

Breaking Through Pynchon Studies in Japan

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Thomas Pynchon: Museifu-shugi-teki-kiseki no Uchu [*Thomas Pynchon: The Universe of Anarchist Miracle*], by Yoshihiko Kihara. Kyoto: Kyoto UP, 2001. 246 pp. ¥3400.

Postmodern Metamorphosis: Capitalism and the Subject in Contemporary American Fiction, by Takayoshi Ishiwari. Tokyo: Eihousha, 2001. 174 pp. ¥2600.

For Japanese Pynchon critics, the first year of the twenty-first century will be remembered for the publication of two books. One is Yoshihiko Kihara's *Thomas Pynchon*, the first book-length study of Pynchon published in Japan, written in Japanese. The other is Takayoshi Ishiwari's *Postmodern Metamorphosis*, in English, with a chapter on *The Crying of Lot 49*. (That chapter is a slightly revised version of Ishiwari's article "Anti-Oedipa: Masochism, Self-Portrait, and *The Crying of Lot 49*," which won the 1999 Shinjin-sho, the rookie-of-the-year award in the field of English and American literature offered by the English Literary Society of Japan.) While both books are important by themselves and worth reviewing separately, by reading them together we can see the contours—the where and the what—of Japanese Pynchon studies at the beginning of the new millennium.

That Kihara's *Thomas Pynchon* is the first book-length study of Pynchon published in Japan does not mean Pynchon has been neglected by Japanese critics for more than a quarter of a century. Rather, Japan should be counted among the non-English-speaking countries where Pynchon is most popular. Since the first Japanese translation of "Entropy" appeared in 1973, all of Pynchon's novels have been translated but *Mason & Dixon*, the translation of which is now under way, and dozens of reviews and critical articles have been written by Japanese scholars both in English and in Japanese (see Osterhaus; Sato), though few have been introduced to English-speaking readers.¹ In addition, the English Literary Society of Japan, the Japanese equivalent of the MLA, has organized two Pynchon symposia, one in 1979, after the publication of the Japanese translation of *V.*, and the other in 1991, after the publication of *Vineland*, the first Pynchon novel published after Japanese readers had started to pay attention to

the American author. Still, no book-length study of Pynchon had been published before Kihara broke this long spell with his *Thomas Pynchon*.

Kihara undertakes, not just for academic readers but also “for lay readers” (240),² to cover all of Pynchon’s novels, including *Mason & Dixon*—though somehow hardly paying any attention to Pynchon’s short stories, however relevant they are to his argument—with the intent to identify one specific theme underlying them: how the “universe of anarchist miracle” is evoked in each novel. In fact, Kihara neither tracks down the theme systematically through Pynchon’s works nor clarifies what he—or Pynchon—really means to say with these words. All we can know about the universe of anarchist miracle is from a short section titled “An Anarchist Miracle” in a chapter on *The Crying of Lot 49*, where Kihara quotes Oedipa Maas recalling Jesús Arrabal’s words—“anarchists . . . believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul’s talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself” (61; Pynchon 120)—then to suggest only that what Oedipa is waiting for is a universe where anarchist miracle dominates over binary logic. It is as if the readers were supposed to know already what the anarchist miracle means in Pynchon’s writing. This assumption obviously contradicts Kihara’s grand design in writing the book: even though specialists might be able to anticipate the book’s most important theme, nonspecialists will just find themselves puzzled and confused over Pynchon’s universe of anarchist miracle. If Kihara wants not to be too abstract for lay readers, he has to provide a logical explanation of every important term he uses, and he should be more reader-friendly in this particular case, for at stake is the book’s main theme.

A similar defect can be found when Kihara tries to explain in his concluding chapter the notion of “Pynchon-sei”—what most characterizes Pynchon or Pynchon’s writing. Instead of regarding the American author as “postmodernist” (the notion is too “ambiguous and vague” [210]), Kihara classifies Pynchon’s work with the “‘complexity novel,’” by which he means “‘novels representing interactive relations within a series of multi-complexity systems’” (214). He could have taken this occasion to construct some coherent theory in his argument. In fact, he falls short of such a theory, relying heavily on Tom LeClair’s notion of the “systems novel” in explaining interactive relations in Pynchon’s novels. Since Kihara repeatedly refers to chaos and complexity theories in association with Pynchon’s universe of anarchist miracle (66, 71–72, 223–25), most readers would expect him to develop some alluring theory with which to interpret Pynchon-sei in terms of chaos and complexity.

