zephyr’s old stomping grounds! It was all I could do to contain my excitement. Three botched transfers and a good deal of footwork later, I arrived at Asakusabashi Avenue, where I discovered a quaint little recreational district, its Soaplands and Telephone Clubs basking in the afternoon sun. Could *this*, I wondered, have been the home of the real Professor Zephyr? Could this have been where the profound mysteries first began? Verily, I was giddy with scholarly elation!

It cannot be denied that Ango’s story draws upon real-world sources:

Wakatsuki Tadanobu, in his ground-breaking essay “The Model for ‘Professor Zehpyr,’” takes the liberty of spelunking into Sakaguchi Ango’s middle-school notebooks, ultimately procuring an offhanded doodle of one “Professor Okamura,” who’s broad and wrinkly forehead is indeed evocative of an octopus.

Okamura Masatarō taught Natural History at Nīza Middle School, where Ango was his pupil. He is the model for Doctor Octopus.

The 1924 student body publication *Wanna Play?* (『遊方会雑誌』) contains an essay called “Fondly Remembering My Father.” It is a memorial written by Okamura Masayuki, Masatarō’s son.

“He was a man who insisted upon fairness,” the article states, “and at school he was feared as Lord Pluto of Aoyama.” Aoyama was the nickname for Nīza Middle School. The article goes on to state that “from back in his days as a teacher, he had the nickname of ‘Octopus,’ due to the round and broad forehead, and the numerous other facial quirks which inevitably caused him to be the subject of the caricatures for the school Sports Festival.”

This Professor Okamura, who’s forehead was so broad and wrinkly that he was called “Octopus”—could he himself have once stood where I was even then

⁵⁸ excerpted without permission from a letter, postmarked **two weeks ago** (PLEASE use my post office box!!!), from one Professor Chutney, Dept. of Japanese Cartography.

standing? On that same corner? Perhaps Okamura had even indulged in the “mat play” (マッ プレー) for which the proud district was so renowned?

But then lightning struck. It occurred to me, in one tragic instant, that this could not be. It was an impossibility. For a glance at the original text revealed that the ‘A’ ‘B’ ‘C’ which had so permeated my colleague’s memories of youth was merely a figment of my translation! Aye, the original Japanese contained no such roman characters. It merely read: “Such-and-such Ward, Such-and-such District.”

I had been fooled by my own cleverness, as is so often the case with the clever.

(6) I present ye with the unadulterated Truth

My reader, I reckon, has noticed the certain similarities between Professor Zephyr and the narrator (videlicet the rhetorical questions and claims to the Truth highlighted in note 4). In truth, the resemblance is undeniable. A great number of scholars have seized upon this fact to suggest that the Professor and the narrator are one and the same character; and while I would not entirely rule out this possibility, I think that for now it would be better to treat Professor Zephyr as another ironic character.

(7) he is an invidious octopod

Historically, octopi have always been a creature of mysterious habits. They lurk in Freudian cracks and crevices, spurting clouds of foul ink,⁵⁹ slinking along the ocean floor, slimy and spineless. They were originally referred to as “Devilfish”—for like the devil they stalk their prey in the most cowardly of manners, blinding and ambushing victims from behind dark rocks:

⁵⁹ In their hiding behind absorbent amounts of ink, the octopus represents nobody more uncannily than the mailroom clerk, who seems to be publishing an essay every month, all of which are so wordy that one can barely make out the adumbration of his argument, through all the ink.

In Christian culture, its practice of squirting black ink to blind other creatures has made the octopus a symbol of the Devil, while its many arms have sometimes made it stand for lechery.⁶⁰

Strangely, the octopus did not really figure into Western culture until well into the nineteenth century. There have always been sailors' tales of giant squid, but the first real attempt to depict an octopus in literature did not come until 1855, when Victor Hugo published *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*.⁶¹ In Hugo's panoramic romance of the sea, the octopus is depicted in the following sort of language:

...the octopus has almost the passions of a man; the octopus hates. In fact, in the absolute, to be hideous is to hate.

...A glutinous mass possessed of a will, what more frightful? Glue filled with hatred.

...It is flabby. There is nothing in it. It is a skin.

...They are deliberate forms of evil.⁶²

Hugo's painting of the devilfish, although scientifically ill-informed, is a deeply evocative one. In his lavish imagination, the octopus is but a fleshy glob of mindless evil—the antithesis of all mankind. Indeed, the sheer amount of energy and hyperbole employed by Hugo to demonize the octopus is tantamount to the Professor's own rants against Doctor Octopus, in which he describes the Doctor as having "the opaque expression of a shoat, glabrous and plump." In fact, Hugo's novel was so evocative of the creatures that "octopods" soon became all the rage of European society. The fortunes of every aquarium in France and England alike hung upon their ability to acquire and display one of these mysterious creatures. Finally, in 1875, some twenty years after Hugo's *poupe* pulp, a naturalist named Henry Lee attempted one of the first scientific descriptions of an octopus. The book is entitled *The Octopus; or, the "Devil-Fish" of Fiction and Fact*⁶³, a great deal of which is devoted

⁶⁰ Sax, Boria. *The mythical zoo: an encyclopedia of animals in world myth, legend, and literature*, ABC-CLIO, Inc. 2001.

⁶¹ Let it be noted that Sakaguchi Ango was a voracious reader of French Literature, and was most certainly familiar with Hugo's tale.

⁶² Hugo, Victor. *The Toilers of the Sea*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood. Penguin Putnam, 2000. pp. 418-419

⁶³ Lee, Henry. *The Octopus; or, the "Devil-Fish" of Fiction and Fact*. Bradbury, Agnew & Co, London, 1875.

to respectfully debunking Hugo's descriptions. While the book intends to be a scientific treatise, the author is quite obviously enchanted by these mysterious animals, regularly breaking into poetic bits such as this:

Both of these accounts of the locomotive powers of the octopus are perfectly clear and definite; and therefore, although we may say, with Horatio,—“This is wondrous strange!” we must either entirely disbelieve, or apply to the case the aphorism of Hamlet:—“there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.”

Now, whether or not Sakaguchi Ango knew the pseudo-scientific work of Henry Lee is a matter of pure speculation; however, I have dug up this ancient treatise in order to illustrate the how the role of the octopus has developed in a historic context. In the mind of nineteenth-century Europe, the octopus was seen as an evil debaucher, waving its phallic arms about in the dark of the ocean floor. And in the Professor's testimony we can still hear the echoes and implications of Hugo's powerful invective: “These creatures almost inspire uneasiness in regard to the creator.”⁶⁴

(8) I swear upon Truth itself that he is indeed bald

As we have established in notes 4 and 6, the Professor's assertions of Truthfulness, like the narrator's, are rather suspect. The fact of the matter is that such claims to Truth only serve to further our feelings of unease. And I think I speak for all readers of this story when I say that Professor Zephyr is a rather dubious narrator. Consider the logic of this oath, for example: the Professor is, in essence, swearing upon the Truth that he is telling the Truth. Following this statement to its logical end, we realize that if the Professor is in fact lying, then is only calling himself a liar—a truly elliptical statement.

Again, I would like my reader to consider the ironic potential of these statements. As Kierkegaard observes in “The Truth of Irony”:

⁶⁴ Hugo, pg. 420.

Irony as a controlled element manifests itself in its truth precisely by teaching how to actualize actuality, by placing the appropriate emphasis on actuality.⁶⁵

How truly these words ring—like the lunchtime bells of the University, pealing o’er the quad as they do right now! By repeatedly emphasizing the “truth” and “actuality” of his argument, the irony is only intensified, thickened, curdled into phlegmy fodder for our laughter. For when the Professor swears to the Truth that the Truth is the Truth, we must necessarily doubt him all the more.

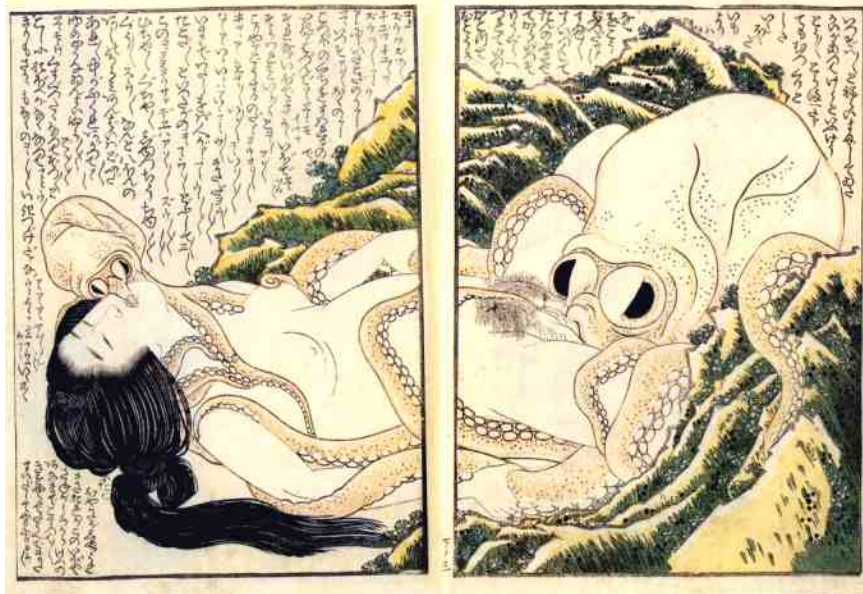
In truth, it is lunchtime—and I must get to the teacher’s lounge before a line forms at the microwave!

(9) He is but a mollusk

In note 7, we explored the role of octopods in the western canon, leading up to the time of Sakaguchi Ango. Continuing in this vein, I would like to take a moment to consider how Japanese art has treated these mysterious creatures over the years. In recent times, of course, the octopus has become an integral part of Japanese cuisine, and cartoon caricatures of octopi are ubiquitous in the fast-food sushi restaurants of our modern world. And who, visiting Tokyo’s infamous Summerland Water Park, does not ride upon the Dizzy Octopus at least once?

But the octopus was not always a symbol of such gay and care-free diversions. Indeed, just as in the western world, the octopus in Japan has historically evoked fear and animosity, and above all unbridled male sexuality. O many are the hours that I have spent in a quiet corner of the library, training my disconcerted gaze upon Hakusai’s notorious image:

⁶⁵ *The Concept of Irony*, pg. 324



“Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife” – Hokusai (1820)

The multifarious suckers wrapped around a tensile nipple, the glassy eyes of the octopus gobbling his nubile victim, and the woman, the *ama*, thrusting her pelvis up off the ocean floor, as if to goad her lover on—“More! More! More!”—it is almost too much to bear.

And then there are the myriad minor *shunga* (erotic woodblock prints) depicting more missionary (if all the more shocking) forms of underwater bestialism:



“Abalone Fisherwoman with Octopus” – Anonymous (1880)

Notice how the fisherwoman flails her tongue about in unbridled pleasure, her knees up at her chest and her left hand coaxing the octopus deeper and deeper into the watery abyss of her passion. It is too much—much too much—for a well-adjusted person to tolerate.⁶⁶

But aside from these knee-jerk reactions to the idea of fevered and acrobatic intercourse with a mollusk, I would like to take a more subtle look at the role of octopoda in the realm of Japanese language and literature. The appearance of octopi as a symbol of sexuality occurs as early as the 1810's, with the publication of the Edo comic masterpiece *Tokaido Hizakurige* (東海道膝栗毛). At the beginning of the third chapter, the following song appears:

⁶⁶ But if my reader *does* lack my own moral adjustedness, they might like to know that “Tentacle Attack” (触手責め) actually comprises an austere and lucrative genre of pornography in Japan. A dictionary definition of the ilk can be found on Wikipedia at <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/触手責め>. For readers interesting in performing their own academic analysis, the animation *Chōshin Densetsu Urotsuki Dōji* 『超神伝説うろつき童子』 is considered the *Citizen Kane* of tentacular eros, while *Injū Gakuen La Blue Girl* 『淫獣学園 (La☆Blue Girl)』 provides a more tongue-in-cheek take on the genre. One might also want to round out one's experience with the live-action *Injūkyōshi* (淫獣教師) volumes 1-4.

うらがお長松のかゝアは蛸よナア	My buddy Nagamatsu's wife's an octopussy
あぜさ蛸だとおもしろやるへ	You know why she's an octopussy?
八間まなかに足だらけ	Cuz she's all legs and crotch.
しょんがえ ドウドゥ	Be-Bop 'n Doo-Doo

Here, the octopus takes the role of a woman, while preserving the traditional connotations of crass sexuality. The point, however, remains the same: the octopus is “all legs and crotch,” an extreme manifestation of the phallus and vagina in grotesque organism.

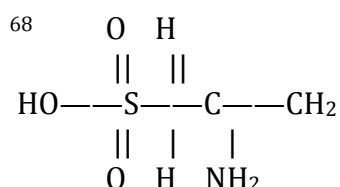
And the linguistic influence of the octopus is not confined to bawdy Edo literature, either. In traditional Japanese comedy (*rakugo*) the octopus is oft employed to symbolize the penis, while the ark shell mollusk (赤貝) serves as a standard trope for the vagina,⁶⁷ as we see in this 1974 erotic comedy “Octopus and Ark Shell”:

⁶⁷ For a good example of the ark shell mollusk as a symbol of the vagina in traditional comedic literature, see 「赤貝」『艶笑小咄傑作選』、小島貞二編。ちくま文庫、2001 年、pg 24.



And this is more than just fiction—the flesh of octopi is ripe with the chemical taurine⁶⁸, a notorious aphrodisiac popularized by dance-club beverages such as Red Bull or that frighteningly orange malt-beverage yclept “Sparks.” Consequently the word “octopus,” in the argot of Japanese hanky-panky, has long carried the connotations of George Benson albums or green M&Ms.

In this manner, Ango’s archvillain Doctor Octopus strikes a fiercely sexual figure, cuckolding the poor Professor Zephyr and shattering his dreams of academic grandeur. It requires little imagination to conjecture what the bald and beat-red head of Ango’s octopod (a “ruddy protuberance,” with “ghastly effluvium”) represents none other than an erect and turgid phallus, pungent with unctuous sweat, its unblinking eye affixed on the coeds down on the quad, playing Frisbee and dashing about in merciless hotpants.



(10) canst ye conceive of the notion of erudite octopodæ?

So far, we have established a noteworthy duality in the narrator's tale. Professor Zephyr, we know, embodies the loftiness of thought while Doctor Octopus represents all things fleshy and lust-driven, the dark desires hidden just beneath the wig of false erudition. The magnanimous Professor is described as a "black-maned, clear-eyed, jaunty young man," compared with which the invidious Doctor Octopus is "an unmentionable, lewd, hairless and ruddy protuberance" giving off an "offensive stench." Why, we are led to wonder, has the author created such a distinct dichotomy? Wherefore such Cartesian contrast?

This is a question that many Japanese scholars have wrestled with. Sōya Shini, in his 1967 essay "Sorcerer of the Void: Sakaguchi Ango's Hindi Proclivities,"⁶⁹ interprets the tale as follows:

Ango separates the "wind" of the ātman and the "octopus" of the flesh, and then depicts their rivalry.

Sōya, here, sees the "octopus" as a clear symbol of the lingam of Shiva, further affirming our idea of Doctor Octopus as signifying sex. This may seem like an elaborate way of troping such a self-evident pairing, but it is important to notice how uniformly scholars have arrived at similar conclusions. Kamiya Tadataka and Hirose Shinya⁷⁰ both separate Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus into categories of "thought/ideals" versus "flesh/reality." Asako Itsuo⁷¹, meanwhile, puts a slightly different twist on interpretation, suggesting that "mollusks are a symbol of women who possess fleshy beauty," while Murakami Mamoru, in his book "Wayfaring Ango: Seeker of Farce,"⁷² separates them into similar categories—conceptualizing them as Erik Satie (Zephyr) and Jean Cocteau (Octopus), both of whom Ango read and translated. At while such an obvious antagonism needs little scholarly affirmation, the question remains—why?

⁶⁹ 宗谷真爾、「虚空の幻術師＝インド教的安吾私見」。『日本きゃらばん』17号、1967年10月

⁷⁰ 廣瀬晋也、「博士の仮面＝風坂口安吾覚書」。「叙説」、1991年1月

⁷¹ 浅子逸男、「『風博士』論」、「坂口安吾私論＝虚空に舞う花」。有精堂、1985年5月

⁷² 村上護、「案語風来記＝ファルスの求道者」。新書館、1986年。ppg. 264-269

To answer this question, I would like to turn back to Plato's *Phaedo*. As my reader is well aware, Socrates' elaborate argument for the immortality of the soul revolves around a dichotomy very similar to Ango's.

Socrates begins his polemic by arguing that "the philosopher frees his soul from association with the body"⁷³ because "the body fills us with loves and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and a great deal of nonsense."⁷⁴ A man of learning attempts to achieve the purity of thought—to become as formless as the wind. "We are in fact convinced," Socrates continues, "that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things in isolation with the soul in isolation."⁷⁵ It is thus that Socrates arrives at the startling conclusion "that true philosophers make dying their profession."⁷⁶ True philosophers attempt to separate the soul from the body, achieving this in death.

In this manner, we begin to see Ango's story as a fictional representation of Socrates' polarization of the body and the soul. The carnal finds an icon in the greasy tentacles of Doctor Octopus, while Professor Zephyr evinces the ethereal altitudes of scholarship. In the end, the magnanimous Professor's fate is kindred to that of Socrates: both philosophers ultimately "make dying their profession."⁷⁷

(11) 'Twas the great Japanese samurai Minamoto Yoshitsune who transformed into Genghis Khan

Minamoto Yoshitsune (源義経) was a legendary Japanese general. In Japanese history, he cuts as notorious a figure as, say, the Napoleon of nineteenth-century Europe. He led a brilliant military campaign against the Taira family in the name of his half-brother, Minamoto Yoritomo, who became jealous of his fame and tried to have him killed. Yoshitsune evaded his vengeful brother for some time, using all of the cunning that had earned him such fame, but was eventually betrayed and forced to commit ritual suicide. Consequently, he became something of a folk hero, his untimely demise inspiring a drove of crackpot theories such as the above: that Yoshitsune secret fled to China and became Genghis Kahn. In this sense, Yoshitsune is something of a medieval D. B. Cooper—his heroic and mysterious death stirring

⁷³ Plato, "Phaedo," trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant. *The Last Days of Socrates*. Penguin Books, 1993. pg. 117

⁷⁴ *ibid*, pg. 119.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, pg. 119-20.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, pg. 121.

⁷⁷ the octopus is a dually appropriate trope for "the flesh" in Socrates' case, as Socrates was notoriously bald and plump.

the pot of public speculation regarding his true fate. Which leads us to a certain Professor Zephyr and his own bizarre death:

My reader has perhaps noticed that the allusion to the tragic fate of Yoshitsune, as well as the Professor's subsequent attempts to rewrite it, have some fascinating parallels. Both of these heroes (Yoshitsune and the Professor) die by their own hands after suffering a cruel betrayal. Just as Yoshitsune is forced into suicide by Yoritomo (aye, even as Socrates drinks hemlock upon Meletus' vile charges!), so Professor Zephyr's lofty own ruminations have been brutally decimated by the invidious Doctor Octopus. By extension, we can understand the octopus in *Professor Zephyr* as a metonymy for all the villains of history. Like all the Rasputins, Suge Knights, and Yoko Onos of the world, so octopi exists for the sole purpose of undermining the noble aspirations of man. "They are the joyless disturbers of contemplation," says Hugo in *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*. "Profound perplexity to the thinker."⁷⁸

And to add another layer to this rhyme, I think it would be safe to associate Professor Zephyr's imaginative historicism with Socrates, once more. For it was Socrates who insisted that to learn was only to "recollect," without any regard for Octopodal "reality." Or as a young Kierkegaard so elegantly couched it: "It is Socratic to disparage all actuality further and further back toward a past that itself retreats as far back in time as that noble family's origin that no one could remember."⁷⁹

O Yoshitsune!

O Elvis!

(12) What groundless, philistine sophism!

"Philistine sophism," here, is a translation of the hyperbolic Japanese idiom *guron-senshiki* (愚論淺識), a literal transliteration of which would read "stupid-thesis shallow-knowledge," but which possesses decidedly academic overtones of condescension that I have feigned to elicit with the fusion of "philistine" (in the German sense of "uneducated") and "sophism" (as opposed to, say, "pendantism," which, if my reader will tolerate a brief digression, I would like to address the tenuous, almost ethereal quiddities of nuance that furcate the consubstantial but nevertheless divergent concepts of (1) sciolism, (2) pedantry, and (3) pedagoguism, the latter two terms obfuscated by homogeneous etymological roots (no, scintillate

⁷⁸ Hugo, pg. 420.

⁷⁹ Kierkegaard, pg. 60

reader, not the Latin *pedis* of the podiatrist, but the Greek *paidos* of the pedophile!) and the prior perplexing us with the connotations of *sciolus* and *scire*, two meals not necessarily to the same table, Hamlet, lest we be the astucious Charlatan that Gunter Grass couched in such Ciceronian simplicity: “There is no difference between playfulness and pedantry; the one brings on the other”).

(13) his crimes are so fantastical as to confound the very intellect

Doctor Octopus’ crimes, in fact, are very juvenile in nature: the hackneyed banana peel outside the Professor’s door hardly qualifies as a sophisticated cabal. But duly clichéd is the Professor’s indignant reaction. And triply frivolous is the Professor’s devoted pupil, who presents us with his master’s last will and testament in an equally indignant (and therefore thrice fatuous) tone. O reader, this is indeed frivolousness of a rarified sort! Almost as frivolous, in fact, as that crook-pated brat down in the Department mail-room, who has succeeding in getting me even more trouble: this time by slipping a PRIVATE letter of mine into the locker of Mandy Preke (dazzling captain of the undefeated ladies’ swim team—Go Fighting Dofleini!), a letter which happened to be from a certain “alternative” social club to which I belonged during my free-wheeling graduate years, and which Mandy Preke in all her athletic innocence opened, thinking it was for her. Although the mix-up has been taken care of through sensitive (and expensive!) legal intervention, nothing has been done to remove the festering cause of the misunderstanding: namely, our own little mailroom octopod.

