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Review Of "Text And The City: Essays On Japanese Modernity" By M. Ai

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Maeda Ai, Text and the City: Essays on Japanese

Modernity. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

391 pp. ISBN 0822333465 (paper).

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Maeda Ai (1931-1987) was among the most gifted and influential critics in late twentieth-century Japan. Maeda played a significant role in establishing the prominent critical genres of *toshi-ron* (theories of the city) and *kūkan-ron* (theories of space), exploring the intersection of literature with social and political history through an investigation of specific urban spatial configurations. In addition to a finely tuned historical sensibility and a deep knowledge of early modern and modern literature, Maeda brought to this task his familiarity with European theory and criticism, including the work of Benjamin, Williams, Bachelard, Lefebvre, Barthes, and Foucault. While Maeda made a significant contribution to the introduction of European theory in Japan, he also maintained an awareness of the historical specificity of the Japanese works he discussed, and developed exemplary methods to steer between the rocks of both of nationalist exceptionalism and theory-driven universalism. In collecting, translating, and introducing a selection of Maeda's landmark essays, editor James A. Fujii and his able team of translators have brought to the English-reading world some of the most stimulating and influential works of late twentieth-century Japanese literary criticism.

Following a forward by Harry Harootunian and a lucid introduction by Fujii, the anthology is divided into four sections: "Light City, Dark City: Visualizing the Modern," "Play, Space, and Mass Culture," "Text, Space, Visuality," and "Crossing Boundaries in Urban Space." While the first, second, and fourth sections contain generous samplings of Maeda's literary investigations of urban space, the second and third sections provide a glimpse of another of Maeda's major contributions to literary-critical methodology in Japan: his attention to the physical manifestations of literary texts and the changing practices by which readers consume literary texts within specific social and ideological formulations. Both of these loci of Maeda's critical attention -- that of urban space and that of practices of reading -- offer fresh perspectives on the major cultural, social, and political shifts occurring with the establishment of the modern Japanese nation.

Few nations have had as seemingly clear a point of historical demarcation between the early modern (*kinsei*) and modern phases (*kindai*) of their country's history as Japan. The arrival of Commodore Mathew Perry's "black ships" in 1853 touched off a political crisis in the Tokugawa (Edo) regime, culminating in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and putting an end to a two-

hundred year policy of "national isolation"-- or perhaps more accurately, national "insulation"-- from contact with the outside world. A new national mission to learn from Western countries in order to strengthen Japan's own international position was inscribed into the Meiji Charter Oath, with the charge that "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule."

In the ensuing decades, major transformations extended to nearly every facet of Japanese life, and literature played a central role in both mediating Western ideas and providing a forum for personal reflections on the sweeping social, political and cultural changes during this tumultuous era. The program of literary reforms advanced by certain Meiji writers, especially the "unification of spoken and written language" (*genbun itchi*), came to serve as the canonical foundation for a new "modern" Japanese literature.

Maeda's investigation into reading practices during the Meiji period both confirms and complicates the epochal nature of the Meiji shift. In the essay, "From Communal Performance to Solitary Reading: The Rise of the Modern Japanese Reader," Maeda elucidates the extent to which reading throughout much of the Meiji period was both a social activity and one mediated by the voice, in contrast to the model of the silent, solitary reader that had gradually come to dominate by the end of the era in 1912. Maeda ascribes the early-Meiji prevalence of communal reading practices in part to practical circumstances such as the relative scarcity of texts (many books were borrowed from rental libraries) or the uneven attainment of literacy, but more importantly to the widespread appreciation of the pleasures of oral performance, fostered by the rich traditions of popular performing arts that were densely intertwined with Edo-period literary genres.

Among the numerous Meiji communal reading contexts that Maeda documents in his study are the reading aloud of various types of fiction in the home, and the sound-reading of Chinese classics in the schools, where recitation, repetition, and memorization were valued as a pedagogical method prior to students' full mastery of the meaning of the texts. In addition, Maeda suggests the importance of communal reading practices to the development of the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement in the 1880's, including the public reading of newspapers in village civic groups, and the recitation of liberal "political novels" in student boarding-houses and political associations -- novels that employed a prosody similar to the Chinese classics that the Meiji intelligentsia had absorbed in their private schools. The late Meiji political setbacks to the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement coincided with the decline of the "political novel," the rise of the model of the solitary reader, and the internalized narrative voice of the emerging *genbun itchi* style. In the course of this brief but tremendously suggestive essay, Maeda intimates the political significance of well-known Meiji literary events, provides a stimulating new perspective on the

transitional and foundational works of this period, and reconstitutes the differing modes of textual reception by readers, drawing attention to modes of vocalization and performance that had been nearly forgotten in the ensuing decades. Maeda's study of the development of the modern reader is continued in another essay collected in this volume, "The Development of Popular Fiction in the Late Taishô Era: Increasing Readership of Women's Magazines."

Maeda shifts his focus from reading practices to the visual presentation and technological mediation of literary texts in the essay, "Modern Literature and the World of Printing." Discussing the rich visuality of Edo-period woodblock-printed texts, Maeda observes that such texts "comprised a graphic style that involved a direct transfer of the author or scribe's hand to the printing plate, a system of signs and marks that incorporated sounds, modulations, and rhythms and a skillful page layout calculated to take full advantage of the interrelations between the text and the illustrations," concluding that "such works can be thought of as a collection of crafted objects that constituted an extremely complex and organic system" (264). Rereading Meiji literary reformer Tsubouchi Shôyô's canonical 1885 treatise, *Essence of the Novel (Shôsetsu shinzui)*, from the perspective of the shift from such woodblock-printed texts to moveable-type printing, Maeda argues that Shôyô's new precepts of literary "realism" respond to a situation in which the written text must take over the full burden of visual description that had been shared by interaction of written text and illustrations in Edo-period works. Furthermore, he argues that Shôyô's critical project corresponds with the tendency of nineteenth-century European realist and naturalist literature to separate "the seer from that which is seen," in which "that which is seen becomes objectified and segmented" (257).