To be fair, Kihara does offer helpful and insightful comments when dealing with each of Pynchon's novels. Especially for the Japanese beginning readers to whom the book is addressed, his lockstep listing and explication of Pynchon's wordplays, scientific and theoretical allusions, and references to American popular culture are very useful and also suggestive. Most provocative is a chapter on *Mason & Dixon*, in which Kihara enumerates a number of theoretical clues with which to interpret Pynchon's latest novel: superstring theory, fractals, the butterfly effect, quantum electrodynamics, to name a few. Unfortunately, he limits his argument to what he supposes beginning readers will understand and never offers any cohesive theory. Even though Kihara's study may serve beginning readers as an introduction to Pynchon's work, readers already familiar with Pynchon should seek a more tenacious reading of the American author.

While *Thomas Pynchon* is a specialist's book written for general readers, *Postmodern Metamorphosis* is a generalist work intended for academics. The contrast is clear: while Kihara reads all of Pynchon's novels in chronological order, Ishiwari picks up *The Crying of Lot 49* only, along with other postmodernist novels—Donald Barthelme's *Dead Father*, Robert Coover's *Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*—to analyze the problem of subject (trans-)formation in the postmodernist society of late capitalism. For Ishiwari, the postmodern subject forms, deforms and even re-forms itself by its discursive performances.

Ishiwari also refers to nonliterary works of four contemporary photographic artists—Cindy Sherman, Jo Spence, Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger—"in the hope of better treating the problem of performance—and also, that of metamorphosis—in postmodern *culture*" (28). Balancing the four male authors with the four female artists reflects not only Ishiwari's broader perspective on subjectivity but also his awareness of the importance of gender relations in theories of postmodernism. From a constructivist view of the body as a site where "various discourses keep intersecting with each other" (103), Ishiwari draws attention to women's performative acts of "reappropriat[ing] and reclaim[ing] [their] body" (16). Even though *Postmodern Metamorphosis* is not a feminist study—not only are the novelists discussed all male, but also the theoretical references are mostly limited to male theorists in a Marxist vein (Louis Althusser, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard and Marx himself)—Ishiwari clearly considers gender issues inseparable from the question of postmodern subjectivity.

Ishiwari starts the book with a reading of *The Crying of Lot 49*, one of the best novels that addresses the problem of gender relations in the formation of postmodern subjectivity. We can see in the figure of

Oedipa not only “instances of female confinement, imprisonment, and immobilization” (31) but also ways her female body is appropriated, discursively, by male subjects. Pierce Inverarity names her executrix of his will; Mucho Maas intentionally mispronounces her name to the radio audience, thereby transforming her subjectivity; Arnold Snarb gives her a new transsexual identity by putting his ID badge on her. Seeing the gender relations represented in *The Crying of Lot 49* as an updated American version of the masochistic master-slave relationship elaborated in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s nineteenth-century Austrian masterpiece, *Venus in Furs* (1870), Ishiwari draws attention to Oedipa’s passive or masochistic relations with male masters or those who name her. That is, the relation is based on the “one-sided mechanism of interpellation” (39) that determines or, more precisely, overdetermines not only her social roles but also her subjectivity. In a reading highly influenced by Althusser’s theory of interpellation, Ishiwari describes Oedipa as “unknowingly functioning as an efficient ‘relay’ that would receive, amplify, and . . . ‘spread’ patriarchal discourses of capitalism” (46) as she is called into historical existence by male subjects.

While Oedipa tries in vain to escape her Rapunzelian enclosure, Cindy Sherman successfully undermines the masochistic condition in which she herself is placed by assuming at once both the master’s and the slave’s roles in her work. Ishiwari argues that in a series of self-portraits, *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman poses for her own camera eye, after stereotypically fetishistic images of Hollywood heroines, to foreground the mechanism of patriarchy in which the desired images of the feminine are produced and reproduced ad infinitum. This is to say that if Oedipa remains passive and even paralyzed in her encapsulation, Sherman, better aware of the workings of the male-dominant system in which she is encased, is “masochist” (48)—or, I would rather say, “sadist”—enough to reiterate the very artificial/artistic mechanism that transforms her body into a female object under the masculine gaze. Ishiwari calls this strategy of Sherman’s, which puts her self in the positions of both the sadistic master and the masochistic slave, “‘masochistic performativity’” (39). At stake are both Sherman’s transgression of gender—“women simulating men” (18)—and her “indifferen[ce] to her own individual identity” (40), which open up—engender—in the male-dominant regulatory space “a new space or context” (19) in which one can not only deform but also “‘re-form’” oneself by one’s discursive practices (20).

