
Trapped in the Funhouse: Gotô Meisei's "The Unwritable Report"

PETER TILLACK
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Early in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), there is a passage in which the novel's questing protagonist, Oedipa Maas, drives her car south from Kinneret to San Narciso:

[Cresting a hill overlooking the city, she] looked down a slope . . . onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern California, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit as to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding (Pynchon 24).

Around this time and across the Pacific, the Japanese writer Kôbô Abe came out with *The Ruined Map* (*Moetsukita chizu*). Early in this work, the questing protagonist—a detective who may or not be a certain Mr. Nemuro—is confronted with the following scene as, just outside Tokyo, *he* crests a hill in *his* car:

Suddenly the scenery changed, and a straight, white line of road stretched to a sky daubed with white. It was some thirty feet wide. . . . It was as if I were looking at some patterned infinity: the four-storied buildings, identical in height, each floor with six doors, were lined up in rows of six to the right and left. Only the fronts of the buildings, facing the road, were painted white, and the color stood out against the darkish green of the sides, emphasizing even more the geometrical character of the view. With the roadway as an axis, the housing development extended in two great wings, somewhat greater in width than in depth. Perhaps it was for the lighting, but as the buildings were laid out in staggered lines, on both sides one's view met only white walls supporting a milk-white dome of sky (Abe 7).

What Oedipa Maas looks upon with such wonder is the sprawl of American suburban development. What the detective beholds is the Japanese *danchi*, the

inhabitants of which, viewed from a distance “seemed like fanciful reflections” (Abe 7). *Danchi* are massive apartment complexes whose construction was partially subsidized by the government under the auspices of the Japan Housing Corporation (*Nihon jutaku kôdan*, JHC). The complexes sit on large tracts of land and comprise from several to many ferroconcrete apartment buildings. Generally distinguishable from one another solely by the large numbers painted on their sides, each building is four to five stories in height and contains tens of identical apartment units. *Danchi* were the nation’s answer to solving chronic housing shortages caused by the large number of people from the hinterland that poured into the cities for work and higher education opportunities during Japan’s high-speed growth period (1955-1973) (Nishiyama 321-24).¹

Although these quoted passages depict densely populated dwelling spaces, none connotes a sense of “home,” or even “house.” From the perspectives of the stories’ protagonists, each description rather evokes the sublime. This is because the real flashes into view: we glimpse instrumentalism that printed circuitry renders concrete; this is the basis upon which even the most putatively intimate of human spaces are produced during this late-modern moment. These spaces are described in detail to a degree that implies contiguities with larger totalities “trembling just past the threshold of understanding”; yet despite one’s seeing all transparently, nothing of significance is apprehensible. But this should come as no surprise: not long before these works appeared, Herbert Marcuse had penned his *One-Dimensional Man*; for years, Henri Lefebvre had been cranking out his works critiquing everyday life in the developed world; and Guy Debord was telling us that, under conditions of a degraded “every day,” we now lived in a “society of the spectacle.”² Regardless of which side of the Iron Curtain one called home, the developed world was beginning to look and feel much the same. In other words, at this increasingly globalized juncture of history, there was a nascent awareness that most newly built dwellings had been designed and built (to paraphrase David Harvey) not for “people,” but for “man” (sic) (Harvey 40).

Perhaps no one felt this more acutely than the Japanese writer Gotô Meisei (1932-1999). Gotô’s awareness derived from the fact that he had weathered not only the profound ideological schisms that appeared during Japan’s transitions from imperial power to occupied country to economic behemoth, but also the spatial dislocations, which for many people (Japanese and otherwise) were intrinsic to these upheavals. Born in a Korea under Japanese rule and ordered at war’s end to “return” to a Japan he had never set foot in, Gotô, to fit in, found himself practicing the local dialect in his mother’s birthplace home of northern Kyushu. Years later he worked for Heibonsha Publishing Company in Tokyo. He moved

in 1966 into the gigantic Matsubara Housing Complex (a *danchi*) outside of Tokyo. He quit his job two years later and began writing full time, which entailed spending the bulk of his life within the *danchi*. As Atsuko Sakaki has discussed, Gotô's writings reveal how "home" for this writer was never a given, and always something open to contestation (Sakaki 306-08).