Indeed, it “confounds the very intellect.”⁸⁰

(14) Fortunately I suffered only a bruising of the buttocks and shoulderblades and avoided the potential concussion to my brain

The Professor opens the door to his office, utter oblivious to the glib and genital object poised just beneath his feet. I would like to emphasize the fact that this is not just a banana but a banana peel. For the turgid carnality of the banana-

⁸⁰ 「常識を肯んぜしめず」

phallus is distinctively *vacant*—hollow in its sheer corporeality, an empty signifier. We are instantly reminded of Victor Hugo’s vivid depiction of the octopod:

It has no bones, it has no blood, it has no flesh. It is flabby.
There is nothing in it. It is a skin. One can turn its eight
tentacles wrong side out, like the fingers of a glove.⁸¹

A banana peel, like a glove, has several fingers. Furthermore—and contrary to Hannah-Barbera’s cartoon depictions of banana-treachery—in order to effectively trip up one’s victim, a banana peel must be placed *inside out*, so that the slippery side is on the periphery, causing slippage between the banana and the shoe, as well as the banana and the ground. In short, the octopus must be turned inside out, like the fingers of a banana-peel glove.

And so the Professor steps out of his office, preoccupied with his philosophies, and steps upon the banana rind. He keels over, upon his back, suffering bruises to his hindquarters. But this is a victory, for the Professor! Indeed, bruises to his buttocks and shoulderblades notwithstanding, his precious grey matter was not concussed. This, as well, is quite significant: the Professor does not give the faintest fart for his body—but worries the world for his *mind*.

(15) My wife’s beauty, like high alpine vegetation, was so much more than mere vegetation!

Irony (according to Oxford, at least) is “(1) a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used.” In short, this is *not* an instance of irony. It is a simple case of inanity, on the Professor’s part.

On the part of the narrator, however, this is a choice example of “(2) a condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things.” This is what is often referred to as “dramatic irony.” We expect the narrator to present the Professor as a protagonist—a lofty-minded sage who has been undermined by the ironic and bodily octopus. The testimony that the narrator gives us, however, works contrary to this characterization. The Professor’s ludicrous prose-style and irrational metaphors (such as this one) undermine the very notion

⁸¹ Hugo, pg. 419.

that the Professor is the legitimate protagonist of our story. The octopus of irony, then, has insinuated itself not just into the Professor's life, but into the narrative as a whole.

(16) Strike down the invidious whifflebat!

I admit, I was a wee bit drunk when I translated 「膺懲せよ、憎むべき悪徳漢」 as “strike down the invidious whifflebat.” But upon subsequent review, I have decided that the phrase is an excellent, albeit textually discrepant, representation of Professor Zephyr's baroque condemnations. We must remember that tone precedes the literal meaning, in language, just as nuanced wind precedes fleshy form.

And what could be more breezy than the featherweight whizzing of a wiffleball?

(17) O gentlemen, whose coolness is such as to be comparable to an electric fan

Professor Zephyr's flattery, here, is significant: it is a compliment to be compared to a fan—a creator of wind. To be wise is to be cool. To be cool is to be windy, as opposed to the hot and thoughtless Octopod. We have already discussed these associations in several earlier notes, and this merely adds a thermal dimension to the duality. Nor is it an original association.

In a couple of earlier notes,⁸² I pointed out that a certain amount of irony is at work in this tale: Professor Zephyr's extravagant prose style, ludicrous oaths, and silly scholarship leave little doubt in the reader's mind that the Professor is an ironic character. I would like to consider this fact, again, in light of Socrates, and the implications that it has upon how we are to treat this irony. I return to Kierkegaard:

To me it is indisputable that everything described here definitely constitutes ironic situations and that certainly anyone who read the Apology with the assumption that

⁸² notes 8 and 15

Socrates had never lived but that a poet had wanted to embody the intriguing elements in an indictment and condemnation such as this would feel the irony.⁸³

All the elements of our story exist in this quotation. As my field trip to Asakusabashi made evident, we have little reason to believe that Professor Zephyr or Doctor Octopus really existed. A man who flies around inside whirlwinds of his own device? A walking talking octopus? Very little that the narrator says can be taken as a legitimate attempt at Naturalism, and so when he asks his audience whether they are acquainted with Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus, the audience replies with an implied “No.” Everything described in the story constitutes ironic situations—in particular the intriguing elements in an indictment and condemnation.

Again, I return to Kierkegaard:

Indeed, the whole Apology in its totality is an ironic work, inasmuch as most of the accusations boil down to a nothing—not to a nothing in the usual sense of the word, but to a nothing that Socrates simply passes off as the content of his life, which is again irony.⁸⁴

Could it be that *Professor Zephyr*, as a work of literature, “boils down to a nothing?” Could the putative suicide of Professor Zephyr represent Socrates’ passing off of his life as “nothing?” I would say that this is not exactly the case, for reasons that I will elaborate in subsequent notes; but for now let it suffice to say that the irony of the narrator’s own Apology is as Socratic as the character of the Professor himself.

(18) I was able to spirit into his room like the very air itself

This sentence provides yet another example of our eternal flesh/mind and Octopus/Zephyr dichotomies. The Professor has just “spent a long night reading through approximately every single tome ever written on the subject of locksmithery”—and it is none other than this “knowledge” that allows him to become “like the very air” whilst the flesh-bound Doctor Octopus cannot but wallow

⁸³ Kierkegaard, pg 90.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, in footnote on page 37. Making this a sort of meta-footnote.

in the mindless deepsea of sleep. And so we again have “intelligence” associated with weightless aether; the Octopus with the unconscious flesh.

(19) Alack, for I have but one recourse. I have chosen to end my own life.

How, one wonders, will suicide help the Professors cause?

After a long expostulation on the invidiousness of Doctor Octopus, the Professor tells us that suicide is his only option and, in one brief sentence, disappears—as if this were a totally natural decision on his part! We can only emit a wry chuckle at his exaggerated decision, for as was the case with Socrates’ death sentence, there is “no reasonable connection between the crime and the punishment.”⁸⁵ The irony has ne’er been thicker.

Which leads us to a definition of irony, as it operates, here. And since irony is an invidious and slipp’ry character, I would like to begin by listing the concrete instances of “irony” that we have confronted thusfar:

1. The Professor swearing “upon Truth itself.”
2. The Professor’s impassioned defense of apocryphal scholarship.
3. The Professor’s overwrought indignation over Doctor Octopus’ childish pranks.
4. The Professor committing suicide because of his failure to reveal Doctor Octopus’ baldness to the world.

In all four of these instances, the irony that we detect is a result of “the punishment not fitting the crime.” Irony is a matter of contrast—a contradiction between spoken word and underlying meaning. For example, visiting the zoo one might exclaim, “Elephants sure are tiny!” to the uproarious laughter of one’s companions. Such pleasure it brings! I would like to turn to Kierkegaard again, here, to explore the trappings of this humorous irony. Keirkegaard tells us that irony “maintains the contradiction between essence and phenomenon, between the internal and the external.”⁸⁶ In *Professor Zephyr*, we have seen how the narrator’s assertions of the Professor’s erudition are often contradicted by the actual evidence present; however, as I expressed at the end of note 17, there is something that exceeds mere irony and contradiction in this tale. There is something more urgent here than mere japery—a fact attested to by one of Japan’s finest Ango scholars:

⁸⁵ *ibid*, pg. 89

⁸⁶ *ibid*, pg. 257. The emphasis is the *author’s*, believe it or not.

Professor Zephyr is a decidedly logical work, through and through. The wind whipping through the room, the clock striking one PM, the chair, the shadow, the flashes, the whirlwinds, the quiet seventeen year-old flower girl and the manic old Professor, his extreme anticipation and forgetfulness with regard to his own wedding ceremony, the POPOPO, the TATATATATAH... his transformation into the wind, and then influenza, finally infecting Doctor Octopus at the end—it is all almost *too* uncannily logical.⁸⁷

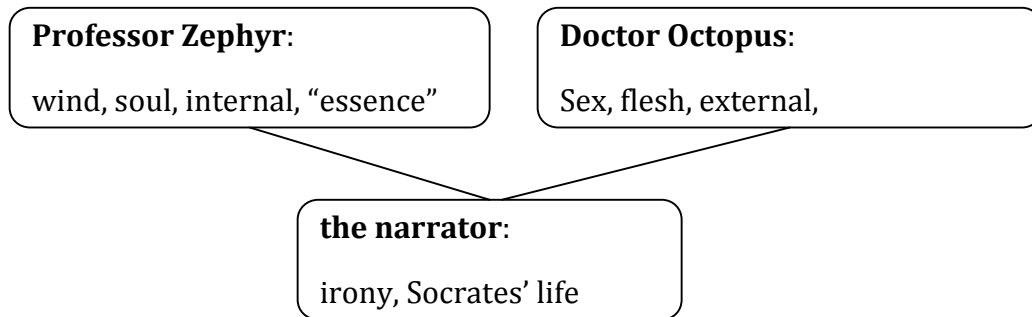
And so my question is: how do we account for this logic—for logic is certainly present? Wherefore the elaborate plot, when the goal is mere irony? Why do I get the feeling that author is trying to say something—something allegorical—in spite of all the pastiche he employs? The answer, actually, has been staring us in the face for some time now.

Returning to our definition of irony:

Irony, you will recall, consists of the contrasting representations of “essence” and “phenomenon.” And in our tale, we have a similar construction: the two dialectically opposed tropes of the Zephyr and the Octopus could be construed as figurative manifestations of Kierkegaard’s “essence” and “phenomenon.” The ungraspable wind is the perfect trope for “essence,” while the greasy octopus epitomizes real-life “phenomenon.” Seen in this way, Ango’s tale could be interpreted as *an allegory of the concept of irony*. Certainly, the characters are ironic, but this is only incidental—or, at least, a self-reflexive gesture on the part of the author! Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus form a Cartesian duality—much like Socrates’ ideas of the flesh and the soul—and the sheer contrast that the two provide create *irony*. The lofty ideas of Zephyr/Essence contradict the greasy corporeality of Phenomenon/Octopus, and in the end, this irony forces “essence” to vanish into thin air. What Ango has provided us with (in essence) is a blueprint of the workings of irony. An ironic tale *about* irony. A parody, if you will, of a parody.

To sum these exciting ideas up in a simple chart:

⁸⁷ 庄司肇、「坂口安吾論集成」。沖積舎、1992年。pg. 46.



Logically, it is a very clearcut arrangement of the themes I have addressed. Using this simple outline, we can clearly see that *Professor Zephyr* is a work of irony that is profoundly aware of its own ironic status.

And yet, the moment I put this on paper, I begin to feel somewhat unconvinced by my own argument. In delineating the allegorical structure of *Professor Zephyr*, I have compromised its primary status as a work of irony. By definition, a work cannot be both ironic and didactic—that would be a contradiction in terms. But I am not alone in my frustration, here, as Kierkegaard himself often became jaded in his attempts to expose the irony behind Socrates’ *Apology*, professing:

When it comes to an account of the irony diffused in the *Apology*, to which I now turn, I find myself in a bit of difficulty. I could try to chase together a host from every corner, but, to say nothing of the fact that the lengthy argumentation necessary for each point would bore the reader, I also believe that the whole section, instead of coming together like a soft whisper, as is the nature of irony, would come whistling. To have to demonstrate irony through additional research at every single point would, of course, rob it of the surprise, the striking—in short, would enervate it. Irony requires strong contrast and would utterly vanish in such boring company as argumentation.⁸⁸

Irony, it would seem, cannot be properly depicted in the dry medium of academic discourse. To describe an ironic situation is to rob it of its irony; to take it seriously is to miss its import—fetter it in logic and it instantly disappears into thin air. The Professor, for one, has already vanished with a poof in lieu of proof.

⁸⁸ Kierkegaard, pg. 90.

Kierkegaard worries about this. How does one deal with Socrates' irony, when "it is the nature of irony never to unmask itself?"⁸⁹ How do you show the world that which cannot be shown? Isn't the very idea of trying to "show the unshowable" an impossibility—one with an inevitably ironic outcome? Indeed, Professor Zephyr finds himself in an identical situation: how does one go about exposing an Octopus who keeps producing new wigs out of thin air? And how does the narrator go about proving that the Professor Zephyr has "disappeared" when the crux of his disappearance was that he left no proof? And how shall I myself deal delineate the irony that bleeds from Ango's tale?

Indeed, irony is like a blushing coed's maidenhood: you grope and grab and at last you grasp it—only to gasp, for it has vanished in the grasping.

And yet one cannot help but grasp.

(20) a manner which left no corpse

To recapitulate the conclusions that we have arrived at thusfar: there are two separate layers of symbolic meaning for the relationship of Professor Zephyr and Doctor Octopus. The first is the Socratic relationship of the flesh and the mind, with the Professor corresponding to the mind and the octopus representing the flesh. The second is the structure of Kierkegaardian irony, in which the Professor represents the Kantian essence (internal) and the octopus *embodies* the existential phenomenon (external).

With regard to both of these interpretive frameworks, the Professor's putative suicide provides several important revelations. For one, the significant lack of a corpse affirms our construal of the Professor as a manifestation of pure thought. In Socrates' mind, death was a "purification" of the soul, for which the philosopher prepared by "separating the soul as much as possible from the body, and accustoming it to withdraw from its dispersal throughout the body and concentrate itself in isolation."⁹⁰ The Professor appears to have achieved this Socratic ideal in death, for he has left no corpse. He has become the wind, in a very literal manner! This is an amazing feat; however, within our Kierkegaardian interpretation of the tale, the Professor's disappearance merely attests to the fact that any examination of the logical of irony will in essence "kill" the irony, leaving no *corpus delicti* of the irony that was being examined in the first place. The Professor's attempts to delineate the terrible antagonism between himself and Doctor Octopus in his "Last

⁸⁹ Keirkegaard, pg. 48.

⁹⁰ Plato, pg. 120.

Will and Testimony” inevitably results in his “dispersal” into thin air—alack, for the ironic figure has “but one recourse.”

Which brings us to the narrator of our tale. Whoever this loyal disciple may be, he has begun the task of reconstituting the irony of the Professor’s life for his jury, sans corpse or any other evidence of wrongdoing. His tone, we have noticed, is identical to his mentor’s; moreover his ornate diatribes against Doctor Octopus are utterly Zephyrian in nature. Seen from a Socratic standpoint, this impassioned defense is another attempt to establish the Professor as an embodiment of pure intellect—as the wind. But seen as a Kierkegaardian allegory of irony, the narrator becomes another ironic figure—frantically trying to reconcile the “essence” of the Professor’s death with its “phenomenal” *lack* of a corpse. The narrator stands upon schism. His absurd invectives and baroque depictions of the Professor’s aeronautic acrobatics create a blaring gap between his intended effect (“essence”) and our actual reaction (“phenomenon”) to his speech. The narrator, like his master, has been fooled by the octopus; and we, his jury, cannot but dismiss him as a madman.

(21) the magnanimous Professor was oft sucked up into the ensuing tornado, somersaulting through the air with one fist held out before him

In contemporary terms, a scene like this would be called “magic realism.” Up until this point in the story, we have been treated to a veritable Tupperware party of ludicrous rhetoric: strange invectives, lamentations, and ejaculations punctuating nearly every sentence. But the narrator has also been careful not to violate our scientific understanding of the *physical* world. The laws of Newton were, for the most part, adhered to. With this paragraph, however, we are suddenly confronted with an undeniable gap between the narrator’s tale and our assumptions about reality. Just like the Professor’s silly dreams of Minamoto Yoshitsune transforming into Genghis Kahn, the narrator has presented us with an absurd representation that compromises his credibility and confirms his status as an ironic character. In magic realism, this same effect is achieved by presenting fantastical subjects (“essence”) as though they were just everyday “phenomenon.”⁹¹

While we are on the subject of “magic realism,” I would like to remark that a number of surreal things have been occurring here in the Japanese Department as of late. Yes: another exacerbating mailroom prank. This last semester I was teaching a seminar entitled “Post-Semantic Japan: Subversive Strategies of the Pseudo-Ideological Aesthetic,” and had been blessed with a group of enthusiastic and

⁹¹ It might be interesting to re-access the post-colonial objections to the paradigm of “magic realism” as a rejection of its inherent “irony” (the irony of the colonist).

athletic young students—many of them members of the women’s water polo team. I enjoyed every class to the fullest, and the students’ final papers were of such high quality that I felt that some of them should be published. For this reason, I had included a few comments of a personal nature in my critiques of their paper—invitations to discuss the possibility of publishing over a cordial or two. As luck would have it, the crustacean cretin in the mailroom (coveting my position, no doubt!) decided that he would deliver my students’ papers to the department chair rather than the students themselves. Consequently there has been a dramatic misunderstanding with regard to my innocuous attempts to further my students’ academic careers; what’s more, my poor students have apparently been blackmailed or otherwise corrupted by our scheming postman, for rather than coming to my aid, several of them have conversely requested disciplinary action against me. I would attempt to explain the incredible irony inherent in this situation, except that we are both aware that irony, once delineated, will dissipate into thin air like Professor Zephyr himself. And so I shall refrain from bothering you with the wry injustice of these allegations—for as Socrates asks us in his eternally rhetorical manner: “What sort of thing would naturally suffer the fate of being dispersed?”⁹²

(22) The bride-to-be was, at the time, a seventeen year-old girl of consummate beauty

As my acute reader may have noticed, something very strange has happened. You will recall that the Professor, in his “Last Will and Testament,” spoke of how his beautiful “wife” was seduced by the lecherous Doctor Octopus. In the narrator’s version of the story, however, the Professor never actually marries his seventeen year-old fiancé. This strange discrepancy has caused a great deal of speculation among scholars—myself among them. In yet another unpublished⁹³ tour de force, I state:

...leaving aside cheap dismissals of “Homer nodding,” the obvious interpretation is that the Professor was indeed married, subsequently divorcing his wife after she was “seduced” by Doctor Octopus. He then went on to propose to the fiancé of the narrator’s tale, failing to mention her in his

⁹² Plato, pg. 136

⁹³ the folks at Monumenta Nipponica have held a childish grudge against me for years, perhaps due to a deconstructive interpretation of one of their rejection letters that I posted to my website.

testimony. This reading would make sense, superficially; however, it would severely forfeit the sense of narrative unity and logic permeating this tale. The Professor speaks as though he were writing his “Will and Testimony” shortly after his wife’s debauching. How could he have time to court another girl and get married again? And even if he were capable of divorcing and remarrying in such a short period of time, wouldn’t that contradict his main impetus for suicide—namely, the loss of his beloved wife?

There seems to be only one answer to this conundrum: namely, that these female characters are one and the same woman. Both are described in similar terms—floral beauty and consummate innocence being their chief characteristics. According to the Professor she was his wife, stolen by the pleasure-giving tentacles of Doctor Octopus; according to the narrator she was his fiancé, waiting for the Professor at their wedding altar all night. As the “jury” to whom the narrator speaks, these notable discrepancies between the stories must somehow be accounted for. Someone, we realize, is not telling the truth.⁹⁴

Without pausing to dwell upon the keenness of my own observations, I would like to address the implications of this excerpt. The significant disparities between these two versions of the female figure could be credited either to the Professor, the narrator, or a combination of the two. But since the narrator is the true teller of any tale (the defendant, *in quaestione versare*), any incongruence between the Professor’s story and his own are the narrator’s problem. The burden of proof in fiction (as in an essay such as this) always lies with the narrator. And so we are led to assume that the narrator himself has not noticed this blaring logical schisms in his tale, but has let them slip out from beneath his toupee. In this instant, we have caught a glimpse of the octopus lying just underneath his narrative—but the octopus himself does not notice that we have noticed.⁹⁵

(23) the magnanimous Professor Zephyr and all the other magnanimous Professors, enshrouded in their furious whirlwinds

⁹⁴ Matthew Mistral, “The Politics of Symptomatic Narrative Discrepancies and ‘The Gaze’ in Ango’s Prewar Metafiction.” Unpublished, 1996. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!

⁹⁵ There is a discussion of this very issue, along with a rather retro hypertext version of the story (hasn’t the <frame> tag been deprecated by now?) at:
<http://members.tripod.com/~ango/kaze/index.html>

My reader, I imagine, found themselves scratching their heads at these words. I myself have spent many an evening itching my own bare scalp over this enigmatic turn of phrase. What does the narrator imply by “all the other magnanimous Professors?” Why does he further damage his credibility by suddenly mentioning this multiplicity of Professors? Is flying about in a whirlwind such a common activity, among academics?

In notes 21 and 22, we explored some startling contradictions between the Professor’s testimony and the narrator’s retelling of it. These contradictions, combined with bizarre statements such as this, serve to further our suspicion with regard to the narrator. There is little we can say to account for this—that is, unless there are indeed a multiplicity of protagonists—a veritable army of Socratic soul, wheeling about on the lofty winds of thought, trying to expose the octopi that lurk in every one of us. Who are these wispy pedants, flipping frantically through the texts of yore, in search of little ironies?

Usually, narrative discrepancies such as this are a gigantic headache for hermeneutic scholars. In this case, however, every slip of the narrator’s tongue seems to reinforce our interpretation of *Professor Zephyr* as an allegory of irony itself. Through our enlightened eyes, the gaping hole in his tale is immediately recognized as a “contradiction between essence and phenomenon.” The narrator himself has assumed the Professor’s position, and we become the “narrators,” making our own elaborate Apologies against the narrator as we read along.

Some readers may find themselves admiring my ability to so deftly deal with problematic passages such as this. I am grateful for this praise; however, I must admit that any adeptness that I may possess in dealing with “discrepancy” and “irony” is due not so much to my interpretive skills or my considerable erudition, or anything else that could readily be considered a virtue; but rather, I am able to handle the slippery presence of contradiction through the abundance of the unctuous substance in my own life—one particularly poignant manifestation of such involves the very essay that you now read. You see, I begin writing this with the hope that its publication would create something of a splash in the field of Japanese literary studies—a billowing wake that I could ride all the way to the sandy beaches of tenure. At this point, however, I have begun to realize that, although this essay may still someday create a splash in that elite lane of the pool reserved for literary-critical lapswims, tenure is no longer in my future. This last week, you see, under the guise of “delivering mail to Professor Mistral’s office” our conniving mailroom clerk decided to take a few liberties with my desk, which I had forgotten to lock in my rush to the microwave. His sticky fingers quickly unearthed some photographs that I had taken at a swim meet several months past—all completely innocuous, in any other hands but his.