Ishiwari’s argument is clear and very strategic. In my view, his chapter on *The Crying of Lot 49* should be counted among the best readings of that novel. So it comes as no surprise that he won the Shinjin-sho prize for an earlier version of the chapter. Indeed, as the

ELSJ editorial board puts it, Ishiwari's reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* reveals a "homeopathic" treatment, latent in the capitalist system, for a serious power imbalance between the sexes (247). For the rest of the book, Ishiwari also provides gender-conscious readings of Coover and DeLillo in which the works of the male authors are critically contested in comparison with those of the female photographic artists Holzer and Kruger, respectively, who exemplify the female appropriation of the male-dominant space of contemporary America. A female counterpart is somehow missing, however, in a chapter on Barthelme analyzing the ways the Dead Father's corpse constitutes a postmodern cultural site.

Despite the excellence of the individual readings Ishiwari offers, his book as a whole is not well grounded theoretically. That is, one may want to question how or even whether the notion of the postmodern can really be distinguished from that of the modern in Ishiwari's argument. Even though he offers to call "postmodern" the "absurdly *eccentric*" (20) space the female artists engender by trespassing traditional gender roles, the transgendered disfiguration of masculine space can already be found in modernist discourse. Willa Cather, for example, "a male-identified writer" (Butler 143), conceals her lesbian sexuality in her fiction.³ As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, *The Professor's House* (1925), in which a male-homosexual relationship is concealed in a heterosexual family arrangement, is a fine specimen of Cather's double translation of her sexual identity: she assumes the position of male characters and that of their homosexuality to double-refract her own lesbian love, which "did not in Willa Cather's time and culture freely become visible as itself" (69). If what Ishiwari calls the "postmodern" space is a sort of cultural enclave where "[self-]deformed subjects" abound to "undermine the valuable '-centrisms' that their already established rules are meant to reinforce" (20), then Cather's transfer of gender in her writing, too, can be regarded as "postmodern." For, as Judith Butler puts it, it raises "the question of whether . . . the name stages an exchange of gender identifications that the substantializing of gender and sexuality conceals" (144–45).

Indeed, Ishiwari's argument is weakest when he defines the postmodern as a modality against the traditional norm, which "provokes a question (mark): 'Is it really happening?'" (19), after Lyotard's notion of the postmodern in the aesthetic theory of the sublime. If we follow Ishiwari's scheme in this direction and assume that postmodernism is "the problem of the 'rhetorical question'" (143), then "postmodern" supposedly refers merely to a sporadic event, which is to be recuperated into an established circuit as its local extension, however "dissident" (29) it may first appear from the cultural dominant—as Ishiwari himself acknowledges, for instance, when Holzer's subversive

art is finally institutionalized after her selection, in 1990, to “‘represent’ the United States at the Venice Biennale” (78). Insofar as the theory of the postmodern remains in this sphere, a critical backlash against postmodernism sounds appropriate and persuasive. Supposing that “the postmodernization of culture does not transcend historical modernity,” Jim McGuigan claims that “postmodernist writing is typically coy about societal transformation, preferring to emphasize the cultural and very often exclusively the textual, occasionally supplemented by the claim that the social has been subsumed in the cultural; which is one definition of postmodernism” (123).