Particularly galling for Gotô was the sense that, at a certain moment in Japan's modernity, it had become notably more difficult to establish "connections" (*musubitsuki*) with the people and places in one's life. For him this was a hallmark of Japan's "contemporary" (*gendai*) condition (Gotô, "Mumeishi no Katari" 150-53). The erasure of Japanese "aboriginality" (*dochakusei*) had begun with Japan's reinvention of itself as a modern nation state in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This process had transformed organically delineated relations of affection and obligation into the more abstract relations of subject to sovereign. Following Japan's defeat in World War II, "subjects" (*shinmin*) became "citizens" (*shimin*), a transformation that rendered each person a citizen of the nation (*kokumin*) (Avenell 10-11). Gotô glosses over such distinctions, however, by claiming that the "min" suffix in these terms evokes an impression that the people ("*shomin*") are still positioned in a humble position vis-à-vis the government, and that what matters is being aware of what one is really being called when he is hailed by another (Gotô, "Mumeishi no ronri" 11-13).³ He raises this point in relation to the observation that now, in addition to identifying with that great abstraction of the nation-state, one has come to *dwell* also "as an abstraction."⁴ This outcome came about because the nature of tenancy had changed; just as one paid taxes to an abstract entity, the human landlord who collected rent had now become also a faceless abstraction, the JHC (Gotô, "Mumeishi no ronri" 14).

Moreover, Gotô's writings, dating from when he moved into the *danchi*, evince an implicitly Lefebvrian understanding of social space as not merely "out there," but "in here" as well, for it is contiguous with the human body that inhabits, produces, and reproduces it (Lefebvre, *Production*). That is to say, Gotô also understands the production of social space as intrinsic to subjectivity formation. Such awareness lies at the heart of the story examined in this article, "The Unwritable Report" ("Kakarenai hôkoku," 1970). In marked contrast to stories by Gotô that are set in the *danchi*, "The Unwritable Report" features a man who has no historicity to speak of.⁵ It is perhaps the attenuated nature of his own past that contributes to the man's perceiving the walls, in his *danchi* unit, as coterminous with his own skin so that anything outside the unit that tries to enter constitutes a threat to his psychic integrity. Short on dialogue, the story is comprised largely of the man's interior monologue and, as it unfolds and the man discovers various cracks on

the walls and ceiling that allow water and bugs in, he adopts increasingly absurd tactics for bonding with his apartment. These show the extent to which he, as a *particular* embodied sentience, has ceded his desire to the gaze of a *generalized* “other;” in this case it is that of the mass-mediated “*danchi* tribe” (*danchi zoku*), a term that appeared in the late 1950s, at the height of the *danchi*’s popularity (Nishiyama 346). This categorical designator signified that one lived in a *danchi* but, inasmuch as the protagonist appears to accept his role as *danchi* tribe member, one can read this as a psychoanalytic symptom, as an appeal to the “big Other.”⁶

However, a situation arises that detracts this dweller’s attempts to *enjoy* his symptom. On the ceiling of his dining-kitchen area, presumably caused by a water leak of unknown origin, he notices a stain that incites him to take a querulous attitude toward the relationships of “part” to “whole” and of “cause” to “effect” in the *danchi*. I argue that, for the very reason that this stain bothers the man, it “sticks out” for him in a psychoanalytic sense: it becomes the basis for his casting an anamorphic gaze toward an environment that, in the quoted passage, Abe’s protagonist likened to a “patterned infinity.” The man dismisses the fact that he has come to look at his *danchi* “awry,” but his response to the ceiling stain is not lost on the reader for whom it cracks the great discursive mirror of middle-class membership in which the Japanese of the time were exhorted to see themselves. I further argue that, in fissuring the mirror thus, Gotô mounts an immanent critique of the ideology that appropriated Japanese desires for the instrumentalist purpose of achieving high rates of GNP growth. To convey this, however, it is first necessary to discuss Gotô’s take on contemporary Japanese subjectivity and the discursive environment that prevailed when the story was written.