Being a loyal supporter of our school’s swim team (Go Fighting Dofleini!), you see, I make a point of learning the names and faces of all the athletes. From way up

in the bleachers, however, it is nearly impossible to distinguish one swimmer from another in their uniform Speedos and swimcaps; thus I am obliged to bring my Nikon D90 (with Zoom-Nikkor Telephoto lens) with me to all of the meets. Not only can I zoom in so close as to distinguish which athletes have neglected to shave their legs, but the photographs I take at meets are sometimes featured in the sports section of the *Campus Buzz*. I often make prints of the more artistic of these, proud as I am of my craft, and give them to swimmers and staff. Unfortunately, the pictures purloined from my desk happened to include a number of test shots that I took when I first got my telephoto lens. Among them are close-ups of my former student Mandy Preke, including one particularly vivid snapshot of her, freshly shellacked with poolwater, searching betwixt two perfectly chiseled buttocks for that lucky strand of wedgy'd swimsuit, beads of water poised on her goosepimpled haunches in perfect focus, a masterpiece of depth of field.

The mailroom clerk, however—possessed of an imagination so sordid that the technical attention paid to framing and shutter-speed went completely unnoticed—seized upon this opportunity to unlawfully⁹⁶ confiscate my photographs. I can no longer attend department meetings without at least one new accusation being raised against me. Yes: I myself have become a victim of the “indictment and condemnation” that Kierkegaard finds in Socrates’ Apology—the very same sorts of accusations that have been hurled at Zephyr’s poor apologist. At any rate, another legal fiasco inevitably looms on my horizon—a horizon from whence the setting sun of tenure slowly wanes...

(24) He is the wind is the wind is the wind

This strange turn of phrase⁹⁷ recalls Gertrude Stein’s notorious manifesto: “A rose is a rose is a rose.” In Stein’s case, this phrase has been interpreted as an attempt to restore contact with the “essence” of a thing by repeating its name indefinitely. This interpretation could most certainly be extended to the case in point, here; however, our poor narrator has the misfortune of dealing with the enigmatic and ironic wind as opposed to something as corporeal as Stein’s rose.

⁹⁶ I would like to stress the fact that these pictures cannot, in good conscience or legal practice, be used against me in court.

⁹⁷ The original Japanese is perhaps even more bizarre than my translation conveys: 「然り風である風である風である」

(25) Doth ye intend to doubt me further, gentlemen? This is most lamentable indeed!

Ah, how I would love to repeat these selfsame words verbatim to our department chair! And yet the result would likely be the same—for in our story these words come as no surprise: the narrator asks his audience whether they believe him and their response is a vehement “No.” Not only has the narrator’s account of events factually contradicted that of the Professor’s, but the Professor’s own testimony was a joke to begin with. And in attempting to defend an ironic character like Professor Zephyr, the narrator has become an ironic figure himself—for how does one champion the cause of the wind? How does one advocate the aether?

The answer being that one *cannot*, in any successful manner, plea irony’s case—for irony has no case. “Irony,” Kierkegaard tells us, “has no purpose; its purpose is immanent in itself and is a metaphysical purpose. The purpose is nothing other than the irony itself.”⁹⁸ Irony, by definition, negates an idea—it is a destructive force, an acid, dissolving all it touches in its acerbic wit. Including me—for here I am, attempting to deal with the irony that is rife in Ango’s tale in an enlightening manner, only to have it slip through my fingers like the wispy phantom of tenure. And to add insult to perjury, on this very morning I was forced to make my own Socratic defense in front of the the entire Academic Council. The result of my eloquent and subtle oration, however, was all too faithful to Socrates’ script, for not only has tenure been officially denied me, but that tentacle’d creature from the mailroom has been granted an assistant professorship on par with my own. And finally, if that weren’t enough irony for you, here I am still sitting at my typewriter, pecking away at this ill-fated essay—which I began as my golden ticket to a tenure! Can you fathom the deep-sea depths of irony inherent in the very composition of this essay: an essay about irony which will, ironically, achieve absolutely nothing? Most lamentable indeed!

(26) On that very same day—indeed, in the very same instant!—the invidious Doctor Octopus contracted influenza, having stood out in the wind too long.

The word “influenza,” in the penultimate phrase of *Professor Zephyr*, carries little of the punch in English that it would for a Japanese reader. Although the original Japanese employs a bastardization of the same English word—“*infuruenza*”

⁹⁸ Kierkegaard, pg 256.

(インフルエンザ)—the implications of the word are contained in the native Japanese word for the flu, “*kaze*” (風邪). This is both a homonym and a metaphorical derivation of the word “*kaze*” meaning “wind” (風)—which, incidentally, is our dear Professor’s name. Whereas in English we would say “I caught a cold,” in Japan idiom is “I drew the wind.” A Japanese reader would immediately pick up on this pun; however, my own audience does not have access to this association, and therefore I have opted to amend the final phrase with the clause, “having stood out in the wind too long.”

How to gloss profound implications of this phrase? How to expound upon the significance of the Octopus “catching” the Professor’s lofty wind? In this simple turn of phrase, Sakaguchi Ango has achieved a veritable Copernican revolution within the philosophical discourse of irony! Aye—for the body hath caught the disease of the soul, giving birth to a whole new form of irony! In this one word, *kaze*, the narrator has set off a firework show within the tinder of our logic, which we can only watch with bated breath. The whole structure is even now roaring with flame, fed by the greedy winds that would eat our arguments down to its very foundations.

Ah—and speaking of fire: I was officially fired yesterday. This came as no surprise; but I must admit that I was taken aback by how quickly my mailroom nemesis capitalized upon my lay-off: in the course catalogue for next fall, he is already scheduled to teach a class entitled “Post-Humanist Criticism and the Face of Contemporary Japanese Scholarship.” Alas, I can just picture the snide imp as he rakes his squeaky chalksticks over the blackboard, grease from his lower back slowly bleeding through a threadbare sportshirt, forehead fevered under the weight of his plait toupee, my dear Mandy sitting before him in one of her unseasonal miniskirts, wide-eyed, broad-shouldered, suspecting nothing! Little does he know, however, that at this very moment I am at last completing what will doubtless be one of the greatest works of modern Japanese literary scholarship. The cicadas are humming, here in Ueno Park—a sort of victory song, commemorating my triumphant day. Hum and buzz combine into a resounding “huzzah” as I announce, in my press release:

From this day onward, scholars of literature and philosophy shall turn to this translation, whenever the octopus of irony attempts to thwart them in their critical endeavors. The creature may always exist, behind the shadows of rocks or clouds of ink, but due to my labors the wig has been removed, once and for all.

Indeed, it is only a matter of time before that octopus from the mailroom will be forced to add this very essay to his syllabus, so that his tan and perky-breasted students will be read these pages, and perceive his invidiousness, and rise from their seats in unison—laughing, pointing, calling out in Grecian chorus:

“Octopus! Octopus! Professor is an Octopus!”

Oda Sakunosuke: Regardless of the Stink

Fast-forward a few years to the beginning of 1945. Iōjima is ramping up to be a bloodbath, America is preparing to firebomb both Dresden and Tokyo, and a young author by the name of Oda Sakunosuke is putting the finishing touches on a queer little novel called *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*. A retelling of the Chinese Monkey King legend, Oda's version was originally conceived as a radio drama and broadcast by NHK⁹⁹ Osaka over the three-day period from January 30th to February 1st, 1945. These three days coincided with an intense Allied bombing campaign against Osaka, and Oda recalls that

we had to air it in little bits, between interludes of air raid sirens, but apparently people were pretty tired of hearing nonstop government propaganda on the radio because we wound up winning a broadcast award for it.¹⁰⁰

In the days immediately following *Sasskay*'s airing, Oda proceeded to rewrite the script into novel form for publication by Shinchōsha, and a print version of the first chapter was on the shelves of Osaka bookstores by February 10th, under the title "The Book of Fire Concealment." Oda intended to write five such Books, but only got through the first three before dying, less than a year later, of TB.

The story is a comedy—or rather, a farce, in Sakaguchi Ango's terms. In fact, I'm not even sure if "farce" is the right word to describe a story that is basically a forum for the myriad forms of wordplay. While puns are often used in serious literature to forward the plot or illuminate a metaphor, *Sasskay* is the sort of story where the plot and its tropes exist solely to produce more paronomasia. By the end of the story, the multiple levels of punning have become so prevalent and recursive that all other aspects of the tale—characters, historical allusions, names and narrative—become subservient to greater and more elaborate puns. Just as Makino's mirrors and Ango's irony served to make literature a character in the comedy, Oda's puns put language writ large on the stage.

In this chapter, I will move through *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp* in chronological order, to show the reader how the various forms of punning build on each other in a progressive manner. Great emphasis will be placed on the mechanics of the pun—the ways in which puns both make and unmake meaning. In my conclusion, I will discuss the possible reasons that Oda Sakunosuke allowed a

⁹⁹ Japan's national public radio (日本放送協会—*nippon hōsōkyōkai*).

¹⁰⁰ 織田作之助. 『駄洒落』 in 「織田作之助資料」、ed. 関根和行 (東京: オリジン出版センター:), 146.

device like the pun to so completely consume *Sasskay*, and what this decision suggests about the overall meaning of the piece.

This will be a great deal more straightforward than the previous chapters, if only because my subject is not. Puns are oblique—they already miss the point, and quite intentionally so. To adequately engage my text, however, I will be obliged to translate a great deal of the story and its puns into English, a process that entails a great deal of “fudging” (I believe that is the academic term) on my part. And while Ango’s irresponsible translator may have made such fudging seem quite natural, I would like to regain some semblance of critical integrity in this final chapter. So before delving into the actual puns themselves, I would like to take a cursory look at how critics have theorized puns, and how these theories have informed my translations of *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*.

Regardless of the Stink

Any word that begins with P-U is bound to be stinky—and the work “pun” is no exception. Unless of course you punned it with “pundit,” because a “pundit” is defined as “an expert, a connoisseur, a critic”—and none of these things are particularly stinky, except maybe “a critic.” But regardless of the stink, it’s awfully fun to pun.¹⁰¹

—Oda Sakunosuke, “The Pun”

Punning has always had its critics. And the criticism of puns isn’t always limited to its pungency—a really bad gag triggers worse things than the gag reflex. “A pun,” according to Charles Lamb, “is a pistol let off at the ear”¹⁰²—but it isn’t the smell that really pulls the trigger for most critics so much as the simple fact that *puns don’t have a point*. They are punchlines that miss the pun-ching bag and fall over on their pundament. This is funny, I suppose, because the Oxford English Dictionary points out that that the word “pun” might originate from an abbreviation of the Italian puntiglio¹⁰³—a “small or fine point.”¹⁰⁴ And what could be more pointless than a puny point?

But when I say that puns don’t have a point, I don’t mean that they are pointless, per se, because every pun actually has at least *two* points—the word intended and the pun or puns thereof. In my English translation of the quotation beginning this chapter, for example, I have punned the word “pundit” with “punned it,” taking advantage of the fact that the sound *pun’dit* points to two distinct concepts: an actual or self-professed authority (a “pundit”) and the past participle of the verb meaning “to humorously use words that sound alike but have multiple meanings” (“punned it”). In other words, I am exploiting the inherent quirks of language to talk about the inherent quirks of language—showing how even the most lofty and learned pundit (“pundit” comes from the Sanskrit for a Brahman who is versed in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy and law) shares a phonetic signifier with the tiniest whit of wit. The same goes for puns themselves: although punning has met with some harsh criticism (Samuel Johnson states that puns “are to Shakespeare, what the luminous vapours are to the traveler; he follows it at all adventures, it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire.”¹⁰⁵), it is also the stuff upon which great art is built. James Joyce made puns

¹⁰¹ 織田作之助. 『駄洒落』 in 「織田作之助資料」、ed. 関根和行 (東京: オリジン出版センター、1979)、72-73.

¹⁰² Lamb, Charles. *The Last Essays of Elia*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 257.

¹⁰³ Bates, Catherine. “The Point of Puns.” *Modern Philology* 96, 14 (May 1999): 421.

¹⁰⁴ Numerous critics make the same point, including Catherine Bathes, Jonathan Culler, and Walter Redfern.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, Samuel. “Preface to Shakespeare,” in *Selected Writings*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 273.

one of the focuses of his literature, as had Rabelais, Sterne, and Swift before him. The old testament is rife with alliterative puns,¹⁰⁶ and Jesus followed this precedent when he punned about Peter (*petros*) and the rock (*petra*) upon which he would build his church. Perhaps it is only appropriate, then, that Hebrew textual scholars are often referred to as “pundits”—for interpreting the word of God requires a great deal of intimacy with paronomasia, allusion, and the polysemic nature of language.

In the above translation, I feel that I have lived up to this ideal of the punning scholar. By punning “punned it” with “pundit,” I have illuminated a certain quirk of language, all the while performing this quirk for my reader and alluding to the pundits who interpret them.

The original Japanese, however, is based upon an entirely different pun. Oda Sakunosuke plays upon the Japanese word for “pun” (駄洒落—*dajare*), but does so with the word for fashionable (御洒落—*oshare*), making light of the fact that the pinnacle of style shares its root (洒落—*share*) with something typically thought of as the antithesis thereof—the consummately tasteless pun.

Unfortunately, the word “fashionable” is completely lost in my translation, replaced with “pundit” and all of its biblical connotations—an ideal of style replaced with one of erudition. As is often the case with translations, slick taste is replaced by dry scholarship in order to retain the pun’s purported “point.” In this case, I have assumed that the “point” of the above paragraph is that “a pun plays with multiple and humorously contrasting meanings,” and have attempted to retain this meaning with an approximate English pun. It might be suggested that the original sense of “fashionable” is the real “point” of the passage, and that I have done Oda Sakunosuke injustice in taking my own poetic liberties. One might assert that in retaining the joke, I have sacrificed the real meaning, the guts, the soul. But I would suggest that sometimes—or perhaps even *most* of the time—the pun itself *is* the point of the passage, a point which is particularly true with a punctiliously punning author like Oda Sakunosuke.

I have, after all, replaced “style” with “scholarship.”

*

“Puns cannot be translated”—this has long been a sort of maxim among translators, implying a footnoted apology and exegesis of the missing joke. Joseph Addison tells us that the only way

to try a Piece of Wit is to translate it into a different language,
if it bears the Test you may pronounce it true; but if it
vanishes in the Experiment, you may conclude it to have
been a Punn. In short, one may say of a Punn as the Country-

¹⁰⁶ Rendsburg, Gary A. “Word Play in Biblical Hebrew,” in *Puns and Pundits*, ed. Scott B. Noegel, (CDL Press), 200.

man described his Nightingale, that it is vox et praeterea, a Sound, and nothing but a Sound.¹⁰⁷

But this argument obviously exaggerates the case on the pessimistic side. A pun is indeed primarily a sound—but in my experience at least *part* of a pun's meaning can always be retained in translation, the part for which the "literal" is sacrificed. A pun, we know, plays with the multiple senses of a single sound, and while translation is forced to alter the sound value of a sign, a great deal of the sense can be retained. In the above passage, for example, the senses of "pun" are kept, while connotations of "fashionable" are thrown away. In English, the first two letters of "pun" (P-U) connote stinkiness, while the first character of the equivalent Japanese word (駄—*da*) combines the characters for "dog" and "horse," and indicates "coarseness" or "roughness." When we read the passage in English, we are assailed with the unique odor of punning; when we read it in Japanese, the rough edges of language rub up against our skin.

This "roughness" is lost, in English—as is the word "fashionable"—but other things are carefully retained: the slightly self-deprecating humor, the self-conscious wordplay, the rhythm. In particular, the fact that Oda is punning the word "pun" seems vital to the sense of the paragraph. I would even suggest that, if anything, *translating* the paragraph only contributes to its richness, for the simple fact that translation works very much in the same manner as a pun. By straddling two different languages at the same time, any translation is self-consciously artificial, pointing at an authoritative textual reality while performing its own interpretation of it. Translating a pun, in particular, calls attention to the fact that the translation is "performing" the original text.

I originally submitted in a rough draft of this chapter without discussing the nature of the pun in translation, and it was returned to me with a number of comments like "How did you translate this?" "I think you need to explain the original Japanese pun." "Footnote?"

In essence, my translation had fomented in my reader's mind the same sort of doubts that a pun would evoke in the mind of a "pundit." What is the *meaning* of this pun? What part is just a figment of translation? Footnote? Just as puns were to lead Shakespeare out of his way and engulf him in the mire, so translation can take an original text and turn it into a pointless performance. I might dismiss the arguments of a scholar who has only read Japanese literature in translation because he hasn't read the "real" text; or I might be frustrated with an English overdub of *The Seven Samurai* because it is "unfaithful" to the original. But in translating an author like Oda Sakunosuke, I have found that surprisingly little is really lost in translation—in spite of the fact that all of the puns, rhymes, and allusions require me to take an enormous amount of poetic liberty. I would not feign to suggest that Oda *ought* to be read in translation, but I feel that the self-conscious nature of translation helps raise many of the same questions that Oda was attempting to raise with his puns—namely, what is *authentic*, here?

¹⁰⁷ quoted in Redfern, Walter. *Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.) pg. 169.

These are the same questions that Makino was asking, with his mirrors, and that Ango was asking, albeit in supreme Socratic fashion. And these questions are not just theoretical, or textual. Through puns, Oda was raising important points about his characters, about the ego, and about Japanese history, as well as literature. If “farce” was Ango’s ideal, then it is the pointless pun in which Oda finds a unique philosophical stance with regard to all of these things. Wherever possible, I will try to show how I translated the original puns, to bring the “pun” of my interpretation to life for the reader, as well as to assuage any unease about a translation which professes to pun upon the original text.

A pun is a policy—not life insurance or government legislation—but a whole world view, an aesthetic. A pun attests to the pleasure that we take in the loose and shaky basis of language, the wobbly way in which we understand the world. The “critic” mentioned in the above translation is by nature opposed to punning, because “critic” comes from the Greek *kritikos*, akin to *krinein*, meaning to pull apart, to separate. It shares a root with “crisis,” and in doing so represents the very crisis of language, because it is a critic’s job to pull things apart, to separate serious literature from authors like Oda, Ango, Makino. Meanwhile, it is the pun’s job to penetrate these lines, to remind us that the distinctions we make are often only the prejudices of language, figments of the collective imagination. Punning “pundit” with “punned it,” then, has a point after all—a very sharp point which pokes fun at our ballooning lexicon until it punctures the critic’s pride, for as Catherine Bates notes:

By dissociating himself from the pun—above all from the dreaded bad pun—the critic works to preempt or to remove any obstacle which might impede either his own or his reader’s understanding.¹⁰⁸

Perhaps this is why even Bergson found puns to be “the least reputable” of jokes.

Oda Sakunosuke, on the other hand, was as beleaguered as the poor pun, spending most of his career in dubious battle with literary critics who found him coarse and confrontational. His works were censored, bowdlerized in literary reviews, dismissed as “low-brow pop fiction.” His stories, like the puns that permeated them, didn’t seem to have a “point.” In other words, he was “unfashionable”—much like a pun.

But I don’t think that he was very worried about this “fashionable” half of the pun. He was worried about the pun itself—as we shall see in the first chapter of *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*.

¹⁰⁸ Bates, Catherine. “The Point of Puns.” *Modern Philology* 96, 14 (May 1999): 430.

The Cusstival: Puns of Situation

Sasskay the Flighty Chimp begins back in feudal Japan, in a time when samurai and sages, knaves and ninjas, ghosts and goblins all wandered freely about the land. This time is known as the Momoyama Era, corresponding to the latter half of the sixteenth century, best known as the age in which Japan was making the push out of chaotic feudal turmoil and toward a centralized government.

The story begins at the foot of the Japanese Alps, in a small town called Nite Village, the villagers of which were

renowned for inventing a number of bizarre festivals and observances, and as the story goes the residents of the village would assemble in the gathering darkness of the local shrine every New Years Eve, on their way to pay homage to the ancestral gods, and hold a cussing competition.

Men and women, old and young alike would hurl insults and curses at each other sans reserve or discrimination—oblivious, abandoned—until a whole year's worth of pent-up swearing had been exhausted in one foul evening of libel.

And for this one special evening it didn't matter how rude you were, for custom held that if you could out-cuss your opponent you would be blessed with good luck in the coming year—and so people racked their brains, projected spittle, and cursed until their throats went dry. They called this odd tradition "the Cusstival," and from early evening until the temple bells rang in the New Year, the ghastly and tasteless uproar went on uninterrupted.¹⁰⁹

The idea of a "Cusstival" might seem a bit farfetched to a contemporary reader, tempting us to place *Sasskay* in the category of fantasy. Contrary to our assumption, however, these events were actually a revered tradition in feudal Japan:

Aside from all of the festivals celebrating human sexuality, there are numerous other festivals whose main purpose is to incite laughter in the spectators. For example, there is a form of festival called a "Cusstival." During a "Cusstival," the peasants of the village hurl a hailstorm of curses upon the Shinto priests and village aristocrats.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ I will be quoting from 織田作之助.『猿飛佐助』in「織田作之助：ちくま日本文学全集」、(東京：筑摩書房、2000) 199-275.

¹¹⁰ 樋口清之.「笑い日本人」、(東京：講談社、1982) 52.

Like its English counterpart, the Japanese word for “Cusstival” (悪口祭り — *akkōmatsuri*) is a “situational” pun of sorts. The religious connotations of “festival” (祭り — *matsuri*) cause a bit of semantic friction with the blasphemous “cuss” (悪口 — *akkō*), and the result is a sort of confusion that could be called “humor.” This holds true for the original Japanese, since this particular word for “cuss” is one of the Ten Grave Precepts of Buddhism (不悪口 — “Thou shalt not speak ill of others”). A cardinal sin, in essence, is being used as a tool for worship.

A pun, by definition, implies that “one signifier is attached to two or more signifieds; the word can mean two or more things”¹¹¹—and what makes this scene a “situational pun” is the fact that the villagers are signifying multiple and contradictory things with their actions. They are “on their way to pay homage to the ancestral gods,” but mark the occasion by standing around the village shrine, insulting each other’s mothers. Moreover, it is the peasants who are insulting the members of the ruling class—a reversal of ordinary hierarchies. The sacred and sacrilegious are confused, as are the higher and lower classes, creating what Bergson calls “reciprocal interference.”

Higuchi Kiyoyuki describes a “Cusstival” as follows:

The event is utter chaos, but one of the most interesting things about the Cusstival is that while the spirit-summoning ceremonies are conducted in a solemn and reverential manner, as soon as the grills are fired up and the dancing starts, all the spectators will suddenly start shouting curses and insults at the dancers and musicians.

These spectators come to the Cusstival for the express purpose of cussing everyone’s ears off, but after a while the peasants begin to join them in the cursing, shouting particularly lewd insults that incite peals of laughter from the crowd.