Against Ishiwari’s untenable, if not uneventful, theory of the postmodern, I would rather argue, following Thomas Schaub, that “the term ‘postmodern’ has its origin in historical conditions rather than in the evolution of form” (189). Schaub contends that American postmodernism was born out of “the suspicion of narrative frames fostered in the conservative atmosphere of the new liberalism” (190). Ishiwari, whose work is based on Jameson’s thesis that postmodernism is “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” would probably also agree with Schaub. Jameson regards the postmodernization of culture as a process of global indifferenciation and considers that postmodern culture is “the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (5). But even though Ishiwari sees Cold War politics as a basis on which elements of American postmodernity (“consumerism, eclecticism, and ‘genre fission’” [135]) are grounded, and proposes what he calls “‘xenocriticism’” for a critique of American postmodernism’s scheme of globalization (139), he remains, throughout his arguments on his four novelists, indifferent to particular historical conditions that periodize American postmodernism in the last decades of the twentieth century. When more and more critics are reassessing postmodernism and its theories in the historical framework of post-Second World War politics (cf. Knight; O’Donnell), it is simply not enough to disfigure what might appear to be merely aesthetic universals latent in postmodernist culture, regardless of the complexities of cultural formation in which American postmodernism unfolds under the disguise of global configuration.

In the preface to his updated bibliography of Pynchon studies in Japan, Frank Osterhaus notes that the work of Japanese Pynchon scholars falls roughly “into two main categories: Cross-cultural comparison and conventional critical analysis” (196). The two books examined in this review are, I suppose, fine examples of the second category. Following arguments offered by Tony Tanner, David Cowart and others, Kihara tries to locate his study in the tradition of mainstream Pynchon criticism. Ishiwari, despite his broader perspective

from which to analyze postmodern culture in general, remains within the framework of the Western critical tradition. To be sure, few Japanese critics have engaged in cross-cultural readings of Pynchon (cf. Aso and Caesar; Tatsumi). In fact, most articles listed in Osterhaus's bibliography are conventional analyses. Take, for instance, the special Pynchon issue (1989) of *Yuriika* [*Eureka*], a leading literary magazine in Japan: out of ten articles, only one can be categorized as cross-cultural (see Ueno). Similarly, all six featured articles on *Gravity's Rainbow* in the 1994 special Pynchon issue of *Eigo Seinen/The Rising Generation* take non-cross-cultural approaches. Although the trend toward conventional methods is common not only among Pynchon critics but among Japanese scholars in general, it may appear a bit absurd to non-Japanese when simply to *be* Japanese has become an advantage for working on Pynchon, especially since the publication of *Vineland*, a novel saturated with postmodern Japanese imagery as well as such traditional yet hyperrealistic icons as ninjitsu, samurai and yakuza.

If it is true that, as Osterhaus harshly puts it, "Japanese studying Western culture can be caught between the two worlds and seem to fail in both" (197), the reason may be, at least partly, that Japanese critics have been too much preoccupied with Western academic trends to establish their unique position. Like other industries in Japan, Japanese scholarship has kept making every possible effort to catch up with the West, especially since the end of the Second World War, not paying enough attention to its own critical tradition. On this point, Yoichiro Miyamoto, in reviewing *Postmodern Metamorphosis*, criticizes Japanese critics' orientation toward Western criticism, especially their bias toward theories from the West, as an instance of "masochistic self-servitude to [Western] master narrative" (309). Even though I would not share Miyamoto's bitter nationalist tone, especially when he suggests that a critic like Ishiwari may risk losing his own critical voice by simulating postmodern master narrative, I must point out that both Kihara and Ishiwari do neglect preceding Japanese Pynchon studies, thus occasioning Miyamoto's criticism.

"How can we construct our own critical discourse?" This is a question Japanese critics have long and repeatedly asked. Most recently, Tadashi Uchino posed this question at the 73rd conference of ELSJ (2001) in considering the possibility of cross-cultural negotiations among American, British, German and Japanese theaters. Indeed, what is most important in the present critical climate is neither the uncritical reception and appropriation of Western critical trends nor the purification of Japanese critical discourse, but the cross-cultural transaction of various critical traditions. At stake is how critics in Japan embrace their own cultural position on the map of international

scholarship and make efforts to contribute to what Osterhaus terms “a negentropic sharing of information” with scholars outside Japan (197).

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Notes

¹See Tatsumi’s “Comparative Metafiction,” an article on Gibson, Pynchon and contemporary Japanese metafictionist Shozo Numa, and also Caesar and Aso.

²All the translations of Japanese texts are mine.

³According to Sharon O’Brien, Cather sometimes signed her name “William Cather, Jr.,” or “William Cather, M.D.,” dressed like a boy when she was young, and continued to identify herself with a male narrator or a male protagonist at the early stage of her writing career (96–116).

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