Gotô distinguishes between “modern” (*kindai*) and “contemporary” (*gendai*) Japanese subjectivity in schematic terms. His vision of modern subjectivity takes the form of a human body, the bottom half of which is steeped in feudal values such as those of *ie*, *tennôsei*, *giri* and *ninjô* (Gotô, “Gendai” 33).⁷ Ever since Japan reinvented itself as a nation-state, embarking on self-conscious attempts to modernize during the Meiji period (1868-1912), the upper half of this body has been “wakening” to the “ego” (Gotô, “Gendai” 34).⁸ The ensuing struggle between these oddly conjoined “body parts” constitutes the self (*jikô*). Gotô says of this self that it “occupies a single point” at the center “of a self-concluding circle” (Gotô, “Gendai” 37). In other words, the circle is a model of subjectivity that perceives itself as both autonomous and self-sufficient. Gotô claims that it is this “self” that has made the writing of so-called “I-novels” (*shishôsetsu*) possible, for such literature “dispenses with others” (Gotô, “Haibun” 204).⁹

Gotô regards “ego,” to which one awakes through such tensions, as being a

“god” (*kami*). However, beginning with Japan’s defeat in the Second World War and continuing through the Occupation (1945-1952) and beyond, America “stepped on” this god (Gotô, “Gendai” 34). As a result, “the lower half of the Japanese body” was “liberated” by the Americans. No longer in tension with neo-Confucian values, what remains of that center of a self-concluding circle now finds its being through tension with others. This result allows for the possibility of understanding one’s identity as a matter of *intersubjectivity*; it implicitly links one’s sense of self with a wider totality. “Where the hell is the self but in others?” queries Gotô (Gotô, “Mumeishi no katari” 149).

Apparently, it was neither through Georg Hegel nor Jacques Lacan that Gotô found himself able to ask this question, but through Miguel de Cervantes. Of the moment in *Don Quixote* where the eponymous hero rushes an inanimate object, the windmill, Gotô tells us that the comedy arises not from this action, but from seeing it through “the eye that sees Don Quixote and the windmill as equals,” and as mutually dependent. Gotô’s reading of that scene thus led him to reconceptualize his notion of the self: no longer a self-concluding circle, it was now an “elliptical structure” (*daen no kôzô*). Unlike a circle, which has one center, an ellipsis has two. “And those two, simultaneously existing centers are nothing but objective ‘others,’ inasmuch as their actuality inheres in their changing each other’s value” (Gotô, “Daen” 28).

Gotô’s new model of identity premised on “relationships” (*kankei*) inhered in the tension between “laughing” and “being laughed at” (Gotô, “Mumeishi no katari” 148). As Furuya Kenzô points out, Gotô’s elliptical structure does not describe a condition through which people establish ties of “mutual feelings” toward each other, but one in which the “companion” (*aite*) is opposed to oneself as an “enemy” (*teki*) (Furuya 152).¹⁰ The two terms must oppose one another, and one must lose. This seems analogous to Hegel’s lord and bondsman dialectic, which has been described as a “life and death struggle” where self-consciousness arises through one’s attempts to vanquish the other (Osborne 73).¹¹ Nonetheless, in a 1997 essay, Gotô says that the ellipsis is characterized by a “divided subjectivity that cannot decide.” This is exemplified in the “abortive denouement” of Futabatei Shimei’s unfinished *Floating Clouds* (*Ukigumo*, 1887) where the protagonist Bunzo cannot decide whether to leave the house for having lost face with his rival and his love object, or to stay and try to reclaim her (Gotô, “Daen to goshoku” 180-84). In other words, over time, Gotô’s conception of the elliptical structure changed from one diagramming a “positive” dialectic to one that diagrammed a “negative” dialectic, essentially graphing aporia. As we will see, this new conception had everything to do with Gotô’s feelings about the nature of “contemporary” Japan.

Gotô's recollection of having come up with his elliptical structure at the age of twenty four lends interest to his changing apprehension of its nature. The year Gotô reached this age was 1956, four years after the Occupation had ended with Japan's signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the U.S. Japan Security Treaty, an act granting Japan what many Japanese considered a "subordinate independence" vis-à-vis the United States (Gordon 242). It was a year after conservative political power had been consolidated into the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a development heralding decades of "one-party rule" in Japan. And it was also a year into Japan's high-speed growth period. In fact, 1956 was when an economic white paper infamously declared that the postwar period was "already over," a claim that—given the extent and severity of the damage both inflicted by and upon Japan over the course of a "fifteen-year war"—made sense only in narrowly defined quantitative economic terms. Yet, owing to the synergy of developments already mentioned, in various ways the Japanese would be henceforth increasingly exhorted, at various levels of conscious awareness, to perceive themselves in just such terms.