The spectators then try to interfere with the dancers and their dance; meanwhile the dancers try to keep dancing, as serious as can be—and the contrast between these two conflicting parties is absolutely hilarious.¹¹²

What Higuchi has described, here, is the situational pun inherent in “Cusstival.” The sheer contrast between the solemnity of the dancers and the raucousness of the spectators is inherently funny—a literal manifestation of the contrast between “festival” and “cuss.”

The linguistic implications of the scene, as well, are significant. As the opening passage of *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*, the Cusstival confronts us with a situation where language is being used outside its normal context. The villager’s curses work much like bad puns, referring to other words rather than to any real phenomenon. It’s a game of one-upmanship—to see if you can think of something

¹¹¹ Bates, Catherine. “The Point of Puns.” *Modern Philology* 96, 14 (May 1999): 424.

¹¹² 樋口清之. 「笑いと日本人」、(東京：講談社、1982) 53.

worse than the last person.¹¹³ Like a bunch of children, the villagers shout curses “more for the way they sound than for any particular meanings”:

“I hope you get gobbled up by the Chikuma River troll,
and the ogres use your ribs for a toothpick!”

“Well I hope the goblins of Tory Pass nab you and
scramble you for breakfast.”

“Well I hope you choke on your New Year’s
dumplings and we ring in the New Year with your funeral!”

“Yeah? Well I hope you meet a witch in the forest and
are cursed to walk around with sandals on your hands for the
rest of your life!”

“Yeah? Well I hope you have an epileptic seizure at
your wedding and hang your sandals from your nose and
start foaming at the mouth!”

“Yeah? Well I hope your daughter goes crazy on New
Year’s day and jumps in the well and drowns!”

“Yeah? Well I hope your wife has a baby who’s blind
in one eye!”

Within the sacred space of the local shrine, the residents of Nite Village have created an environment where language, conversely, has lost its sacrosanctity. They are no longer addressing real-life objects or social realities, but employ language recursively, referring back to language. The Cusstival is a superstitious, medieval version of a “yo mama” contest: it allows villagers speak uninhibitedly, without the social taboos that ordinarily accompany language.

Johan Huizinga, in his seminal study of “play,” writes of similar cursing contests in Norse and Inuit cultures, describing the latter of which in the following manner:

The clan or tribe thereupon gathers at a festal meeting, all in their finest attire and in joyful mood. The two contestants then attack each other in turn with opprobrious songs to the accompaniment of a drum, each reproaching the other with his misdemeanours. No distinction is made between well-founded accusation, satirical remarks calculated to tickle the audience, and pure slander. For instance one singer enumerated all the people who had been eaten by his opponent’s wife and mother-

¹¹³ When I was a kid, the game was called “What’s Grosser Than Gross?” and involved thinking of something either grosser and/or more painful than the last person. Such vulgarity, it appears, is universal: “Insult matches, lying-tournaments, bragging-matches,” Redfern reminds us, “[are some of] the most beloved practices of human beings the world over and throughout recorded time.” (13)

in-law during a famine, which caused the assembled company to burst into tears.¹¹⁴

But Huizinga takes special care to note the “magic circle” inside which these contests take place. His description of Norse swearing contests is amended with the following caveat:

The ritual nature of these contests is revealed by the express mention of the fact that the hall where the wassailing and disputing are held is a “great place of peace,” and that in it nobody is allowed to do any violence to another whatever he says.¹¹⁵

In Oda’s “Cusstival,” the villagers’ curses are spoken within the village shrine, in a manner almost identical to Huizinga’s Inuit tribes. The curses are spoken for the joy of the audience, as well as for the individual’s sense of liberation from the mores and taboos of language. The Cusstival shows us how wordplay can challenge the conventions of society as well as those of language itself—and suggests that the two might be intimately related. “A pun,” Walter Redfern tells us, “is language on a vacation,”¹¹⁶ free from society, and free from itself.

But there is something too idealistic about all of this. Puns can be liberating, but they can also be cruelly literal. Any television commercial will affirm the fact that punning is not always employed with the listener’s best interests in mind. “The Right is Right,” says a cultural conservative, just a small political and semantic step from the skinhead staple of “White is Right.” I’m not sure when the revered tradition of naming pornographic movies after Hollywood blockbusters was established, but since its conception (that’s a double entendre) this seminal genre (that too) has given us ample examples of how the pun can be used for less than noble means.¹¹⁷ Anyone who ever went to public school has more than likely been emotionally damaged by malicious wordplay: my own name, for example, was frequently revised into “Matt Fart-N-Go” or “Matt Fag-o.”

I will return to this idea of names and puns later, but for now let it suffice to say that puns can be liberating as well as libellating. Puns free up language to semantic play, but they also make language susceptible to use as propaganda and slander. A pun, to one of Swift’s Houyhnhmns, is “The Thing Which Is Not”—a falsity, a decoration. Puns impugn.¹¹⁸ Oda Sakunosuke, of course, was well aware of this, having grown up with all the wartime slogans of the Japanese empire, some of the more famous of which include “Wartime Shortages—the only thing we have a shortage of is a frugal mentality” (足らぬ足らぬは工夫が足らぬ) and “Excess is the

¹¹⁴ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 85

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 69.

¹¹⁶ Redfern, Walter. *Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.) 14.

¹¹⁷ I can’t help but cite a few: *Big Trouble in Little Vagina*, *Brassiere to Eternity*, *Moulin Spoooge*—and since we’re talking about Japan, here: *Poke’er, Mon*.

¹¹⁸ Ouch.

enemy!” (贅沢は敵だ). These phrases provide an excellent example of how puns can be both oppressive and subversive, because the Japanese people subsequently took these bits of government wisdom and cleverly re-punned them into critiques of the government and the war: “Wartime Shortages—the only thing we have a shortage of is husbands.” (足らぬ足らぬは●夫が足らぬ) and “Excess is excellent!” (贅沢は素敵だ).¹¹⁹ An entertaining American parallel appears in Delia Chiaro’s *The Language of Jokes* (Routledge, 1992. pg. 36), telling of how “the ubiquitous World War Two poster reading ‘Be Alert’ was often amended in graffiti: ‘Your country needs Lerts.’”

Because of this constant battle between propaganda and inappropaganda, Oda was well aware of the power that punning had when wielded as an ideological weapon; and although the Cusstival seems to be working as an ideal experiment in the use of taboo language, it only takes one belligerent villager with “the nasal whine of chronic emphysema” to ruin the harmless nature of the contest:

“Yeah? Well I hope your wife has a crater-faced baby
like that Hawkmond boy, Sasskay!

The very next moment, a tall and hulking man slipped
out of the shrine grounds—quietly, but with the big
bounding strides that his height afforded him. It goes with
out saying that this was none other than the prodigal son of
local samurai bigwig—it was Hawkmond Sasskay.

¹¹⁹ These are both notorious examples and require no citation, but for more on the subject of wartime humor I invite my readers to visit <http://www.sky-net.or.jp/masahiro/humor.htm>

Sasskay: Puns of Character

Sasskay, the protagonist of the story, is about seven feet tall and bursting (as it were) with zits. And to make matters more complicated, “he is also the owner of an inordinate sense of pride.” Of good birth and bad looks, Sasskay’s character plays all the ordinary connotations of social superiority and vanity off his bearlike body and sensitive complexion—he is both overweening and over-weenie at the same time. Sasskay’s vanity is so great, in fact, that until this very evening he has been utterly blind to his own unsightliness. He spent his last nineteen years of his life writing elaborate loveletters to the ladies of the village; he was under the impression that they were blushing at his charm.

But his pride is as large as it is fragile, and the words of this uncouth peasant have suddenly pried Sasskay’s pride away from him: “*I hope your wife has a pimple-faced baby like that Hawkmond boy, Sasskay!*” The shock is too much to bear, and Sasskay makes up his mind to quit the village indefinitely. His girlfriend Kaede tries to stop him, assuring him that she did not hear the fatal insult, but Sasskay is resolute:

If you did not hear them, then I shall tell—Alack!
My facial craters gape so deep that peasants do gape back
And mock my pockmarked face. Indeed, my pimples are so vile
That gruesome goblins groan aloud and warthogs fight back bile.
Hitherto I’ve been a fool, unwary of my face
Flaunting it from my tall coign—but to my own disgrace!
So ghastly is my visage, dear, that ogres laugh aloud—
And yet like some ungodly flag I’ve held it high and proud.
A pox upon my pocks! I thought the night would hide my zits
And so I set out dressed up in my fav’rite of outfits.
But at the Cusstival a peasant made it clear to me:
My pimples do exceed the stars in multiplicity!
Such loss of face I cannot face—I wish I could abide
Inside a hole, but I’m too big my craters for to hide.
Goodbye, dear Kaeday.

Throughout the story, Sasskay speaks in high poetic diction like this. The rhythm of his Japanese, of course, is quite different from that of the English translation, consisting of five and seven syllable lines (like a haiku or waka), but the overall aura of Sasskay’s speech is preserved just as the narrator describes it: “In spite of his grief, Sasskay quickly assumed an air of cultivation,¹²⁰ speaking in oddly metered verse.”

¹²⁰ 「風流男の気取り」 —the airs of a cultivated man.

Japanese verse doesn't usually contain "rhyme," as English definitions conceive of it. Sasskay, however, employs a wide variety of wordplay within his verse, a great deal of which is tantamount to rhyme. In particular, he uses a difficult form of verse called *jidzukusi* (字尽くし), which involves rhyming the first syllable of every few words. I will discuss *jidzukusi* in greater detail later, along with another rhyming technique called *goroawase* (語呂合わせ)—but for now let it suffice to say that Sasskay employs a number of devices that are very similar to Western rhyme. Most notable of these devices is the pun.

"Rhyme and pun," Debra Fried tells us, "are twins."¹²¹ Both associate words through their sounds, but derive their interest from the opposing or ironic meanings inherent in the rhymed words. For example, in my translation of the above passage, the word "zits" rings clever when rhymed with "outfits" because of the sheer contrast between pockish acne and foppish garb. One could easily glean a deeper meaning about Sasskay's personality through this rhyme—he is a highly narcissistic man (hence the "fav'rite of outfits"), but he is not very dermally endowed ("zits"). This joke is inherent in the rhyme, just as it is in Sasskay himself. In the original Japanese, the most notable rhyme comes at the end of the passage, where Sasskay states: "I wish I could abide / Inside a hole, but I'm too big my craters for to hide." To give you a feel for how this rhyme works, here is a romanized version of the Japanese:

穴あらばはいりもしたが、
A-NA-A-RA-BA-HA-i-ri-mo-shi-ta-ga
まさかアバタ穴にもはいれまい。
MA-SA-KA-A-BA-TA-A-NA-ni-mo-ha-i-re-ma-i

This is a very complex pattern, consisting of six and eight rhyming "a" syllables at the beginning of either line. It would be impossible to rhyme eight consecutive syllables in English and still preserve any sort of relevant meaning—furthermore, both of these lines end with the same verb "to hide" ("ha-i-ri" in the first line, and "ha-i-re" in the second), creating a very complicated collusion of sounds and sense. The best I can do, as a translator, is to compensate for this baroque rhyming elsewhere, with the use of internal rhymes and alliteration wherever possible ("gruesome goblins groan aloud," etc).

"Poetic form," Fried continues, "itself has a punning logic or illogic because it constantly sets up equivalences that depend of difference."¹²² The Japanese for "hole" (穴—*ana*) rhymes with the word for zit-crater (アバタ穴—*abata'ana*), two contrasting concepts united by a single sound. A hole would hide Sasskay from humiliation; however, ironically, it is the holes in his face that cause him humiliation in the first place. It is this quirky rhyming of similar sounds and opposing concepts that makes us laugh; but there is also the situational irony inherent in the rhyme that functions as characterization. Sasskay would like to hide, but he cannot. He is

¹²¹ Fried, Debra. "Rhyme Puns" in *On Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1988) 83.

¹²² *ibid*, 86.

both introverted and extroverted, proud and shy—a quirk of personality that informs everything he does.

This personality trait is emphasized through another important pun. At the end of my English translation, Sasskay states: “Such loss of face I cannot face.” Linguistically, this is a fairly simple trope, playing off of two meanings of the word “face” (“one’s honor,” and “to pivot in a specified direction”), and in any other context it would be considered simple irony. But in the context of Sasskay’s speech the two abstract meanings of “face” have the effect of evoking Sasskay’s very real pepperoni mug, and the combination of these three elements turns the clause into a more complex pun on complexion. It is Sasskay’s “face” that has caused him to “lose face”—but his deep sense of pride (read: “face”¹²³) won’t allow him to “face” up to a society which sees his face as ugly. Facing society, having two faces, facing the music but falling flat on one’s face—Sasskay riffs off this same pun, lamenting that although his craters make him want to hide, they are much too small to hide him.

In Japanese, this “facial” trope serves to emphasize the intimate relationship between rhymes and puns. The Japanese for “face” (面—*men* or *tsura*) punctuates the passage, and the story at large.¹²⁴ In Sasskay’s soliloquy, here, we see it appear in the word “pochmarked face” (アバタ面—*abatatsura*) and in the figurative sense of “face” as “pride” (面相を持った顔—*mensō wo motta kao*). The phrase “ungodly flag” (面妖な旗印—*men’yōna hatajirushi*) is based upon the same Chinese character, rhyming/punning with the following “high and proud” (臆面もなく—*okumenmo naku*) in the next line, creating another notable rhyme of character. Obviously, the lyrical repetition of the two-syllable “*men*”¹²⁵ creates a rhyme, in the lyrical sense of the word, but what is really important here is the contrast between the ideas of “ungodly” and “proud.” This pun is the fundamental element of Sasskay’s psyche: he is both ugly and proud.

And so the pun is apt, here. A man of a wealthy upbringing, Sasskay was born into a great deal of hereditary “face.” He has “an inordinate sense of pride,” and speaks like a goofy version of Byron.¹²⁶ His physical face, however, along with his hulking build, causes a certain amount of friction with his personality and social

¹²³ Pride is associated with the face in Japanese, as well: 「面目を保つ」 (*menboku wo tamotsu*) means “to save face,” and 「顔が経たない」 (*kao ga tatanai*) means “to have no face to show.” The character for the face of a surface (表—*omote*) is also used to describe the visage as well as one’s social “face.” I have heard that the English “to lose face” is actually a transliteration of a Chinese idiom, which may account for its presence in Japan, as well.

¹²⁴ Oda employs several other words for “face,” as well, including 「顔」 (*kao*) and 「表」 (*omote*), but the word 「面」 (*men*) is used most extensively. The connotations of the English “face” (“one’s honor,” and “to pivot in a specified direction”) are both inherent in 「面」 (*men*).

¹²⁵ This is TWO syllables, in Japanese.

¹²⁶ In Japanese, he speaks like a goofy Ariwara no Narihira (825-880), a poet/philanderer from the early Heian era.

standing—they have put a bad face on him, if you will. Sasskay is twofaced: that is, built upon a pun.

And so, unable to resolve this pun on “face,” Sasskay executes an about-face, turning away from Kaede and fleeing “deep into the mountains, where even the sound of the temple bells couldn’t find him.” Significantly, he runs and hides in a “cave” (穴—*ana*), an act which literally performs the metaphor at the end of his soliloquy.

High above the mundane world, Sasskay spends his mornings playing with chimps, his afternoons studying the classics of poetry, and his evenings practicing swordsmanship on tree trunks. Three years pass in the twinkling of an eye, Sasskay’s “pockmarks completely hidden behind a rich mountain-man beard.” But as he would soon realize, when it comes to escaping your own face, you can pun, but you can’t hide.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Ugh.

I've been using the term "pun" rather broadly so far. Situational puns, puns of personality, puns of poetic form have all been bracketed within my loose definition of paronomasia. Likewise the conventions of rhyme and translation have been associated with the pun. And so a little caveat, here: my use of "pun" is intentionally figurative, and will become moreso as we proceed. The verbal phenomenon called "pun" is being used as a metonymy for *a trope which humorously associates contrasting or contradicting elements of the text*. Puns open up language to multiple levels of meaning—and like Oda Sakunosuke punning "punned it" with "pundit," I feel obligated to pun the word "pun."

One might be tempted to categorize "contradictory elements of a text" as examples of "irony"—but I want to insist on the word "pun" here because I think it captures the mechanisms of *Sasskay* with greater accuracy. Certainly, irony is present in the situational pun of the Cusstival and in *Sasskay's* language, but as we saw with the complicated pun on "face," the polysemous connotations of a pun exceed mere irony. Fredrick Ahl makes this distinction between irony and punning in a very concise manner:

If irony destabilizes a text by letting it mean both itself and its opposite, puns add an alien set of referends which multiply meaning and totally undermine the explicit.¹²⁸

Irony, in other words, says one thing and means another, while a pun says one thing and means any number of things at the same time. A pun is self-conscious, bringing light to the powers of language rather than denying them altogether. To some extent, a pun contains strains of irony, but it exceeds them in that it opens up language to non-ironic interpretations as well. Conversely, the function of irony is a uniquely negative one—irony is "infinite abstract negativity," according to Kierkegaard¹²⁹—contradicting anything that one says.

In *Sasskay*, for example, the function of punning isn't to negate meaning so much as to multiply it: *Sasskay's* character, upbringing, and diction are not inherently antithetical so much as *polythetical*, having multiple meanings. Nakaishi Takashi describes *Sasskay the Flighty Chim* as "a story arranged around dialogue built around nothing but puns"¹³⁰—and the pun is not only the fundamental element of the narrative, it is also the basis for *Sasskay's* personality. Puns give voice to the protagonist's intricate circumstances better than simple irony or

¹²⁸ Ahl, Fredrick. "Ars Est Caelare Artem" in *On Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 21.

¹²⁹ Kierkegaard, Soren. *The Concept of Irony*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 323.

¹³⁰ 中石孝. 「織田作之助：雨 螢 金木犀」、(大阪：大阪文学叢書、1998) 143.

parody could, because his problems are more complicated than simple parody and irony can account for. If the story were ironic, Sasskay's pride would be the punchline to his laughable face—the sheer contrast between the two would be underlined for the reader's amused dismissal. But Sasskay is not just a lampoon, because his pride is linked to his social standing through a pun on “face,” and because we understand his profound sense of loneliness through a pun on “cave.” His character is complex, and like a real human being, he spends his life running from the contradictions on which that complexity is based.

The unconscious, Lacan tells us, is structured like language, built upon signs and associations—and for a fictional character in a book, the unconscious is very *literally* a linguistic structure. The puns in Sasskay are *literal*—that is, *all* of their multivalent meanings hold true. And if irony has an antonym, it is “literalness” like this.

But now I would like to expand my definition of “pun” outside of the realm of character and apply it to the question of genre.

A genre, like a character, is also a linguistic structure. Its rules and ideals are assembled over a number of texts, to be mimicked or abandoned by future writers. Sasskay the Flighty Chimp is a decidedly modern story, written in modern Japanese, but it employs and embodies a number of unrelated genres, all of which play off of each other to generate what I will call a “pun of genre.” In the last passage, for example, Sasskay speaks in a traditional Japanese poetic diction, similar to haiku or waka, consisting of five and seven syllable lines, while the narrator speaks in a uniquely modern voice. My English translation has performed this as a heroic couplet—a genre which, like the Japanese waka, is generally reserved for high-minded subjects like love and beauty. But Sasskay uses these “high” poetic forms to immortalize his pusling pimples, a choice of genre which seems as misplaced as his disproportionate ego.¹³¹

And the “pun of genre” has many more elements than this. *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*, incidentally, is based upon a children's story of the same title from the late Meiji era (1868-1912).¹³² It was the Hardy Boys of Oda Sakunosuke's time, and most Japanese males of adult age during World War Two grew up reading

¹³¹ My choice of the “iamb” for Sasskay's poetic speech, by the way, is based upon the origins of the iambic form in Greek rituals that are very similar to the Cusstival:

Greek tradition has numerous traces of ceremonial and festal slanging-matches. The word iambos is held by some to have meant originally “derision,” with particular reference to the public skits and scurrilous songs which formed part of the feasts of Demeter and Dionysus. The biting satire of Archilochus is supposed to have developed out of this slating in public. (Huizinga, 68)

Thus the form of Sasskay's speech is another manifestation of his character: he is a heroic lampoon (“Iamb what iamb,” Sasskay replies with a shrug).

¹³² specifically, the first volume of *Sasskay* was publish in April of Meiji 36 (1903).

serialized versions of the story.¹³³ But Oda intended his new version of the story to be serious literature as well as a fairy tale, and the afterward to the original publication of *Sasskay* contains his account of “how arduous it was to make real literature out of a children’s story.” While many modernists were writing works based on the classics of antiquity, Oda was anticipating pop art by making literature out of the Japanese equivalent of Encyclopedia Brown.¹³⁴

If we stop here, we have mere irony. Saying “children’s fiction” but meaning “literature” is an ironic move—a negation of the traditional binary between high and low art. But the equation is more complicated than that. Oda intends to “make real literature out of a children’s story”—not mere camp or parody. This is perhaps due, in part, to the fact that the original children’s version of *Sasskay the Flying Chimp* is based, in turn, upon the Chinese legend of the Monkey King (西遊記—*xīyóujì*). This timeless tale is standard fare throughout China, Korea, and Japan, featuring a proud monkey by the name of Son Gokū (孫悟空) who challenges every sort of authority, straight on up to the gods themselves. The tale of the Monkey King was later used as justification for the Cultural Revolution in China, as well as a model for Toriyama Akira’s seminal comic *Dragon Ball Z* in Japan¹³⁵—the animated version of which went on to entertain a whole generation of American kids. Just a few years before *Sasskay*, in fact, Nakajima Atsushi had published his own two-part novel based on the Monkey King legend—a very serious literary affair.¹³⁶ The archetype of *Sasskay*, then, is one that extends from the hallowed halls of the ancient classics to the playgrounds of children’s books, from the peaks of high modernism to the politicized world of Chinese propaganda.

The very title of the story, then, is pun on genre. In one breath, “*Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*” conjures the classical, the juvenile, and the highly modern. A glimpse at the actual text only confuses matters further, as it slips through the schisms in a number of “-isms”: court poetry, pop-fiction narrative, academic treatise and slapstick farce. All of these schools of thought and style play off each other in an

¹³³ This original version was published by Tachikawa Bunko, which was like the Grosset & Dunlap of prewar Japan. It is difficult to get a hold of old Tachikawa Bunko books these days, but a comicbook version of the story was published just after the war under the title *Sasskay*, which can still be found at used bookstores in Japan. Kōdan Bunko also published a “remake” of the children’s story, which while not nearly as engaging as Oda’s souped-up version still has some priceless scenes, such as when the ninja sage makes young *Sasskay* steal the pubic hairs of 100 pregnant duchesses.