Maeda extends his investigation of Edo/Meiji visuality and material culture beyond the realm of literary texts in the collection's first two essays, "Utopia of the Prisonhouse: A Reading of *In Darkest Tokyo*" and "The Panorama of Enlightenment." In the former essay, Maeda discusses the intertwined political and literary discourse of the prison and the utopia, spanning from the writings of Edo-period political prisoner Yoshida Shôin, who was imprisoned for attempting to violate the Tokugawa ban on travel abroad and who still dreamed from his one-mat prison cell [1] of achieving an "unknown and unimaginable expanse," to the Meiji-period poems of Kitamura Tôkoku, who sings of the tortures of modern self-consciousness in his "Prisoner's Song" of 1890, inspired by Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon." In between these two chronological extremes, Maeda investigates the reorganization of the Shogun's capital of Edo as the new imperial capital of Tokyo, through which reformers hoped to realize post-Enlightenment European principles of hygiene, social discipline, urban renewal, and prison reform. In addition, Maeda also delves into the underside of Meiji urban squalor as represented in such works as Matsubara Iwagorô's *In Darkest Tokyo* (1893), which was

inspired by William Booth's exposé of slum conditions in London's East End, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1889). While Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* is the most familiar intertext to Maeda's study, the essay amply demonstrates Maeda's remarkable erudition in a wide range of European and Japanese sources, while offering an intriguing disquisition on the significance of the panopticon in Meiji Japan and a fresh perspective on the ill-fated Freedom and Popular Rights Movement. Another essay, "The Panorama of Enlightenment," serves as a felicitous companion to "Utopia of the Prisonhouse," focusing on the display of the material goods of modern civilization in Meiji period expositions and architectural constructions, and contrasting the materialistic literary representation of the Meiji capital in Hattori Bushô's 1874 *New Tales of Tokyo Prosperity* with the lyrical Edo sensibility maintained by the contemporaneous woodblock print artist Kobayashi Kiyochika.

The balance of essays in the collection are comprised of studies of specific literary texts, including Narushima Ryûhoku's *Diary of a Journey to the West* (1881-1884), Mori Ôgai's "Dancing Girl" (1890), Higuchi Ichiyô's *Takekurabe (Growing Up)*, 1895-1896), Nagai Kafû's "The Fox" (1909), Natsume Sôseki's *Mon (The Gate)*, 1910), and Kawabata Yasunari's *The Crimson Gang of Asakusa* (1929-1930). Many of these essays involve meticulous study of maps and other historical documents to reveal unexpected dimensions of canonical works. Although Maeda's study of Ryûhoku, representing his first major scholarly project, carefully traces the diarist's voyage to Europe, in general Maeda avoids the tendency to draw equivalencies between author and text that has dominated much of Japanese literary scholarship. Furthermore, as Fujii notes in his introduction, Maeda employs his *kûkan-ron* methodology as a way of recasting the postwar critical fixation on issues of interiority and subjectivity, shifting the terms of analysis to "an examination of the materiality of the body as a viewing position. . . as a subject whose materially conceived agency would allow one to recognize the political and social dimensions and consequences of participation in city life" (6).

Potential readers of this anthology engaged with issues of travel, colonialism, and comparative studies of modernity will take particular interest in several chapters that deal with not only the introduction of European ideas, technologies, and material cultures to Japan, but the representation of voyages to Europe itself by such authors as Ryûhoku and Ôgai, as well as the glimpses of nineteenth-century Japanese worldviews afforded by stops in such interim locations as colonial Saigon. However, given the significance of Japan's own acquisition of empire over the period covered in this volume, it is regrettable that the collection does not include any essays that investigate

literature directly related to Japanese imperialism, such as Maeda's highly regarded study of Yokomitsu Ri'ichi's *Shanghai*.

The publication of *Text and the City* makes a major contribution to scholarship on Japanese literature available in English, expanding the lamentably small corpus of translations of Japanese literary criticism and theory, joining the handful of volumes such as Kobayashi Hideo's *Literature of the Lost Home*, Kamei Hideo's *Transformations of Sensibility: The Phenomenology of Meiji Literature*, and Karatani Kôjin's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*. Maeda's work has already had a profound influence on a generation and more of American scholars of Japan; this volume in translation will extend this influence further to students and scholars without Japanese reading proficiency. However, the volume should also be of great interest to a wide range of students and scholars of literary and cultural studies without a specialized interest in Japan. While Maeda does not present a single overarching literary theory or urbanist thesis, his erudite and imaginative studies offer inspiration to any students of literature seeking to pursue contextually grounded analysis. His simultaneous investigation of urban landscapes and literary texts served as a powerful methodological model in Japan, and both his approach and his conclusions should prove stimulating to scholars outside of Japan's borders as well. Indeed, anyone with a serious interest in issues of literature and media; script, print and orality; visual culture; and global modernity; or anyone who enjoys the rich and detailed explication of literary texts, should not hesitate to seek out the work of this intrepid literary scholar.

Notes

1. The "one-mat" prison cell refers to the size of traditional tatami woven straw mat, which is both a basic flooring material in Japanese architecture and a unit of measurement for rooms. In modern times, one mat is approximately 3' X 6'.