Although (as Henri Lefebvre has shown, e.g., in *Everyday Life in the Modern World*) such exhortations rang throughout the "free" world, they would intone with particular acuity to Japanese ears. By the early 1960s, Japan was beginning to portray itself, to its citizens and to the world, as a "democratic" nation. The vestiges of "feudalism" had been purportedly replaced by democratic values, as enshrined in Japan's postwar constitution. Nevertheless, democracy (*minshushugi*) had been *imposed* by the Occupiers, and not won through a struggle against a tyrannizing power (Japanese militarism) by the Japanese themselves. Indeed, "democracy" is sometimes referred to as "*demokurashii*," which denotes its foreign origins as well as, perhaps, connoting that "real" democracy has never been implemented.¹² Partly for this reason, the status consciousness based on the neo-Confucian values comprising the core of Japan's official social values, as codified by the shogunate during the Edo period (1600-1867), persisted beyond the end of the Allied Occupation (1945-1952). Long after a period during which *institutions* regarded by the Occupation as vestiges of "feudalism" had been dismantled, many of the corresponding *sensibilities* remained largely intact.¹³ During Japan's high-speed growth period, such sensibilities were reconfigured; the Japanese would increasingly identify themselves in terms of standardized patterns of mass-mediated consumption. As William Kelly observes, the related discourse of "massification" would obscure realities of social inequality (Kelly 192).

All of this may have something to do with Gotô's silence in regard to whether the democracy foisted upon and adopted by the Japanese ultimately had any effect

on subjectivity as diagrammed by his ellipse. But this was because, as he claims, the ego was merely “replaced” by a surfeit of things to eat, by the phenomenon of having, in fact, “every kind of thing, and a flood of information concerning it all (Gotô “Gendai” 36). Gotô contends that such developments “warped” the elliptical structure; this happened because the Japanese had come to live in an increasingly privatized, commodified realm (Gotô, “Zentai” 43). Such a phenomenon has been subsumed under the rubric of “*mai homu*” (“my home”), which denotes a growing proclivity for people to embrace an aspirational lifestyle predicated on eventual home ownership. *Mai homu* was characterized as a turning away from the sphere of public or communal life and toward the intimacy of the then burgeoning nuclear family and domestic space (Tada). Even if one could never quite acquire that middle class *sine qua non*, a single-family house, one could show oneself and others that this was the direction where one was headed. Nothing signified this trajectory more robustly than living in a *danchi* unit filled with the latest household appliances.

The prototypical *danchi* unit layout was a “2DK,” two *tatami*-matted rooms, a dining-kitchen area, and a bathroom (a 3DK added a *tatami*-matted room). A steel door separated the tiny entryway from the outer world. Unlike similar housing projects in the United States, *danchi* were designed for middle-class families—proof of affordability required a deposit of 5.5 times one’s monthly salary (Nishiyama 345). Yet, even as these dwellings seemed to spring up like mushrooms after a rain, ringing Japan’s cities, *danchi* construction could not keep up with demand. This necessitated selection by lottery for available units. By one account, some white-collar families, living five to a room, had unsuccessfully put in for a *danchi* as many as *forty-nine times* (Asahi Shimbunsha 58-60).

The desirability of these units, which was fomented by their scarcity, was further augmented by marketing campaigns. Consider, for example, a 1960 infomercial called *Introduction to the Danchi* (*Danchi e no shôtai*) produced by the JHC. The film begins with a visit by “*Watashi*” (“I,” “me”) and her fiancé to a unit occupied by her future sister-in-law. *Watashi* and her boyfriend have put off marriage until they are able to move into their own unit. They enter a second-floor unit and the housewife, who has been doing laundry on the veranda, welcomes them in, shaking water from her hands. The camera pans a kitchen filled with the trappings of a rationalized lifestyle: refrigerator, electric rice cooker, mixer, even a garbage can with a foot-operated lid. The housewife confesses, “Once, I opened the drain [of the washing machine] to let out the water and then went shopping. While I was out, the sink [it drained into] overflowed, upsetting the people below us.” She goes on to explain, in detail, “the rational use of small rooms,” how to use the dust

chutes at the end of the corridor found on every floor, and the outdoors communal incinerator. The penultimate scene, that of a “lively home party,” centers on the housewife’s husband as he, cocktail shaker in hand, pours out “the good life.” The last shot shows the building from the outside, light from within filtering through the drawn curtains into the night (*Asahi Shimbunsha* 57). Commentators tell us that such images became *the* symbol of the *danchi* (*Asahi Shimbunsha* 57).