¹³⁴ Encyclopedia Brown is like Hardy Boys for a slightly younger audience, featuring a brainy detective who once captivated my second-grade imagination. It probably has more currency with my generation than the Hardy Boys, which seemed rather dated by the nineteen-eighties of my childhood.

¹³⁵ The works of Toriyama Akira are generally categorized as Pun Comics (ギャグ漫画—*gyagumanga*), another trait shared with some of his earlier incarnations.

¹³⁶ 『我が西遊記』、first published by 問題社 in July of 1942.

intertextual pun that only becomes more and more complicated as the story goes on, reaching its pinnacle in a character named Zarathustra.

One day, while practicing his swordsmanship up in the mountains, Sasskay comes across a walking, talking cypress tree:

Sasskay swung his sword at the cypress' trunk, but the tree dodged left, leapt right, eluded his thrusts.

"Wondrous strange indeed— / a moving cypress tree! / Mere tree this cannot be / but sprite, fairy, or pixie!"

At that moment, Sasskay heard a wild cackle, from whence he could not tell.

"Who laughs thus?"

"Aahahahahaha!"

"Hark! Again it laughs! / At my quirky face perhaps?"

"Ahaaaha!"

"Such impudence! Such brazen disgrace! / To laugh without showing thy own face! / Ye must be the famed goblin of Tory Pass, / who laughs in spite of his own crass / and green-hued face. For everyone knows / a goblin's nose / even outgrows / Pinocchio's / by a nose. / Let's see you laugh that nasal laugh / when I snap your staff-like nose in half! / For every laugh I'll make you groan / when I'm gobblin' up your goblin bones— / that greenish aspect froze with dread / whiter than my own whiteheads."

And so Sasskay went on glaring at the cypress and rattling off the bad puns¹³⁷ until—SHAZAM!—the tree disappeared in a flash, and in its place stood a filthy, slouching old man.

The old man's arms and legs were as scraggy as a spider's, his back bent nearly 90 degrees as he coughed and phlegmed and spat and sniffled and snotted and drooled—a drastic example of the ravages of old age. Sasskay couldn't help but be a bit disappointed by the manifestation; still, he was rather wary:

"Art ye fairy, sage, or sprite?"

"Neither," replied the old man, in a lecherous screech.

"Then ye art human?"

"I am human, and I am not. I am he who has overcome humanity. Ask unto the heavens! Ask unto the earth! Man is something that should be overcome!"

The old man's name is "Zarathustra"—an obvious parody of Nietzsche's superman. In my English translation, he simply uses the name "Zarathustra," but the original

¹³⁷ The Japanese for "bad puns," here, is the same word that puns upon in "On Puns" (駄洒落—*dajare*).

Japanese contains a very complicated pun built around Chinese characters that approximate “Zarathustra”—*tsaratsusutora* (ツアラツストラ 戸沢図書虎). I will be looking at some of the puns inherent in this name later, but for now let it suffice to say that the Japanese spelling of Zoroaster contains references to Nietzsche’s superman, Chinese Taoist sages, Sasskay’s original mentor in the Japanese children’s book, and the ancient Persian philosopher. This type of naming—with a punning phonetic reading of Chinese characters—is a common form of pun, and will be given greater attention in the next chapter, but for now let it be noted that Oda’s “Zarathustra,” like Nietzsche’s, lives in the seclusion of the mountains and quotes his namesake directly: “Man is something that should be overcome.”¹³⁸ By introducing the theme of transcendence to the story, Zarathustra adds yet another genre to the pun: philosophy.

The old man wiped the crust from his eyes as said:
 “I am he who is loath to filthify / the sanctuary of his
 eyes / with the foul sight of man-un-kind; / I am he who is
 not wont to begrime / his ears with human jeers and whines;
 / I am Zarathustra, who soars from mountain peak to
 mountain peak / so as not to peek / upon man’s peakish
 deeds.”

Another situational pun is happening here, between Zarathustra’s misanthropy and Sasskay’s own self-loathing—and it is not long before the old sage picks up on it: “I am loath to let people into my sight,” Zarathustra exclaims, “and you dislike being looked at!”

As a character whose name is a pun, Zarathustra is fittingly fond of wordplay. One of the puns hidden within his name, in fact, is the word for “books” (図書), read in a punningly Chinese-sounding manner: “*tsusu*.” In Japanese, these two characters are normally read as “*toshō*” or “*zushō*,” and so glossing them as “*tsusu*” suggests a Chinese pronunciation (*tushu*, in Chinese), thus alluding to the story’s roots in Chinese legend.

Zarathustra becomes a mentor to Sasskay, teaching him five ancient ninja techniques. These techniques are all based upon Zarathustra’s unique philosophy, a combination of wordplay and ancient texts:

¹³⁸ 「人間は超克さるべきある物である」—I am assuming that this phrase is Oda’s direct translation of Part Three of “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” where Zarathustra first comes down from the mountains and teaches the people about The Superman. I have used R.J. Hollingdale’s translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1961) pg. 41.

“The ninja arts—the arts of concealing—employ coded language and poetry, as dictated by Michi-no-Ominomikoto, the God of War in the ancient histories of Japan.”

Thus spoke Zarathustra.

Through language and poetry, Zarathustra has perfected the technique of hiding his body. He is the owner of a secret document known as the Tiger scroll (the name of which is a pun on the final character of his name: 「虎」 —*tora*, meaning “tiger”), the recitation of which allows its owner to disappear. In Chinese thought, the body is divided into five parts—the head, neck, trunk, arms, and legs—and the Tiger Scroll apparently works by punning these five body parts with the Five Elements of traditional Chinese thought: Fire, Water, Plant, Metal, and Dirt. Accordingly, there are five spells in the Tiger Scroll, and Zarathustra’s convoluted explanation of their mechanics is a funny mix of the ponderous and punderous, Nietzschean existentialism laced with Zen Buddhist wordplay, the sacred laws of the martial arts delivered with the smirk of an Osaka comedian:

“In order to transcend the burdens of the body, you must *bird-en* your body—that is, you must learn to fly. My secret flying technique consists of five techniques: Fire Concealment, Water Concealment, Tree Concealment, Metal Concealment, and Dirt Concealment. Of the fifty-three Ninja schools of Kōga, my Zoroastran school alone possessed the secret art of flying. With this esoteric and magical technique, I can fly faster than the lofty hawk, assassinating a man in Edo from the distant town of Nagasaki before daybreak. You see, the word “Ninja” means “to abide.” First, a Ninja must abide any sort of hardship. Second, a ninja must abide in the shadows, concealing all five parts of his body with the five concealing techniques. A Ninja who can both abide and hide shall be a Ninja Master. A Ninja Master who grasps the secrets of flying shall swoop like a hawk. Becoming a Swooper-man, he becomes a Superman. He who soars worries not about facial sores. Hiding your pockmarked face, you shall go from Goobermensch to Übermensch! Hark, for I reveal unto you the secret ninja flying technique.”

Having spoken, Zarathustra issued forth an earsplittingly articulate fart before disappearing into thin air like the gaseous odor itself.

Birds/burdens, abiding/hiding, soars/sores, swooper/super, uber/goober—Zarathustra employs a wide range of puns to explain his philosophy. These English puns correspond fairly well to the original Japanese, with a few necessary adjustments. The Japanese for “superman” (超人—*chōjin*) is a homonym with the word for “bird-man” (鳥人—*chōjin*); the word for “hide” (忍ぶ—*shinobu*) is based on

the Chinese character for “abide” (忍—also *shinobu*), which forms a three-way pun with the word “ninja” (忍者), while the word for “transcend” (超克—*chōkoku*) combines the connotations of “abide” with the “super” (超—*chō*) of “superman” (超人—*chōjin*); the word for “flying” (飛行—*hikō*) rhymes with the word for “spell” (秘法—*hihō*); and the five body parts (五体—*gotai*) are associated with the five magical spells (五遁—*goton*) and the five elements (五行—*gogyō*).

And Zarathustra seems to suggest another pun by punctuating his lesson with a fart. The pun, this time, is a physical one: Zarathustra’s body first appears before Sasskay “scraggy as a spider’s, his back bent nearly 90 degrees as he coughed and phlegmed and spat and sniffled and snotted and drooled.” While proceeding to teach Sasskay how to transcend the burdens of the body, this evangelist of the Überhuman is constantly farting, burping, peeing his pants, or performing some other vehemently *bodily* functions:

On the final night of Sasskay’s training, Zarathustra was determined to eat his fill of roasted snakes, gobbling down 14 of them—tails and all—before the analeptic properties of the snakemeat got his blood pressure so high that he burst out into a furious nosebleed. Startled by all the blood, Sasskay scrambled to stop his master’s nose up with old snakeskins.

“Alack!” Zarathustra wailed. “You may have stopped my outburst of blood, but now it is you who must burst out in laughter at the sight of me!”

Zarathustra, who so detests the foul sight of mankind, is himself the paragon of human filthiness: blurts of eructation, stench of urine, skinny liverspotted legs and bloody noses. He is a manifestation of the pun inherent in Nietzschean thought—Zarathustra may be a superhuman, but he is also *super* human.

Miyoshi the Monk: Punning the Self

Before we move on to the next variety of punning in *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*, I would like to make a short digression into Japanese history. There's an interesting story about the first time a samurai came face to face with a foreign warrior:

The year was 1274. All the biggest warlords of Kyūshū had gathered their armies on shore of the Sea of Japan, staring out at the pale dawn. They were looking at nothing less than the impending demise of a nation: droves on Mongolian ships loomed on the horizon, full sail, bones in teeth, drums and gongs pealing the eyelids off of the morning. These few brave samurai were about to face ten thousand bloodthirsty Mongol pirates, pitting the honor of their entire nation against the forces of Khan.

Now, anyone who has ever seen a samurai movie (or even a cartoon like Pokémon or Dragon Ball) is well aware of the Japanese tradition of holding long and intimate conversations before and during combat. This institution of verbosely prefacing a bloodbath is called *nanori* (名乗り—literally, “to come forth with one’s name”) and was actually a written law of combat up until the Edo era.

In the Kamakura Era, man-to-man combat was the standard format for fighting. Battles were decided on the basis of individual skill, as they had been since the time of Genji. Warriors would step out from the ranks one at a time, and perform their *nanori* before selecting one warrior out of the enemy ranks and charging toward them.¹³⁹

As the story goes, while the Mongol ships honed in on the shores of Kyūshū, this hodgepodge army of Japanese soldiers simply stood there in the sand, pondering the appropriate wording for their respective self introductions. Shall I sally? Dare I rhyme? Might it be brash to pun “Yamazaki Satori” with “Got a wacky *nanori*?”¹⁴⁰ But before they had a chance to even consider the fact that their carefully composed commencement speeches would be utter babble to citizens of a foreign country, a hail of poison-tipped arrows came raining down from the Mongol ships.¹⁴¹

Introductions have always been an important part of Japanese social interactions. In Japanese as well as English a “name” is much more than an

¹³⁹ 白石一郎。「蒙古襲来」、(東京：NHK 出版、2001) 205.

¹⁴⁰ For the record, it would.

¹⁴¹ The fundamental pun in this case being: “The motto of the Japanese army has always been: ‘Walk softly but carry a big stick.’” For more on the failed Mongol invasion of Japan, see 佐伯弘次、「モンゴル襲来の衝撃」、(東京：中央文庫、2003)

identifier—it signifies a reputation (“to make a name for yourself”¹⁴²), an economic status (“not a penny to your name”), social affiliations (“to drop names”), consequence and causality (“that had your name written all over it”). A name can be lent, cleared, thrown around, sullied, bought, sold, stolen, buried, or taken in vain.¹⁴³

Nanori, appropriately, has an important (and inevitably farcical) role in *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*. Namely, Sasskay uses this custom of self-introduction to christen himself anew at every opportunity. Before a fight, Sasskay might tell his opponent: “I always spell ‘sass’ with a capital ‘K,’ for I am the chimp called Sasskay!” Or, when asked what school of fighting he belongs to, Sasskay might reply: “I don’t belong to any school, save the school of Schooling Your Ass.”

Sasskay’s “name,” like his “face,” is a trope for his honor. By reinventing himself in more and more elaborate rhymes and puns, he changes his name from a simple signifier with a one-to-one relationship with his body into this irreducible complex of meaning. As the story progresses and Sasskay’s frustrations with his plight increase, his rhyme-schemes and metaphors grows more elaborate, as if to compensate for his degrading situation. This is the real “rising action” of Oda’s narrative—a linguistic progression into punnier and punnier *nanori*.

Take, for example, the following passage, in which Sasskay is feeling dolorous about his estrangement from Kaede, his long-lost love:

Sasskay was bored—and so he decided to fly home
for the first time in a while.

But where to fly home to? Do I really have a home?
Back to my beloved Kaede back in Shinshū? Nay, nay—for
until these pimples disappear from my face, I dare not face
her...¹⁴⁴

These thoughts made Sasskay depressed, and so he
began to pun:

“I set out in the morning feeling bold
And fought off warriors like fighting off a cold.
But now, as I bolt home from fighting those dolts
I must fend off thunder and lightning bolts.
But I don’t mind, for I fly first class—
With a shout all five of my body parts pass
Up through the clouds and into the aether,
Until the lightning flashes down beneath here.
In all of Japan, one man travels this way:

¹⁴² There are three million ways to say “make a name for oneself” in Japanese, including but not limited to 「名を成す」「名を揚げる」「名を立てる」「名を残す」「名を得る」「名を遂げる」「名を留める」「名を流す」

¹⁴³ These terms in Japanese are as follows, respectively: 「名を借りる」「名を雪ぐ」「名を振るう」「名を汚す」「名を売る」「名を偷む」「名を埋む」「軽々しく人の名を口にする」

¹⁴⁴ In the original Japanese, as well, this is the same fundamental pun: 「アバタの穴が消えぬ限り、楓の前には、合わす顔がない」

The invincible chimp known as Sasskay.”
—and having spoken thus, all of Sasskay’s feelings
of depression were punned away, and he flew through the
sky humming a tune both sassy and gay.

In this scene, Sasskay uses the convention of *nanori* to cheer himself up. He feels as though he has no “face,” and so re-“names” himself as the most powerful warrior in all of Japan, flying above the lightning itself. Sasskay’s “name,” like his “face,” represents his “honor”—and as a man with a horrible pimpled “face,” he can only restore his honor through the magic of puns.

Huizinga, in his investigation into the origins of play, describes *nanori*-like traditions in a number of non-Japanese cultures. He calls them *aristeia*—a tangible symbol of a warrior’s prowess:

A very characteristic instance of this is Wakidi’s description of the Battle of Badr, where Mohammed defeated the Koraishites. Three of Mohammed’s warriors challenged a like number of heroes in the enemy ranks; they introduce themselves with due form and hail each other as worthy adversaries. The First World War witnessed a revival of *aristeia* in the dropping of challenges by airmen.... We must not regard this as having provided an omen or as being a humanitarian measure designed to avoid the spilling of blood, but simply as an appropriate substitute for war, a concise proof, in agonistic form, of the superiority of one of the parties.¹⁴⁵

Situated within the magic circle of language, the formality of *nanori* gives Sasskay a unique opportunity to dress himself in a suitably fancy tapestry of associations. Take Sasskay’s first attempt at a *nanori*, for example, which occurs one afternoon in the forest, when he stumbles across a Buddhist monk who is hunting chimpanzees with his friends:

Suddenly, before the monk’s bewildered eyes, there
appeared a hulking man of some seven feet.

“Hath ye fallen from the sky?” screamed the monk.
“Or hath ye risen from the earth?”

With the air of an actor just out of the curtains,
Sasskay began to introduce himself:

“Like a shooting star, hath I fallen from heaven’s
dome? / Or like a morning mushroom, hath I risen from
earth’s loam? / Wert I a shooting star, would I not have a tail?
/ And wert I a mushroom, would I not smell? / Tailless,
scentless, I remain covert / using Five Concealments: Fire,
Water, Tree, Metal, and Dirt. / As quick as Zoro and as light

¹⁴⁵ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens* (London: Beacon Press, 1955), 91-92.

as Aster / my master / was the great Zoroaster. / Having
taken his teachings to heart / I now take your arrows as
darts / and throw them back like fish underweight— /
laughing as you dart out of the way. / And when I laugh, you
will see no dimples / for I am he whose myriad pimples /
hide his dimples— / Sasskay the Flighty Chimp(les)!”

Sasskay looked around, but apparently this
introduction hadn’t quite had the effect he hoped it would—
and so he amended:

“Ask unto people far and wide / or look yourself if ye
stand close by:¹⁴⁶ / this acne’d and blackheaded face / is the
only battleflag I raise. / Look well! For this crater’d landscape
shall be / the last battlefield you’ll ever see: / the face of
Sasskay the Flighty Chimpanzee!”

The metaphor of a “battleflag” is interesting, here, for as Robert Redfern observes, the custom of heraldry “provides many examples of punning in armorial bearings and family badges.”¹⁴⁷ To go along with Sasskay’s metaphor, here, the *nanori* itself operates much like a coat of arms: his “name” is writ upon his “face,” in the pimples and dimples that (badly) rhyme with his name, “Chimp(les).” To some extent, this elaborate “battleflag” is intended to strike fear in the heart of his opponent, by associating his speckled forehead with craters, banners, and other military imagery. But all of Sasskay’s browbeating actually has a deleterious effect due to the lowbrow puns in which he couches them:

At this point, the monk was having a hard time
containing his laughter. But since samurai protocol requires
a man to perform a *nanori* before battle, he merely bit his lip
and gave his own little prelude:

“Your impudence arouses my scorn! / I don’t mean to
toot my own horn / except that I *do*—for I am the most /
infamous blower of both trumpet and boast / who ever did
blow! / But should we come to blows / I think that you
should also know / That the reason I opt to wear / this
monkish garb and shave my hair / is because I am a braggart
of deep religiosity / for I am the Monk who is known as
Miyoshi!”

And having said thus, Miyoshi the Monk hoisted a
spear and hurled it right at Sasskay’s chest.

“Hai-yah!”

¹⁴⁶ This is a sort of set phrase for samurai *nanori*: 「遠からんものは音にも聴け、
近くば寄って眼に見よ」

¹⁴⁷ Redfern, Walter. *Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1984) 136.

In the next instant, Sasskay was standing atop a nearby oak tree, laughing.

Miyoshi's own *nanori*, like Sasskay's, is based upon a simple pun:

Miyoshi the Monk was famed the world over for blowing his own horn, in both the literal and figurative senses. Not only could he brag like a boxer, but he played the trumpet so well that with a single toot he could cause all the chimpanzees for miles around to come running.¹⁴⁸

In the original Japanese, the word “brag” (法螺—*hora*) adds another layer to the joke, in that it puns on the word for cavern (洞—*hora*), which has been a trope for Sasskay's crater-face since the beginning of the story. Sasskay's hiding in a cave out of shame is a homonym with Miyoshi's bragging—an association which makes a great deal of sense, considering the role that bragging plays in compensating for Sasskay's cavernous pockmarks.

At any rate, these two characters wind up being the best of friends. Miyoshi's musical abilities echo Sasskay's poetic affinities, while both men are devoted fabulists. They also share a love for puns, suggesting that all artists are, invariably, prevaricators. Oda Sakunosuke was, in fact, explicit about the connection between art and brag:

As far as I'm concerned, nothing is more pointless than an author who doesn't lie his ass off. Sakaguchi Ango, for example, lies to me all the time in real life—so why should he suddenly quit lying and get all serious while he's writing novels? He ought to know better than anyone that the

¹⁴⁸ Conveniently, the idiom “to toot one's own horn” translates almost perfectly from Japanese: 「法螺を吹けば笛も吹く」. An excellent example of warriors holding a boasting contest in Western history is Charlemagne and Roland's *gaber* in Constantinople, in which Roland boasts:

Let Hugo lend me his horn and I will stand outside the town and blow so hard that the gates will fly off their hinges. And if the king attacks me I will spin him around so fast that his ermine cloak will vanish and his moustache will catch fire.(a)

(a) *Le Pilgrimage de Charlemagne* (11th century), ed. E. Koschwitz (Paris, 1925), 471-81. As quoted in Huizinga, 70.

pleasure we get from lying stems from our profound love for reality.¹⁴⁹

Miyoshi upholds this ideal of the lying artist, but his status as a “braggart” has another function here, as well. In tooting his own horn, Miyoshi puns on the very ceremony of *nanori*, suggesting that this age old custom of self-naming is really no different than the childish habit of bragging. And by proceeding to brag about his uncanny bragging abilities, Miyoshi underscores the amount of sheer artifice involved in the act of naming oneself. Usually the stuff of solemnly furrowed brows, Miyoshi’s *nanori* shows how naming is also the stuff of cocked brows, raised brows, brow ague.

And the word *nanori* itself is a pun. In fact, it is a pun which signifies a pun. According to Kōjien (the Japanese OED), definition number ④ of “*nanori*” refers to the practice of giving a proper name multiple meanings through different phonetic readings of its Chinese characters.¹⁵⁰ We have already seen one example of this second sort of *nanori*—the name Zarathustra, which is written as 戸沢図書虎^{ツアラツストラ}—with the Chinese characters for the name below the jokey Japanese reading of them (a phonetic approximation of “Zarathustra”).

Sasskay’s name, as well, is a pun. In English, “Sasskay the Flighty Chimp” plays off the word “flighty,” alluding to the fact that although Sasskay has the ability to fly, he only uses it to run away every time somebody sees his face. In Japanese, his name is *sarutobi sasuke* (猿飛佐助), punning the word for monkey (猿—*saru*) with the word for “to leave” (去る—*saru*).¹⁵¹ The verb “to leave” alludes to the fact that Sasskay is always running away from people, trying not to be seen, which is why I opted to use “Flighty” in my English translation.

Sasskay’s family name “Hawkmond”¹⁵² contains a pun as well, playing the lofty connotations of hawk off of the earthly weight of a burial mound. Every chance that Sasskay gets to introduce himself, he riffs off of these inherent puns, putting his own problematic nature on display. Not only is Sasskay’s “face” a pun, but his “name” presents another joke that Sasskay manifests in his baroque self-naming.

And speaking of “baroque”—we last left Sasskay standing atop a “bare oak,” looking down upon Miyoshi the Monk and countering with another punny poem:

“Hey you who calls himself Monk! / From up upon this
tall tree trunk / Your bald and shiny head looks to be / a
lonely mountain without trees— / barren, arid, and defunct.
/ I think I’d like to thump / into your hairless hump / a
couple bumps and lumps / to give your hill tree stumps. /

¹⁴⁹ 織田作之助. 『可能性の文学』 in 「織田作之助：ちくま日本文学全集」、(東京：筑摩書房、2000) 440-441.

¹⁵⁰ 「漢字の通常の読みとは別に、特に名前に用いる訓」

¹⁵¹ 「『今日より峠を猿（去る）飛佐助だ』と駄洒落を飛ばし…」

¹⁵² 鷹塚—*takaduka*.

And then the heat of your own ire / can cause your very own forest fire!"

Sasskay then stopped his soliloquy short—and in the very next instant had leapt down from the tree and was whapping Miyoshi upon the head with his folding fan, who promptly fell over and lost consciousness.

The battle between these two men, here, is like a war between rival rap stars¹⁵³—more puns than punches, the only actual blows dealt with a harmless folding fan.¹⁵⁴ The trope that Sasskay uses to belittle his adversary is a little bit *too* poetic, too elaborate for a battle scene such as this. Sasskay is punning, and Oda is punning on his puns, presenting a characterization of a character, a depiction of a man who depicts himself, in turn, as a fanciful association of language. To name *is* to pun—especially when your personality is a pun, and when your name is built on a pun, and when the very act of *nanori* implies punning as well.

¹⁵³ The verbal battles between Biggie Smalls and Tupac are perhaps the most famous mudfights in rap history, but I think that for the best example of rhymes being used as weapons, the Tim Dogg vs. Snoop Dogg war brings the goods.

¹⁵⁴ Folding fans, it also might be noted, are traditionally used to write poems upon in Japan, making it a tool for wordplay as well as physical violence. But most importantly, they are a fundamental prop for manzai comedians, who hit each other over the head with their fans in just this manner—Sasskay and Miyoshi are literally behaving like stand-up comedians, here.

Ishikawa Goemon: Punning History

History tells us that every hero has an archrival, and Sasskay is no exception. His rival, in fact, is one of the most notorious ninjas in all of Japanese history—a master thief by the name of Ishikawa Goemon (石川五右衛門、[1558?-1594]).¹⁵⁵ Ishikawa was the Jonathan Wild of feudal Japan, the charismatic leader of a gang of robber-ninjas who nobody could catch until he attempted the impossible feat of stealing the shogun's dearest possession: a three-legged censer known as the Plover Censer.¹⁵⁶

As legend has it, when Ishikawa crept into the shogun's bedroom and stood over the sleeping shogun, the Plover Censer sensed that its master was in danger and became incensed, croaking like a frog and waking the entire castle up. Ishikawa was caught and, being one of the most notorious criminals in Japanese history, condemned to execution. As a despot, however, the shogun was every bit as notorious as Ishikawa, and spent a great deal of time and money contriving an elaborate execution ceremony worthy of Japan's greatest thief. First, a gigantic wok (釜—*kama*, which rhymes with toad—*gama*) was cast out of iron, and a roaring fire built underneath. Then cooking oil was spread all over the pan before Ishikawa was tossed into the wok and braised alive.¹⁵⁷ After his ill-fated end, Ishikawa was immortalized in both story and song, as the greatest ninja who had ever lived.

Sasskay first meets Ishikawa when, flying along late one night, he hears a strange voice at the gate of a mountain temple, saying something about a “Plover Censer.” This immediately tips the audience in to the fact that Sasskay has stumbled across the legendary Ishikawa Goemon, although Sasskay is a little slow on the uptake, stopping in mid-air and cocking his ears to catch the rest of the conversation:

The next thing Sasskay knew a dagger came flying along a trajectory leading towards the area right between his eyes. Fortunately, Sasskay caught the dagger in midair before it hit, only to find a creepy long-haired man standing before him. The stranger appeared to be a man of culture, however, for he spoke in a rhythmic northern drawl:

“And time and time—the time is late
The trees asleep, the grass prostrate.
And though the time has grown so late
Untimely guests have crashed my gate.

¹⁵⁵ For those familiar with Japanese cartoons, the swordsman Goemon of Rupin fame is, indeed, based on Ishikawa Goemon—Rupin being a thief and all...

¹⁵⁶ The censer was actually shaped like a frog, but they called it the Plover Censer anyway because it stood on three legs, which I guess reminded people of the footprint of a Plover.

¹⁵⁷ To this day, Japanese baths heated with firewood underneath are called “Goemon baths.”

Suckered by some succubus?
A sleepwalker? Mere wanderlust?
In his head the night wind must
Have found a hole, through which it gusts.
For no whole-headed man would just
Breeze through my holy gateway thus.
Now with a cunning dagger thrust
I'll ope another windhole up.
Tell me now—who are thou!"

The English pun, here, is based upon the word "hole," with the idiomatic phrase "to have a hole in one's head" describing a state of stupidity—Ishikawa implies that Sasskay must be stupid to intrude upon his turf. The original Japanese, meanwhile, takes a slightly different course, with the pun based upon the word "wind." Ishikawa states that "a strange wind must blow within your head" (風の通しのちと変挺な—*kazeno tōshino chito hentekona*), an idiom with the same implications of the English "to have a hole in one's head." The word "wind," here, also puns upon the word "wanderlust" (風来坊—*fūraibō*), a pun which I have attempted to compensate for with my extensive use of "hole." The rest of the passage is relatively similar to the English, with Ishikawa threatening to open a "windhole" with his dagger, for Sasskay's strange "wind" to escape through.

But Sasskay is far from frightened by this new foe:

Upon hearing this speech, Sasskay was so overjoyed at
finally meeting someone who shared his affinity for high
speech that he had a hard time containing his elation:
"Of holes in heads I hear you talk
But the only hole in my head locks
The lid to a Pandora's box.
For on the day the Lord made pocks
He used me as His chopping block
And poked in me a mighty flock
Of holes, just like a lava rock."

As with the showdown between Sasskay and Miyoshi, the battle here is one of words. Ishikawa's rhymes are surprisingly poetic, and Sasskay is obliged to respond with a correspondingly gaudy verse. He picks up on Ishikawa's use of the word "hole," and turns it against him by punning it with "keyhole." The original Japanese does not use the word "Pandora's box," but rather the word "Dragon Temple Box" (竜宮土産—*ryūgūmiyage*), a box out of a famous Japanese folktale, the opening of which has equally ominous consequences for the opener.

But merely countering Ishikawa is not enough for Sasskay, and he raises the rhyme bar with his next verse:

At this point, Sasskay switched to a more elaborate poetic diction:

*"Ho! Hold thy horses, hombre.
These horrid holes are not hormonal,
Nor hoed by un-holstered howitzers—
My holes are homage to my Homeric spirit,
I hope you don't find them too hokey.
Because, like whole hordes of honeycomb,
Or the honking of hot-headed horns,
Like the hollyhock of my homeland, Honshū,
Or the Holsteins of hoary Hokkaido,
Like homemade hominy hors d'oeuvres,
A howling monkey, hollering himself hoarse,
Like Horatian rhymes on 'ho,' you see,
My holes hold hordes of metaphors.
Hoy! I hover on the horizon!
A hologram? Or Houdini?
However, this is no hollow hocus pocus,
For I am Sasskay the Flying Chimpanzee!"*

The poetic form that Sasskay uses is called *jidzukusi*, an inverted style of rhyming which literally means "syllable exhaustion." As I have tried to show in my English translation, *jidzukusi* consists of a rhythmic string of words which all begin with the same syllable. In English, this looks a lot like simple alliteration, but in fact *jidzukusi* implies rhyming the *entire first syllable* rather than a single sound (my English translation just puns on the initial "ho"). As the name "character exhaustion" suggests, this is a pretty exhausting form of poetry, and I had to do a bit of driving-without-poetic-license in order to deliver the form to the English idiom. My metaphors differ greatly, in sense, from the original Japanese, but hopefully the sound and the rhythm has been preserved. What is lost in translation is the sheer literary skill manifested here on the part of Oda Sakunosuke. Nakaishi Takashi attests that "the passage where Sasskay meets Goemon and exchanges elaborate *nanori* in the *jidzukusi* form displays an utterly unique brilliance."¹⁵⁸

Goemon, not to be outdone, counters with his own *jidzukusi*, this time on the "go" of Goemon—a rhyme which is even longer and fancier than Sasskay's.¹⁵⁹ Towards the end of his monologue, he even switches to another form of punning called *goroawase*, which involves punning numbers based on the different readings of their Chinese characters. I will be talking about *goroawase* later in this section, but for now let it suffice to say that Goemon has taken Sasskay's poetic wager and raised it double or nothing.

Sasskay, however, is undaunted:

¹⁵⁸ 中石孝.「織田作之助：雨 蛭 金木犀」、(大阪：大阪文学叢書、1998) 143.

¹⁵⁹ Hence the lack of a translation.

Upon hearing that this was the legendary Ishikawa Goemon, Sasskay did not so much as flinch, but conversely started to get a little excited about this fascinating turn of events.

“Aha!” Sasskay realized. “So the reason you were whispering about the Plover Censer is because you’re planning to sneak into the shogun’s castle at Momoyama and steal his most prized treasure—or some silly plot like that!”

For a while Ishikawa just stood there, groaning over the fact that Sasskay had overheard his Top Secret plan—but after a while he regained his composure and began to shouting in his strangely iambic diction:

“It’s been a while since I was a child, / but wile and guile have made me more wild / than any child. The name of *Goemon* / alludes to the fact that I *go among* / cutthroat men. *We issue cowards* / death, at the hands of *Ishikawa*.”

—and having thus found a suitable rhyme for his name, Ishikawa made a grand gesture in the air and began chanting:

“Namu Satu Taru Ma! Heebie Ha Lay Lu Jia! Shangri-La! Shangri-La!”

In the next instant, Ishikawa had disappeared from sight, and in his place stood a big, slimy toad.

This is the first of a series of historical puns based on the historical figure of Ishikawa Goemon. The Plover Censer that the historic Ishikawa would eventually attempt to steal is shaped like a toad, and Ishikawa’s mutation into a literal toad is a less-than-subtle allusion to this future event.

The effect of this “historical pun” is one of ironic foreshadowing—much like the pun inherent in Oedipus’ name,¹⁶⁰ alluding to the future for the audience’s benefit. There is certainly a great deal of irony involved in this sort of punning, and our laughter at Ishikawa’s transformation into a toad is of a decidedly wry sort. But puns by definition exceed mere irony, and the word “toad,” inevitably, has more than one connotation:

For a while, Sasskay couldn’t stop laughing:

“Your spell sounded more like some corny ode— / perhaps that’s why it turned you into a horny toad! / But no matter how horny, I’ll give you no kiss— / not cuz I’m prudish nor cuz I’m a priss, / but because I fear that I might change you for the worse: / back into Goemon—now that’d be a curse! / But in lieu of giving you a lusty smack upon the

¹⁶⁰ The word *pous* means “foot,” and *oidi* means “swollen,” punning off of “oida” to know. From Ahl, pg. 35.

lips / perhaps I could give you a smack with my fists? / A
toad needs a stool, and that stone where you sit, / looks
awfully cold. Why don't I warm it up a bit..."

Sasskay, unaware of the historic pun that is occurring here, puns the word "toad" on a number of Japanese "toad" idioms. My English translation varies slightly in order to make its own puns ("toadstool," etc), but the final sentence has particular resonance with the historic figure of Ishikawa, who died in a very *hot* manner. In the original Japanese, Sasskay asks, "What are you thinking, cold frog?"—rhyming the phrase "cold frog" (寒の蛙—*kan no kaeru*) with the verb "to think" (考える—*kangaeru*)—a particularly exasperating pun.

Sasskay then goes on to *act out* this "historical pun":

—and so saying, Sasskay disappeared into thin air, a pillar of
smoke rising up where he had stood. The smoke then began
to change into a tower of flames, and in the blink of an eye
the whole area around Goemon turned into a sea of fire. The
flames immediately began to climb up the toad's back as he
hopped around, greasy sweat dripping off his frog-body,
shouting out in a miserably human voice:
"Ouchie! Hot! Ouch!"

This second historical pun is also a sardonic portent, evoking Goemon's infamous death by stir-frying, the "greasy sweat" exuded from his warty skin suggesting the vegetable oil that the shogun was meticulous enough to fry him in. What we miss out on in English, though, is the literal pun occurring here: the Japanese word for "toad," (蝦蟇—*gama*) rhymes with the word for "wok" or "frying pan" (釜—*kama*), a pun which may have been the real inspiration for (and punchline to) the shogun's brutal form of capital punishment.¹⁶¹ Another pun that is occurring in the Japanese lies in the phrase "greasy sweat," as toad sweat was often used on the battlefield as a healing salve for injured warriors.¹⁶²

In this sense, historical puns work a lot like literal puns, playing off a number of different concepts all embodied by the historical figure of Ishikawa Goemon. Fiction, as it were, is being punned with fact: the toad-shaped censer and gigantic wok of real history are plunged into an associative frypan with the fantastic magical spells that turn Goemon into a toad and then fry him in his own greasy sweat—which, ironically, is supposed to be a *healing* substance. Oda's highly imaginary *kama* and *gama* mimic the very real *kama* and *gama* of history, but also contradict

¹⁶¹ Two more fundamental puns that Oda makes in this passage are "the patience of the bullfrog" (蝦蟇の我慢—*gama no gaman*) and "like cauterizing a stone" (石の灸—*ishi no kyū*), the word "stone" punning off of Ishikawa's name (Ishi means "stone") and "cauterization" alluding the firestorm Sasskay hails upon him).

¹⁶² This salve was simply called "toad oil" (蝦蟇の膏—*gama no abura*).

and confuse them, creating a situation that resembles both the literary allusion of high modernism and the jokey burlesque of lowbrow farce.

This is more than just a clever technique. Just as *nanori* are as much puns on actual names as they are puns on the act of *naming*, so Oda's historical puns are also puns on the very idea of representing history. Goemon's Toad Spell (*gama*) and Sasskay's Fire Spell (*kama*) exceed wordplay when they are used as magical charms, conjurations; they are examples of the pun in action, language as a weapon. The joke makes the reader laugh, but it also draws one's attention to the fact that language *can* be used as a spell to make us laugh—just as it can be employed to make a toad out of history. Representation is not being dismissed as an impossibility—that would be a completely ironic statement—but the figure of Goemon, sautéing in his own sweat, suggests that our representations of history are inevitably puns upon the past—riffs and interpretations in the key of the present day.

Sasskay has no plot. A reader of the story soon realizes that there will be no “rising action,” no climax. It is an episodic work, consisting of fights and puns, followed by pun and fights. Even the elaborate events that comprise each episode are of little interest except as vessels for clever dialogue. *Sasskay* is an unfinished work: Oda died before he could finish it, and we read knowing that the little threads of story will never be woven together.

But there *is* a progression. The characters may not have epiphanies, and Sasskay's scars are not about to miraculously heal—nevertheless one important aspect of the story continues to develop, little by little. The first chapter of *Sasskay*, you will recall, was written for the radio, which explains why so much of the narrative is relegated to dialogue. When Oda published this first chapter of *Sasskay* in novel form, an author by the name of Uno Kōji wrote a letter to Oda, complaining:

I realize that every word of *Sasskay*—every letter of every syllable of every word—was written as a script, as dialogue. I understand the great pains you must have taken to achieve this, but it is my humble opinion that you would fare much better if you wrote *Sasskay*'s farcical adventures not as dialogue but as a “normal” narrative.¹⁶³

In spite of his profound respect for Uno, it seems that Oda was oblivious to this criticism, because the second chapter of *Sasskay* is just as rife with dialogue as the first—*despite* the fact that it was written for publication exclusively as a novel. With each new episode, the story actually becomes *less* novelistic, *less* narrative, while *Sasskay*'s puns become more convoluted, multifarious and farfetched.

This *is* the narrative action of *Sasskay*: a progressive move away from traditional naturalist representation—away from traditional characterization, away from narration at all—and toward pure puns and dialogue. Nothing is being represented, anymore, but the act of representation itself.

¹⁶³ 中石孝. 「織田作之助：雨 螢 金木犀」、(大阪：大阪文学叢書、1998) 141.

In the final chapter, Sasskay has a second showdown with his arch enemy, Ishikawa. And as our hero puns and punches his way through Ishikawa's gang of bandits, every bit of the actual action is relegated to Sasskay's spoken puns:

"And now, within this dialogue / I shall show that
you are more bull than frog! / Ribbit up while you still can /
For today is the day you shall croak. / And don't say I didn't
wart you! / Remember that I *toad* you so."

And having spun this pun, Sasskay was so pleased
with himself that he couldn't help but break into a grin,
holding his head high, dimples buried beneath his pimples.
And he only continued to lay it on thick, even as he laid
Goemon's gang flat.

But as the sweat welled up on Sasskay's red and
splotchy face, he realized that fighting, in and of itself, lacked
much artistry, and so he began to make puns, out loud, for
each of his knockouts:

"Number one was easily *won*."

"Number two withered like *tulip*."

"Number three must have been a pacifist like Arlo
Guthrie."

"Numbers four and five were unfortified."

"Number six—I broke his *coccyx*."

"Number seven—*seventually* he'll learn."

"Number eight just *ate* dirt."

"Number nine was *asinine*, and number ten lacked
the necessary *tenacity*."

If Sasskay has any sort of epiphany, it occurs *here*—at the point in which Sasskay realizes that actual fighting, actual narrative, actual representation will always take a backseat to linguistic play. To represent anything is to pun, and Sasskay decides to do so with an excess of artistry. The resulting battle, to risk another pun, is more smacktalk than actually smacking¹⁶⁴—each opponent reduced to a really bad joke. Specifically, Sasskay composes a *goroawase* (語呂合わせ), a common form of punning based on different readings of numbers. "One" is punned with "won," "two" with "tulip," "three" with "Guthrie" and so on. The original Japanese puns, of course, are different than mine: "One (*ichi*) is for **I**shikawa, two (*ni*) I do with **n**inja techniques," and so on.

Even today, *goroawase* is a very common form of rhyming in Japan, and is basically the same thing as making funny words with the letters corresponding to your phone number ("1-800-SASSKAY," etc.). But aside from being "a helpful mnemonic device for remembering phone numbers,"¹⁶⁵ punning and rhyming

¹⁶⁴ More saying than slaying? More chuckles than knuckles?

¹⁶⁵ 中村明. 「笑いのセンス」、(東京: 岩波書店、2002) pg. 90.

numbers presents a challenge the “surety of mortal mathematics”¹⁶⁶—it shows us that “unlike physics, in which two bodies may not occupy the same space, language is a material in which the same names are capable of supporting several mutually exclusive meanings simultaneously.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Fried, Debra. “Rhyme Puns” in *On Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1988) 98.

¹⁶⁷ Ulmer, Gregory. “The Puncture in Grammatology” in *On Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1988) 165.

Oda Sakunosuke: Punning Literature

Art, it was famously said, holds a mirror to life. A pun, meanwhile, holds a mirror to art—it is “indisputably self-aware.”¹⁶⁸ For Makino Shinichi, this mirror was a literal one: a device that allowed the narrator see the humor in his own characterizations. For Sakaguchi Ango, the mirror was held up to his writing in a manner that let the reader see their own reflection, as well. In *Sasskay*, of course, we have puns, the role of which grows larger and larger while the actual narrative is lost in the alliteration.

Sasskay begins with the free linguistic play of the Cusstival, which “holds a mirror” to Sasskay’s face, making him irreversibly conscious of his ugliness. The word “face,” however, soon becomes an elaborate pun which informs the character of Sasskay for the duration of the story. In this case, the pun has become a mirror held up to the protagonist’s psyche, an embodiment of Lacan’s conception of the unconscious. In later chapters, Sasskay attempts to re-invent himself through the ritual of *nanori*, punning his name with a variety of genres and discourses. Philosophy, children’s literature, and Chinese fables are employed in a manner that conflicts with a literary context. This serves to reduce the aesthetic and ideological content of *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp* to mere linguistic structures. In the same manner, the narrator rhymes a number of historical personages with the words traditionally used to represent them, forcing the reader to see history outside of its usual linear context—as a self-referential system of symbols that is subject to punning in the same manner as language. Eventually, the very idea representation is held up to the mirror of the narrator himself, as the puns cease to be mere jokes and step into the realm of self-conscious performance. This is the progression of the story: it is a journey from simple wordplay to a place where everything is subject to association, everything is artifice. Hopefully, my freeform translations have succeeding in conveying the flagrant *artificiality* of Oda’s language.

But I would like to end this essay on a slightly contrary note. It is true that puns are highly self-conscious literary devices. They are omphaloskeptic—obsessed with the empty signifier in their center. But like aesthetes and other highly self-conscious people, puns gain this insightful introversion at the cost of any awareness of the world around them. *Sasskay the Flighty Chimp*, you will recall, was originally broadcast smack-dab in the middle of the war, “between interludes of air raid sirens.”¹⁶⁹ There were real-world crises insinuating themselves into every phrase that Oda penned. Osaka was burning. The entire nation-state of Japan was about to crumble. And yet Oda’s tale is so unaware of these facts that one has a hard time believing that it was published in 1945. In terms of style as well of content, *Sasskay* was unerring in its obliviousness to the larger historical context of its creation. We have already seen that a great deal of effort went into making the story the subject of its own joke—but I don’t want to skip over the fact that an equally

¹⁶⁸ Redfern, Walter. *Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1984) 6.

¹⁶⁹ 織田作之助. 「織田作之助資料」、ed. 関根和行 (東京: オリジン出版センター、1979) 146.

concerted effort went into leaving the real world out of the punchline. In an afterward to the novelized version of *Sasskay*, published after the war, Oda states:

I originally published *Sasskay the Flying Chimp* in a particular environment¹⁷⁰, and wrote it in a certain style so completely removed from literary conventions that it drew either praise or condemnation from nearly everybody. It was an entirely new side to my work, and some people lauded the direction I took with it, while others furrowed their brows and complained that this new style was crude and would ruin me as a writer. But to be honest, neither of these reactions really appealed to me, as the author. Like they said, *Sasskay* is indeed a crude work—but in a world where literature is not considered real literature unless it's a conformist reproduction of national policy,¹⁷¹ I can help but feel a little affection for that little version of me, back then, who sat there in his little corner of Osaka writing nothing but frivolous slapdash prose.

It seems highly significant to me that the author is not proud of his creative new “style”; nor is he proud of the popularity that the work achieved. He’s proud of its “frivolity,” its detachment from real-world events, his seclusion off in some “little corner of Osaka.”

Now, it is considered an academic felony to view a work of art as separate from history—and rightly so. It would be a shame to read *Sasskay* as merely funny, despite its overweening jokiness. Rather, Oda’s self-seclusion here is only significant because of the weight of all the events that he is secluding himself from. The same can be said for Ango’s farces, or Makino’s comedies, which were written the decade before. One can surmise that none of these writers would have been nearly as playful had they not been writing during the largest crisis in Japanese history. Serious times breed playful writers, it seems—but what do we make of this obsessive indifference to history?

Interestingly, Oda’s attitude resembles that of his protagonist—that is, he assumes the guise of a pun. Puns, like Oda’s literature, are frivolous things which operate outside the ordinary context of a sentence. But puns lose all semblance of humor if they are stripped of context, and so there must be some amount of sense to a phrase before a pun can make nonsense out of it. Were I to break my arm in a horrendous typing accident and my physician concocted an elaborate tourniquet for me, I might call him a “Wizard of Gauze,” both because the story of Dorothy and Toto has absolutely nothing to do with my immediate situation, and also because a clear context allows me to bring the Wizard of Oz into the context because of simple phonetic happenstance. Walking up to a stranger on the street and saying “Wizard of Gauze” would not go over quite so well.

¹⁷⁰ World War Two.

¹⁷¹ 「便乗の国策文学」

The pun is anti-contextual, then—that is, it positions itself in opposition to its immediate surroundings, and yet requires those surroundings to establish its opposition. And it is in this anti-contextual spirit that Oda Sakunosuke “sat little corner of Osaka writing nothing but frivolous slapdash prose.” In a time of rations and mass homelessness, *Sasskay the Flying Chimp* was about as frivolous a story as one could hope for. One recalls a Sakaguchi Ango who, in the face of increasingly humorless laments over the lack of humor in modern Japanese literature, decided to write an essay on the subject that was, itself, farce.

There is a crater in Sasskay’s face—a hole where there ought not be one. And in order to fill up this lack, Sasskay has no choice but to defer this lack through word-play. His puns are the sort that Freud saw as a denial of anxiety, a deferral of horrible truth. On a larger scale, Oda the author was confronted with the horrible truth of World War Two on a daily basis. He disliked the government, disliked the literati, disliked a war which was making his beloved Osaka into one big crater hole. For Oda, I think that to write about the war would have been to perpetuate it. To address the issue would have been, in Sasskay’s words, to open a Pandora’s box—a hole that he would never be able to close. And so his literature took flight into the mountains, into a style “completely removed from literary conventions.”

Language can be a weapon, as Sasskay learned from the words of an oblivious peasant. In Oda’s time, this weapon had the power to do more damage than ever. And once burnt and branded by wartime ideology, Oda, like Sasskay, set out to make language into a toy gun, to restore the “face” of literature by punning it away. He wanted literature to be a “frivolous slapdash” thing, because the alternative to punning was too horrible to “face.” Words were flying like bullets, all around him. Some people ducked for cover, and others shot back. Oda’s pride didn’t allow him to hide, but his shame didn’t allow him to join in the shooting. And so he took the route that Sasskay did: in the battle of language, Oda didn’t go after the shooter—he went for the gun, which he quietly converted into a water pistol, pointing it at his own face and spraying. It was worth a few laughs.

Xeron

by Makino Shinichi¹⁷²

Moreover, in order to properly embark upon this primitive new lifestyle, I was faced with the task of hocking all of my tracts and treatises, my home furnishings, and all other remaining possessions—only to be left perplexed over what to do with one unpawnable bronze bust. Surely my readers are familiar with the life-sized bronze likeness entitled “Bust of Makino” which stood alongside the likes of “Chicken,” “Cow,” “Owl,” and other wooden sculptures by artist Tatekawa Makio in the Fall Exhibition at Nippon Art Institute, two years ago? It was, in fact, hailed as a “masterpiece” by persons knowledgeable of such matters.

Having considered every possible method for jettisoning the statue, I concluded that I had no other option but to transport it to one Monsieur Fujiya of Whirlwind Village for safekeeping. For some time now, Monsieur Fujiya had been longing to throw a celebration in honor of Tatekawa’s achievement in “Bust of Makino,” but my vagrant lifestyle had obliged the statue to move about at my discretion until the opportunity presented itself—which it suddenly had.

I bundled the bust into a particularly large and durable rucksack, swung a sturdy walkingstaff before me, hung a buckknife from my shoulder and set out upon my journey. The new life that awaited me was all but burnt upon my inner eyelids, and I was thus desirous to be done with this digression as quickly as possible. Riding an express train from Shinjuku, dressed as I was in my poor excuse for mountaineering gear, I debarked four stops later at Kashiwa Station and—without so much as stopping to breathe the country air—made an immediately beeline north, back uphill for a couple of miles to Tsukada Village, where I intended to borrow a carhorse named Xeron from a friend at the village watermill. Even with its shortcuts, my itinerary was precocious enough that in order to conceivably reach my destination before nightfall I would have to rely upon the courage of my good friend Xeron to guide me through its challenges.

Now, were you exit the same train anywhere along this stretch of tracks—or at Odawara Station on the Atami line—and turned your eyes up to the northwestern sky, you would doubtlessly espy one lonely peak, rearing its heavy head up like a fat Buddha right before where the Hakone Mountains and the Ashigara Mountains are divided by the Dōryō forest and the foothills of Myōjingatake Mountain. Situated some 40 kilometers from the sea and rising a good 900 meters above its waves, the protrusion is called Turret Peak, parts of which have become an object of inquiry to a certain group of geologists and archeologists, due to the fossilized scallop shells located there; a mountain which is furthermore feared by locals as the home of the wolves and foxes and sometimes boars that and come out during harvest season to

¹⁷² first published in the journal “Renovations” 『改造』, October, 1931.

torment the villages situated around its foothills—making it a sort of Blocken in the eyes of adventurous hunters.

Monsieur Fujiya Hachirō, my beloved mentor and perhaps the world's most obscurely-located scholar of classical Greek and medieval European chivalrous literature, lived there in a home that he called "Pierre Von." On the grounds of this villa, hidden deep within a forest gorge, there stood at intervals a number of decidedly rudimentary log cabins, each named things like "The Gym of Charlemagne," "The Library of La Mancha," "The Atelier of the Pre-Raphealite Brotherhood," "The Shield of Idea"—and it was these rooms that he would lend out to those poorest of his friends, who were pursuing the way of the arts. A troubadour author, I myself had spent some time as a guest in "The Shield of Idea," where I underwent Monsieur Fujiya's stoic pedagogy. The sculptor Tatekawa, in fact, was a guest himself in the "Pre-Raphealite Brotherhood" cabin at this time, and it was here that he spent some two years making this very bust, with me as a model. When I was chosen as the model for Tatekawa's piece, the local villagers begin their vituperous defense of the impoverished Tatekawa, sympathizing with the taciturn artist, asking why he hadn't chosen a horse or cow or something in that vein as his theme. This was mainly because, had Tatekawa chosen a theme of this ilk, he would receive numerous and immediate inquiries from parties wishing to purchase said horse or cow. Had he insisted on sculpting a human form, why couldn't he have chosen the village mayor or the local landlord as a model? Had he chosen the mayor, village money could have been allocated for a commemorative statue; had he chosen the landlord, this man would doubtlessly have spared no expense in erecting a statue monumentalizing his virtue for future generations of villagers (and had secretly expressed his desire to do so). Or if he had chosen a local hero like Sakata no Kintoki or Ninomiya Kinjirō, then surely then the piece could have been sponsored by an area school or shrine! But still, nevertheless, regardless, Tatekawa decided to sculpt that, that, that——

It was at this time that my name suffered amendment by some of the most ignoble adjectives imaginable, all at the hands of these artistic Philistines.

"For the love of—" they'd say, and I could feel the accusation and scorn in the fingers they pointed at my back, in the street, in spite of my quiet, unassuming attitude.

"I can't believe he's going to *sculpt* an actual pile of feces."

Gradually their disapproval grew more and more obstreperous, culminating in the hurling of stones at the window of the atelier where we were working (apparently Tatekawa owned the hurler some money), and so Tatekawa started thinking that he might be able to avoid all this trouble if changed the name of the piece to "Bust of a Man," or "A Poet," or the more sensationalistic title of "One Retard"—although when it came time to exhibit the bust he wound up carving the title without my approval:

"BUST OF MAKINO" by Tatekawa Makio

And so Tatekawa shook my hand and, joyous over a job well done, bequeathed the statue to me in commemoration of our days at Pierre Von.

In those days I feared nothing more in life than my own shadow, and I spent most of my time composing derogatory songs about myself. I would have much preferred that the piece been titled “Bust of a Poet” or “Face of a Man” and promptly sold to one of Tatekawa’s patrons; and it was for this reason that Monsieur Fujiya forced me to submit to a pact: that were my living situation ever to devolve to the point where I would be unable to find a home for the bust, I was to bring it immediately to him, out of deference to Tatekawa’s pride.

To get to Monsieur Fujiya’s Pierre Von Villa, one must follow the saw-toothed gorge dividing Dōryō Forest and Monkey Mountain Forest until it bottoms out, at which point one begins climbing up some 10 kilometers to where an evergreen forest lies curled up at the feet of Turret Peak, providing a dense canopy for the ravine hiding an eerily still pond known as Devil’s Tears Pond, on the banks of which one will discover a small assembly of some fifty or so odd cottages, still dreaming the feudal dream, known simply as “Whirlwind Village.” Located in upper Ashigara, Kanagawa Prefecture, the village is some 40 kilometers from Kashiwa Station.

Having conveyed my plans to the owner of the watermill, I jettisoned my walking staff and took Xeron’s reigns, only to stop and wonder whether I might need my walking staff as a goad...

“Damn thing’s as stubborn as a donkey, these days,” the miller said, with a pessimistic grimace. And then, in a display of genuine sympathy for the grueling itinerary that awaited me and my heavy cargo, he proceeded to inform me that, had this been a statue of a cow or a chicken, I could have easily sold the thing and enjoyed a future rife with free drinks on the proceeds; and that nobody in their right mind would ever buy a “Bust of Makino,” so I should hurry up and foist it upon Monsieur Fujiya; and on my way home would I see if I couldn’t talk Tatekawa out of his latest sculpture (a statuette entitled “Horse”) because he would be happy to take me to the local pawn shop and subsequently go on a hell of a bender with me—and having said this much, he attempted to hand me a brand new bamboo switch.

“Xeron!” I threw my arms around the neck of my beloved steed, casting not so much a glance in the direction of that horrid whip. “I refuse to believe that a loyal mare like yourself could require a goad. For I would sooner take a goad to my own haunches than strike thee.”

According to the miller, in the time since I abandoned my village home for city life, depriving Xeron of his chief source of coddles and caresses, what was once a proud hazel steed had turned into an obstinate donkey, a veritable wooden horse that required whipping in order to move at all, and who had even developed a limp—although it would indeed be a boon if Xeron recognized me today and returned to his old self.

“Oh, he will, I assure you—for Xeron is my trusty steed.”

Confident in this bond, I grasped Xeron’s bridle with a sense of boundless intimacy and joy.

“Hell, I’m just grateful to have the damn ass out of my sight today,” spat the miller, as we rode away.

I couldn't resist taking my precious pet's ears in my hands. Aye—the very sound of Xeron's hooves sang their joy at my return. The weighty bust danced back and forth against my back, in time with this tune. I was glad that Xeron was here to convey me comfortably to Whirlwind Village. In the past, the miller had always proactively volunteered to carry Tatekawa's sculptures into town, and having auctioned one of these sculptures proceeded to go on a rampage through the local bars and brothels, tarnishing Tatekawa's reputation on his way—an unhealthy activity of which he was apparently still quite fond, for when I had arrived with a Tatekawa piece on my back he had all but danced a jig before peeking into my rucksack and, identifying its contents, immediately expressed his unabashed disappointment.

Giddily, I whispered in Xeron's ear:

"Next time your master takes you to town with one of Tatekawa's statues, feel free to stand as still as a Trojan horse. Play up the limp and dump him by the side of the road, if you want."

Having proceeded the eight kilometers or so back along the railway embankment, however, Xeron's hooves began tapping a more erratic rhythm, causing me to nearly bite my tongue, lose my balance, and grab desperately on to Xeron's mane to prevent myself from being pitched off the saddle. At last, noticing a nice green patch of grass by the side of the road, Xeron slowed to a stop and proceeded to commence grazing, forgetting entirely about the rider on his back, in spite of said rider's irascible protests.

"Xeron!" I emitted a poignant cry, my dumbfounded head cocked to one side. "Hath thou forgotten me? 'Twas spring, a year ago... on the outskirts of the village, where the pussywillows puffed on the banks of the river..."

I pulled up Xeron's head and pointed it off into the distance, in the direction of a black-gated villa besides the Sacred Woods, over which a raptor was flying in spirals.

"Tis I, the jongleur of Pierre Von," I growled, bringing my face right up to his, "whom you carried off to the great metropolis last year, in the spring, when the peach-blossoms bloomed in the garden of those greedy scrooges."

But the moment I let the reins slack his head would droop back down and begin munching on grass all over again. The villa with the black gate belonged to my in-laws' family, upon which I had mounted many an offensive from the vantage of Xeron's back, and so I assumed that by pointing Xeron's head in this direction I would immediately evoke the gay dreams of yesteryear, Xeron snorting in fond recognition—but I was wrong.

"Xeron."

I continued trying to revive Xeron's mule-stubborn memories, whispering into empty ears.

"Wert thou not Bucephalus to this bandit poet, as he relieved the winecellars of those greedy scrooges of barrel after barrel of sake? And should thou still not remember me—yea, I shall sing you a song of yesteryear. For when I sang this canzonet, I remember thou didst stride, at will, in pace with the tempo—now quickening, now slacking, as the tune dictated."

And so I subdued my melancholy aspect, assuming jaunty airs and cantillating with tremulous voice a horse-driving tune, in rhyming hexameters, by the name of "New Canterbury:"

*Tipple now, recalling King Hiero's feast
And Castle Towers in forest deep
At the ancient table 'round
the knights in numbers did abound*

—but alas, twas of no avail.

"And was it not thou who at first blush one May morning set off in pursuit of one strikingly beautiful cloud, causing this foolish Archimedes to scream "Eureka!" at his followers—thou wert Pegasus to me. To this students of Stoic learning gathered in the gym of Epictetus' school in the name of omniscient Love, in the name of a Beauty that exceeds human willpower—yea, in order to find and grasp the flower of truth through the practice of agonizing drunkenness!—wert thou not Rocinante to us?"

I rapped my saddle and continued to sing, pumping my fist in the air all the while:

*And the knights held their swords and their mead aloft
While oaths to the King were sworn so oft—
Each knight vowing again that he will
Return to the crown its missing jewel...*

—but the obstinate donkey did not budge.

I leapt from the saddle, and assuming a pose not unlike that of the Boatman of Volga, drew all of my strength into my arms and gave Xeron's reins a mighty tug—but the strength of a single human was no match for that of a stubborn horse. All that I achieved was the loss of my footing and repeated confrontations between my forehead and the ground.

I returned to the saddle, my tears pattering on the dirt below.

"And the time I passed out in the village alehouse," I went on in the same vein, weeping with the sort of ardor that one normally reserves for human cohorts.

"Without anybody to take your reins and lead you, you took me on your back through the midnight streets, and brought me safely home again—are you not the kind and selfsame Xeron?"

Still I sang my plea, in a Homeric rhyme scheme:

*O 'twas a hoary and pie-eyed night,
Soused in streets of starry light,
A hunter hurries home to his nest,
While melancholy lurks in his breast—
Onward ho, young ladies of Rugia...*

—but Xeron just stood there blank-faced, paralyzed, completely static. His dull, heavy eyelids hung over his eyes, unblinking, as per the proverb: "a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse." He stood there, gazing at a gadfly that buzzed about in front of him, until the gadfly attempted to land on his nose, at which point

this wooden horse suddenly began shaking violently, kicking at the ground with both back legs and whinnying desperately. I couldn't help but accompany him in this whinnying, clinging like a treefrog to the neck of my cowardly steed, a mere shadow of the Xeron I used to know.

With his newfound momentum, Xeron set off down the wildflower-bedecked dike. I thought it advisable to take advantage of the momentum, whistling an brisk ditty as a sort of musical whip, in *vagone rotto* tempo. Due to Xeron's limp, his gallop only became more wild and barbaric with speed, his mouth falling vacantly open, his teeth bared, twin pillars of steam spouting forth from his flaring nostrils and blasting the clear morning sun into microscopic bits. And the thought that I, the conductor of the creaking and decrepit steam engine must guide it over the steep and dangerous mountain passes that loomed ahead—this thought alone caused the bust on my back to assume a new weight and my voice to waver from the solemn and rich tones required by the tune at hand, until I grew worried that my lilting timbre might translate into a similar lag in Xeron's pace, and so I swallowed the fear welling up in my throat and bore onward, wailing a Hyksos marching tune at the top of my lungs ("*Through demon-infested swamp and valley briar'd / flayed by the hooves of my horse untired...*"), raising a whirlwind that felt like the orgiastic beating of gongs against my breast as we barreled ahead, leaving anything and everything behind us. You must remember that my particular circumstances made any chance encounter with one of the villagers a rather awkward affair, and so I felt further motivated to breeze through this part of my journey as hastily as possible. Had I chosen the path through Tsukada Village rather than following along the dike, as I was, I could have shaved a great deal of time off my journey; but instead I was obliged to traverse the narrow paths threading through the rice patties, cutting a long, arced detour of almost four kilometers around the Sacred Woods. It was at this point that I set my course toward Boarsnose Village. Worried that the villagers in the tiered patties and fields would hear our blustering progress and take notice, I kept a vigilant lookout, and whenever the upper-body of a patty-submerged farmer appeared I would bury my face in Xeron's mane, like a grasshopper, descanting my valiant tune to dissipate the fear that all but came popping out of my pores. At some point, jarred by our irregular and violent movement, the bust on my back was bounced aloft, cracking me on the pate and slamming back down against my spine as though to knock the wind out of me—but by forcing myself to imagine my destination, Pierre Von, and the feast that awaited me in those "Castle Towers in Forest Deep," I managed to remain stoic in the face of extreme agony.

Having passed through Tsukada Village unharmed, I now had to climb up through the tiered fields of wheat that climbed like steps up the side of a hill (in truth, twas more a small mountain than a hill!) before descending on the other side into Boarsnose Village. As I made my way up this zigzagging and uneven path, face buried in Xeron's mane, my appreciation for the convenience of this limping stallion became significantly more acute. Having at last achieved the summit of this hill, I gazed down at Boarsnose Village, spread out below me, and began walk along the ridge of the summit, traversing the rim of a gigantic pestle-shaped valley, intending to circumnavigate the village below entirely. On the other side of the village lay fields and forests and valleys unsettled by humans—landscapes a traveller would

normally find precarious, but which to me would be a source of comfort. Considering the challenges of the road ahead, I knew that I could not afford a moment's hesitation. The sun has already passed its apex, and the purple of Turret Peak had assumed a ruddy corona. My journey was not yet halfway complete. I drove Xeron desperately onward, o'er the rim of that pestle-like mountain range, feeling all the while as though we were crossing a tightrope. Realizing that the path ahead would all but require Xeron's obedient service, I climbed out of the saddle and began walking behind my steed as quietly as possible. Seeing Xeron walk from a rear vantage, I began to be seriously concerned about his limp. I poured some of the liquor I had received from the miller from my canteen into his mouth, inspected his horseshoes, made a cold compress with some cloth and some liquor and applied it to his bad leg, in anticipation of the challenges to come. For once we had completed our circumnavigation of this Pestle Valley and began descending into the canyon below, we would enter a region so thickly forested as to be dark by day—a dangerous region where any half-witted brigand could easily escape his pursuers' chevy. This was where a group of robbers who posed as mendicants made their lair, and while I was an acquaintance of their leader, a notorious gunslinger who lit his cigarettes by firing off his gun like a lighter, it happened that I had left for the city without so much saying farewell, a fact which had so irked him that he had been blustering to everyone that if he ever laid eyes on me again he would "light me up with his pistol and smoke me like a cigarette"—and so I was hell-bent on making my way through this forest without gracing the crosshairs of this most frightening lighter. Xeron's undivided swiftness was therefore imperative. In fact, few were the men who had ever made their way through this forest alone and lived to tell the tale. And it was said that the annals history still awaited an adventurer bold enough to follow in the courageous footsteps of Sakata no Kintoki or Shinra Saburō and cross this forest at night. To get to Whirlwind Village, one would normally avoid the forest by traversing from village to village—Boarsnose to Okami, Mitake to Mount Hiriyū, Karamatsu on to Monkey Mountain, etc.—but since I had already taken a long detour around Okada Village, and due to the grass-eating donkey incident with Xeron, I was now so far behind on my itinerary that I ran the risk of having night fall on me if I didn't make a beeline through the forest. And even if it would earn me a seat in the Halls of Glory next to the aforementioned heroes, my confidence in my ability to make the journey at night was somewhere around zero. The very thought of it made my hair stand on end. I had actually traveled through the forest before, with a large group of friends, and I was pretty sure would remember the path by daylight—I remember that after barreling through the depths of the forest we had passed a cliff with a waterfall, then emerged into a almost blindingly sunny, hilly, and flower engulfed field. I remember how startled we were, after holding our breaths through the murky and oppressive forest, and how we had grasped hands and nodded at each other. And I remember how, after crossing this surreal expanse of meadow, we came across an overgrown scrubland, gnarled with rotting creepers around a rotting old Buddhist temple straight from the pages of fable. There were a number of legends about lone travelers getting caught in grassfires here and dying unnatural deaths—and it was, indeed, the sort of place where a grassfire would

certainly be fatal. In these parts, even the bandits of the forest strictly obeyed all laws regarding fire safety during the fall and winter months.

Now, having completed this dangerous and bone-chilling course, we would still be granted no repose, for we would then be forced to climb a steep incline of slippery red clay. This hill is held in extreme contempt by the locals, who simply call it “Penniless Hill,” because it rises as such a sharp and arduous pitch that one is tempted to empty ones pockets of all excess weight, when one attempts to climb it, including but not limited to one’s purse. Whatsmore, rumor had it that trolls and goblins and the like often came out in broad daylight, and many were the tales of hapless travelers waylaid by mischievous creatures here. Now, supernatural episodes like this are likely due to a certain level of anemic exhaustion in the traveler, having braved the dangerous mountain passes and finally come to Penniless Hill, and while I myself intended to maintain a certain semblance of lucidity through this part of this trip, my nerves were already feeling rather taught even now, the movement of a sparrow in the brush causing me to flinch violently—and before I knew it I was steeling myself for an encounter with a goblin, just like every other poor fool who ever traveled this route.

I had set out in the morning with Xeron’s reins in hand, fully intending to rely upon his swift limbs to overcome the many obstacles of the day, and now, as we plodded around the rim of the Pestle Valley, my mind leaping forward to the many difficulties that the coming road would present, I was overcome with an acute sense of danger. As it happened, the clouds that had brought rain the night before had cleared, and the whole world abounded with sparkling freshness and life, the sun coruscating its light o’er the landscape like a gigantic pair of wings that it spread across the entire sky before letting them fall gently to the ground again and again—in contrast to which that horrible hill lay waiting where sunlight dared not go, crouched all damp and dark and squelchy, its steep face twisted into a muddy and cagey grimace, or perhaps a smirk of anticipation and slipperiness for for this poor traveler! Xeron and I had come prepared for the impending battle, with a pair of straw sandals and a walking staff tied to a corner of the saddle in case we had to take the hill step by step—but as I looked down at his bum leg, which limped so severely as to sway me side to side in the saddle, my heart began to fill with what felt like lead.

Glancing down beneath my feet, where the distant panorama of Boarsnose Village appears as translucent as diamant glass, I began whistling a horse-driving tune in as lighthearted a timber as possible. Smoke from the cottages down in the village hung over the whole scene, indistinguishable from the shimmers and glimmers of sunlight—it was the sort of scene that reminded one of the old poem: *Poignant though it is, sunset arrives on the last day of spring.* I still had quite a while left until sunset. It would be a disaster for the sun set on me now—and yet I couldn’t help but be entranced by the sun-drenched, smoke streaked calm of the village below, as I sang the old poem aloud in a firm, clear voice. Training my eyes on the village thoroughfare below, I realized that I could make out faces, that I knew exactly who certain people were, where they came from. The guy going over the bridge on a horsecart full of hay, for example—he was the young rancher who bought Tatekawa’s statue “Wooden Rabbit.”

"I must not be espied!" I whispered, pulling my hat down low over my brow.

I had borrowed "Wooden Rabbit" from this very rancher for simple viewing purposes, only to have the college student staying with me slip off with it and use it as collateral toward another bout of drunken philandering in town. Were this rancher to catch site of me, he would certainly take the opportunity to collar me and demand reparations. The villagers appeared to be in the midst of digging a new well for the local landlord with the ginkgo grove, because most of them were bustling about his garden, squinting in the sun. If this group were to apprehend my presence, a dogged pursuit would most certainly follow, for it was I who had been so orchestral in helping that bandit gunslinger of the forest to stealing Tatekawa's "Chicken" sculpture from the landlord, who had purchased it lawfully from Tatekawa. I could only speculate where "Chicken" ultimately ended up, but this landlord and his whole entourage had apparently been searching far and wide for me, in order to track the statue down.

I shifted my gaze to the left, now, where the village alehouse stood in the distance, in front of the shrine gate, the owner of the alehouse standing out in the street, shouting and making angry gestures as all who passed by. This alehouse owner was indeed a highly temperamental character, and when Tatekawa and I ran up a small tab at his establishment, he had carried an invoice over hill and gorge, all the way to Tatekawa's atelier, arriving just in time to find us in the process of gazing at the newly-completed "Bust of Makino," a sight which caused him to shout:

"Doth thou mock us all, making this sort of useless offal?!"

And with that, he had hurled an outraged fist at my bronze-enshrined visage, spraining his finger and earning him some hard time in a sling. To this very day, he would tell anyone who would listen of our transgressions.

"Heigh-ho!" A chill shot through my breast. "The workers digging the well are pointing at me and saying something!"

I frantically turned my face away from the village, out toward the mountains. Down below the hill, the forest had begun to look like a swamp. It spread out languidly beneath me, unfathomably deep—and if you listened close enough, you could hear the sound of gunfire coming from its murky depths. There was a quick salvo, then silence, then one last retort.

An even colder chill seized my breast. For I could not but wonder if our friend the bandit leader was enjoying a cigarillo...

The people of the village likely assumed these salvos to be the offhanded gunfire of a hunter, but I knew what it really was—for on sunny days like this, that brigand leader would become fidgety and irascible, in spite of the weather, anxiously smoking cigarette after cigarette. And when one stubborn cigarillo occasioned to conspire against him and did not successfully light in one shot, his hands would begin to tremble as an uncommon bout of anxiety overcame him. He would deem his unlit cigarillo inauspicious, throw it to the ground, mash it into the dirt with great vitriol and vigor. He was a deeply superstitious man, treating every event of the day as a harbinger of things to come. Whenever he lit a cheroot on the first shot, his mood was one of generosity and joy; but once his hands began to shake he would lose all control. This was paranoid hypochondria in it's worst form: he would unleash whole volleys of gunfire, his hands shaking with greater and

greater violence in proportion to his rage, until the only thing that could ease his spleen was the blood of man or beast.

Now, I had not yet determined that this was, indeed, the case, but the sound of this brigand's "lighter" in the distance was enough to halt me dead in my tracks. Had I world enough and time, I would have abided until he had emptied his barrel and lay there napping, as he always did—but the volleys of gunfire did not die down. And simply dillydallying where I was would put me in danger of being apprehended by the villagers, while the sun meanwhile continued to sink, bringing the greatest danger of all ever closer. The bandit leader wasn't so heartless as to literally maim his human and animal victims, but rather he took strange pleasure in aiming at the area around his quarry, watching as they ran about, frantically trying to dodge the bullets that whizzed by them. Were he to get his hands on me he would certainly break into a satisfied grin before subjecting Xeron and I to the most hellish bullying of bullets imaginable, until the sight of our pitiful leaping and dancing about had at last freed him from the day's ennui. The very thought of myself, perched upon my cowardly steed, that absurd burden hanging from my back and we flew this way and that at the whims of a flaming cigarette lighter—it was enough to send a cascade of cold sweat down my forehead. It would be like writhing in the agonizing flames of perdition, to me. I could feel heavy fetters begin to close around my ankles. On the edge of that mountainous peak, with the whole world spread out before me, I had somehow been driven into a corner. And yet I drummed up all the courage I could, and began goading Xeron forward with that same languid tune:

Poignant though it is, sunset arrives on the last day...

And yet, although my mouth moved in accordance with the lyrics, I was startled to find that no sound issued forth from my lips.

It was then—at that very moment—that Xeron reverted into a stubborn donkey and stopped dead in his tracks. Emitting a cry of utter despair, I began slapping at Xeron's haunches with all my might.

At this Xeron leapt into the air as though delighted, racing forward twenty meters or so before becoming, once more, a trojan horse. He even glanced back over his shoulder, as though to mock me.

"Ah-ha!" I shouted. "This is what the miller spoke of, bemoaning your transformation into a whip-driven mule!"

Regretting that I had left the whip behind, I caught up to Xeron and, making my right foot a cudgel, smote him vigorously across the haunches. Xeron leapt forward, but soon stopped in the shade of a pine tree, looking over his back as if to say: *That's right, come on, give me everything you've got.*

It was as though he had stopped moving the moment the smarting had faded from his flesh. And to think that I had been driving this thankless excuse for a steed along with songs praising his past deeds—I grew livid.

"You ass!" I cried, chasing after him. I was out of breath, but my ire was such that my fists flew at him indiscriminately.

Gleefully, Xeron pawed at the ground with his hooves before moving forward a few feet.

"Curséd mule!" I cried. I had lost all feeling in my arms—they merely dangled from my shoulders like a pair of lead pencils. Indeed, my furor was such

that my legs had given out, as well, a fact which did not prevent me from crawling along the ground, desperately trying to overcome Xeron.

It was at this moment that I heard the fire bell—a shrill clanging from over in the direction of Boarsnose Village.

"Alack! They have spotted me, and are mobilizing for action!"

The peals of the fire bell echoed off the surrounding peaks, whirled about in the basin of Pestle Valley, vainly making their appeal to the vast and empty sky.

Closing my eyes, I clenched my fist tight around a nearby stone. Biting my lip, I began spinning my lame right arm like a pinwheel, taking careful aim before whipping this stony missile at Xeron with all the momentum and abandon of David's sling.

"Take that, Goliath!" I cried as my last desperate hope found purchase in Xeron's haunches—a perfect dead ball.

Xeron's kicked his hind legs wildly toward the sky and dashed ahead. Recognizing the need to follow with a second volley, I continued to crawl onward at full speed, my heavy baggage pressing me to the ground, until at last I had caught up to Xeron, whose gait had already begun to slacken, whereupon I crawled underneath his head and, just as Samson tore the jawbone from an ass in days of yore, I unleashed one exemplary uppercut toward his mandibular. Unfortunately, Xeron had chosen that very moment to turn his head in the direction of the clangorous fire bell, and my fist went shooting futilely through the air. The momentum of the punch sent my body somersaulting into a patch of thistles. But I leapt to my feet and, never stopping to catch my breath, sent Shamgar's legendary ox goad slamming into Xeron's belly. Baring his teeth, Xeron whinnied wildly and began leaping forward in the undulating sine waves of an Olympic hurdler. I grasped the reins that dragged behind him and, having chased him for several yards, finally managed to leap into the saddle. It was with the erratic, arrhythmic violence of a war drum that I beat his sides, clinging to his mane like cavalry on the attack and screaming for him to giddy up, giddy up, giddy up....

For a while Xeron seemed to be as fervent as I, leaping over higher and higher imaginary hurdles and lunging forward along the rim of Pestle Valley, until at last we came to the top of the hill that led down into the forest. Looking back over my shoulder, I discovered that the fire bell was in fact a genuine fire alarm. Flames were visible near the landowner's storehouse, and the firemen were pulling a pump along behind their flag, while people came running from all directions. Someone was blowing a trumpet. Villagers were crying out. Unfortunately, it looked like the old well was no longer accessible—perhaps due to the new well that they were digging—because one group of firemen was frantically trying to drag a hose down to the creek. The hose wasn't reaching, though, and their leader had climbed up onto the fire tower and was waving his hat around, shouting to the other firemen.

"Hose! Hose! Horse!"

I could hear his voice, in the distance. The flames were now moving from the storehouse to the landlord's residence. For a while, the sky seemed to clear, but soon thick, grey smoke began billowing out from under the eaves of the landlord's house.

"Hose! Horse! Xeron!" I thought I heard the man up in the fire tower scream. The hose had made its way into the creek, and people hung from it as though playing tug-of-war. A thin jet of water soon appeared from the other end of the hose, spurting up into the eaves of the landlord's house. The rhythmic shouts of the men working the pump echoed across the valley.

Are they asking me for help?

"Ahoy! You! Riding Xeron! Come here! I need to talk to you!"

This is what I heard. Hunkered down in Xeron's mane, I opened my eyes a crack and peered in the direction of the voice. Upon closer inspection I realized that the man on the fire tower was none other than the cigarillo-smoking leader of the brigands. He was cleverly disguised as one of the firemen. He was knelling the fire bell instead of the watchman, and everyone was so engrossed in the fire that they didn't realize that his erratic rhythm was actually a secret signal to his henchmen.

Between rings, he was waving me over toward him. From what I could read of his Morse-Coded tolling, he was communicating something along the lines of:

Welcome back, my friend. I've been terribly lonely, these days. Why don't you take this opportunity to join my gang again. I'll even share some of today's spoils with you. PS I stole your suit of armor back.

He was referring, of course, to a suit of armor belonging to my ancestors, which fell into the possession of the landlord due to debts outstanding. When my grandmother found out that I had drunk so much liquor that I had forfeited the family suit of armor, she requested that I commit ritual suicide to preserve the family honor. She also stated, in a subsequent letter, she would revoke her lifelong disownment if I ever won this precious treasure back, .

The bell continued to bong:

Why must you always starve yourself over poetry?

For a moment I was tantalized by a vision of the prodigal son returning to his parents' home bedecked in red-threaded Hiodoshi armor, but then I remembered that intent and unrelenting stare that never really focused on anything, lips pouted out like a Buaku Nō mask in a pathetic attempt to look as young as possible—the expression of my father in a portrait that hung in the dim and dismal study I would have to return to, where I would be forced to participate in the accursed practice of Zen meditation—this all came back to me at once, and it depressed me. I have never felt as hopeless and nihilistic as when I was with my father. I intended to destroy that portrait at the first opportunity and would certainly do so, although such an opportunity had yet to present itself.

I was never capable of creating poetry unless faced with starvation, in the middle of some bright and endless wasteland.

"Listen," said the fire bell. "I can tell you how to sell that burden you carry."

"This bust?" I queried back in Corinthian gymnastic sign language, desperate to know the answer.

"Sell it to your family, as a bust of R. Makino. You look similar enough that no one will doubt its authenticity."

R. Makino was the man in the portrait. He had died some ten years back. I had been on the lam for ten years, now.

"I see!"

It was brilliant, I realized, but at the same time I was overcome with a horrifying sense of fatalism, grasping onto Xeron's ears and squeezing them with all my might. And then I fell out of the saddle.

"Giddy up!"

Continuing to assail Xeron's haunches with a barrage of knuckles, we began heading down the hill. The tuft of the ass's tail flew in my face like the spray off a waterwheel. Between these splashes of horsetail, I could see Turret Peak beginning to turn madder-red amidst the cool purple of the distant frontier mountain range. All around the feet of these mountains the forest spread out, darkening already in the vesper light, quiet and still, fathomless and brimming with nightmares while a bizarre and bum-legged donkey went hurdling down toward it, leaping like a grasshopper with each successive swat, its cruel driver barreling after. The bust on my back came to life, and the man in the portrait came bursting through the sky, soaring over this green swamp, gliding over the mountains, fluttering about and taking my by the arms as Xeron stood up on his hind legs and we all took to the sky, eating our way through the clouds and dancing a joyfully and hurky-jerky rococo quadrille. *What a gorgeous sight!* I thought, agog at the spectacle.

I could still hear the fire bell tolling in the distance, but no longer understood its import. The clanging simply became the undying rhythm for our quadrille.

"Could this be...?"

Then, suddenly, I came back to my senses. I took the rucksack in my arms like a baby, and whispered to it:

"I guess the only choice I have left is to toss you into Devil's Tears Pond."

Smiting Xeron's haunches with unflagging blows, we hurled down into that swamp-like valley.

The treetop branches were algae on the swamp floor. Looking up toward the surface of the water, the birds returning to roost became schools of fish. Even Xeron and I were suddenly gilled. My heavy burden tore into the flesh of my back—and how the swamp water smarted on these wounds!

Or was it blood? I wondered.

(Note: Tatekawa Makio's "Bust of Makino" is currently in the possession of Furuya Satarō of Tsukahara Village in Upper Ashigara, in the realm of Sōshū. Although one of Tatekawa's most representative works, the artist himself insisted that "once its all bronzed, I have no problem keeping the thing at the bottom of the swamp," and it was only at the behest of good friends that he agreed to preserve it with Furuya, where anyone can arrange for a public showing if they so desire. The 1929 Nippon Art Institute's official category provides a photograph. Apparently, Tatekawa is currently working on a statue of Xeron entitled "Xeron." I continue to eek out an existence that is as free and uninhibited as it is beggarly and vagrant.)

Bibliography

English materials:

- Alh, Fredrick. "Ars Est Caelare Artem" in *On Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 21.
- Aristotle, *Poetics*. Translated by S. H. Butcher and available at the Internet Classics Archive (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>).
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984, Pg 347.
- Bates, Catherine. "The Point of Puns." *Modern Philology* 96, 14 (May 1999): 421.
- Bergson, Henri, "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. Opting to use public domain materials, when possible, I will be referring to the Project Gutenberg eBook #4352, July 26, 2009
- Cohn, Joel. *Studies in the Comic Spirit in Modern Japanese Fiction*. Harvard University Press, 1998, pg. XI.
- Fried, Debra. "Rhyme Puns" in *On Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1988) 83.
- Hibbett, Howard. *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish*. Kodansha International, 2002, pg. 133.
- Hugo, Victor. *The Toilers of the Sea*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood. Penguin Putnam, 2000. pp. 418-419
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 85
- Johnson, Samuel. "Preface to Shakespeare," in *Selected Writings*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 273.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony/Schelling Lecture Notes : Kierkegaard's Writings, Vol. 2*. Princeton University Press (January 27, 1992)
- Kushner, Barak. "Laughter as Materiel: The Mobilization of Comedy in Japan's Fifteen Year War." *The International History Review*, Vol 26, No. 2 (June 2004), pg. 303.
- Lamb, Charles. *The Last Essays of Elia*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 257.
- Lee, Henry. *The Octopus; or, the "Devil-Fish" of Fiction and Fact*. Bradbury, Agnew & Co, London, 1875.
- Leutner, Robert. *Shikitei Sanba and the Comic Tradition in Edo Fiction*. Harvard University Press, 1985, pg. 4.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. Lancer Books, April 23, 1989.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. Vintage Books USA, April 30, 1991.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. trans R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1961) pg. 41.
- Plato, "The Apology," trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant. *The Last Days of Socrates*. Penguin Books, 1993.
- Plato, "Phaedo," trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant. *The Last Days of Socrates*. Penguin Books, 1993. pg. 117
- Poe, Edgar Alan. "X-ing a Paragraph" *The Works of Edgar Alan Poe*, Project Gutenberg eBook #2150, May 19, 2008.

Redfern, Walter. *Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.) pg. 169.
 Rendsburg, Gary A. "Word Play in Biblical Hebrew," in *Puns and Pundits*, ed. Scott B. Noegel, (CDL Press), 200.
 Sax, Boria. *The mythical zoo: an encyclopedia of animals in world myth, legend, and literature*, ABC-CLIO, Inc. 2001.
 Ulmer, Gregory. "The Puncture in Grammatology" in *On Puns*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1988) 165.
 Wells, Marguerite. *Japanese Humor*. St. Martin's Press, 1997, pg 112.
 Wood, James. *The Irresponsible Self*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.

Japanese materials:

遠藤伸治、「鬼涙村論」、『近代文学試論』、vol. 22, Dec 25, 1984.

小島貞二編、『艶笑小咄傑作選』、ちくま文庫、2001.

織田作之助.『駄洒落』in「織田作之助資料」、ed. 関根和行、(東京：オリジン出版センター、1979)

織田作之助.『猿飛佐助』in「織田作之助：ちくま日本文学全集」、(東京：筑摩書房、2000)

織田作之助.『可能性の文学』in「織田作之助：ちくま日本文学全集」、(東京：筑摩書房、2000) 440-441

織田作之助.「織田作之助資料」、ed. 関根和行、(東京：オリジン出版センター、1979)

白石一郎、「蒙古襲来」、(東京：NHK 出版、2001)

中村明、「笑いのセンス」、(東京：岩波書店、2002)

中石孝、「織田作之助：雨 螢 金木犀」、(大阪：大阪文学叢書、1998) 143.

中村光夫、「日本の近代小説」、(岩波新書、1955)

中島敦、『我が西遊記』、(問題社、July of 1942)

中石孝.「織田作之助：雨 螢 金木犀」、(大阪：大阪文学叢書、1998)

七北数人、『評伝：坂口安吾：魂の事件簿』、(集英社、2002)

和田博文、「視線の回帰」、(国語と国文学、July, 1987)

金子昌夫、「牧野信一と小田原」、(小田原ライブラリー、2002)

竹内利美、『村の制裁』、(社会経済私学、volume 8, issue 7, October, 1938)

羽鳥徹哉、「牧野信一の文学と笑い」、collected in『笑い創造』、(勉誠出版、1998, vol 3)

庄司肇、「坂口安吾論集成」、(沖積舎、1992)

樋口清之.「笑い日本人」、(東京：講談社、1982)

本田顕彰、「現代文学における笑い」、(『文学』、August, 1938)
守安敏久、「バロックの日本」、(国書刊行会、2003)

牧野信一、「鬼涙村」、(文芸春秋、1934)

All of Makino Shinichi's writing is publically available at
<http://smakino.sakura.ne.jp/download.html>.

牧野信一、『喜劇考』、「作品」、(May, 1930)

牧野信一、『真夏の夜の夢』、「時事新報」、(August, 1931)

牧野信一、「僕の酒」、「モダン日本」、(January, 1934)

牧野信一、『「風博士」』、「文芸春愁」、(July, 1930)

牧野信一、「ゼーロン」、『改造』、(October, 1931)

武田信明、「羞恥する『私』」、『宇野浩二と牧野信一』、(有精堂出版、1988)

柳沢孝子、「青ざめた夜の夢」、『宇野浩二と牧野信一』、(有精堂出版、September, 1988)

柳田国男、「笑いの文学の起源」、『柳田国男全集』、(筑摩文庫、1990, vol. 9)

柳田国男、「戯作者の伝統」、『文学』、(August, 1938)

柳田国男、「笑いの本願」、『柳田国男全集』、(筑摩文庫、1990, vol. 9)

柳田国男、「不幸なる芸術」、『柳田国男全集』、(筑摩文庫、1990)

柳田国男、「仮面に関する一二の所見」、『柳田国男全集』、(筑摩書房、1990, vol. 18)

坂口安吾、「坂口安吾全集」、(筑摩書房、vol. 01-15)

Relevant works from this collection include:

『木枯の酒倉から』

『風博士』

『黒谷村』

『FARCE について』

『電博士の廃頹』

『竹藪の家』

『村のひと騒ぎ』

『金談にからまる詩的要素の神秘性に就いて』

『二十七歳』

『肝臓先生』

坂口安吾、『茶番に寄せて』、「文体」、Vol. 2, Issue 2, April 1939

宗谷真爾、「虚空の幻術師＝インド教的安吾私見」。『日本きゃらばん』17号、October, 1967

村上護、「案語風来記＝ファルスの求道者」。 (新書館、1986)

廣瀬晋也、「博士の仮面＝風坂口安吾覚書」。「叙説」、January 1991

浅子逸男、「『風博士』論」、「坂口安吾私論＝虚空に舞う花」。（有精堂、May, 1985）

岸田国土、「ファルスの近代性」、compiled in 「現代演劇論」、（白水社、1953）

華房良輔、「天皇陛下万歳とお笑い漫才」、（解放出版社、2003）