Japan’s rapidly urbanizing population now felt the pressure of increasing competition for employment at major corporations with their enviable benefits and the increasing educational expectations that such employment demanded. Their status-based insecurities manifested in standardized patterns of consumption, as Yoshimi Shunya makes clear. He quotes an article from the summer of 1955 in *Asahi shûkan* entitled “Washing Machines and Refrigerators: The Coming of the Home Electric Age:”

[The article] categorized households using home electric appliances into seven ‘classes’: the lowest class was the home that used only electric lighting. In the sixth class, electric lighting was supplemented with the use of radio and electric iron. The fifth class included the use of electric heater and toaster. The fourth class had mixer, electric fan and telephone. In the third class, washing machine use was added. For the second class, the refrigerator was added. Finally, the TV and vacuum cleaner made up the first class (Yoshimi 155).

Yoshimi’s discussion shows how, in a newly “democratized” nation, anxieties stemming from the question of *how* to convey one’s status was cleverly exploited in marketing campaigns throughout the high-speed growth period.

Gotô’s sense that the radically new environment of the *danchi* merely territorialized and reconfigured status-based anxieties is evident in his reference to the *danchi* as a “ferroconcrete *nagaya*” (Gotô, “Mumeishi no ronri” 11-13). *Nagaya* (row houses) were standard urban housing buildings for commoners during the Edo period and well beyond (Hidenobu 61-64). They were made of wood, clay tiles, earth, and other readily identifiable organic materials. Beyond evoking the sensibilities of *danchi* dwellers as unchanged from those of their Edo-era precursors, the incongruity of “ferroconcrete” as a modifier for “*nagaya*” creates a startling, almost oxymoronic, image. It evokes the conflation of “society” with “community,” of the mass-produced, the inorganic, with the hand-made and the organic.

Gotô would live this incongruity when he finally acquired and moved into his own *danchi* unit. It was not long before he pronounced that he now existed in “private world of wells” (Gotô, “Mumeishi no katari” 149). This pronouncement derived from his perception that this sterile ferroconcrete world cut him off from

organic relationships with his neighbors and severed the present from the past, while containing nothing that referred to life at a previous moment in history.¹⁴ For this reason, it also severed memory from consciousness. He asks, in “a world where I had cast off ‘others,’ what the hell is it that ‘watashi’ laughs at? It’s probably the flesh of one’s own ‘watashi’” (Gotô, “Mumeishi no katari” 149). He is referring to the subsumption of unique, sensate bodies by mass-produced spaces. A sense of oneself as part of a larger, organic community has been supplanted by a demographic sense of oneself: one is now a member of the “*danchi* tribe,” a subgenus “salary man” or “housewife,” whose domicile is such and such a unit on such and such a floor, in such and such a building. Abe likened the *danchi* to “a human filing cabinet with its endless filing-card apartments” (Abe 8). As his description implies, the *danchi* is a space where an instrumentalist *notion* of human life—life as category, as a “universal”—trumps life as *lived* in all its potential plenitude and possibility, i.e., as a “particular.” Conflating the general with the particular, *danchi* are reifying machines.

Because human beings were contorting themselves into lifestyles configured for the instrumentalist purposes of preserving GNP growth, Gotô came to feel that the “contemporary” condition had warped his ellipsis. It was as if the Hegelian dialectic had morphed into the “negative” dialectic of Theodore Adorno. Hegel’s dialectic juxtaposes two categories, “man” and “woman,” which inhere in a higher determination (also a category), “human.” This third term preserves the other two terms even as it transcends them, giving rise to a new concept. However, as Alison Stone says of this method for achieving understanding:

[W]hen we conceptualize things we dominate them in thought. Because conceptual thinking suggest that things are merely instances of universal kinds, and because we can understand universal kinds using concepts, conceptual thinking suggest that things are reducible to what we can understand of them. Conceptual thinking portrays things as lying wholly within the reach of our intellects (Stone 55).

Each physically existing thing (perhaps with the exception of mass-produced commodities) has a “thisness” to it; it is a particularity that is not reducible to the general (Stone 55). To let things speak for themselves, as it were, Theodore Adorno propounded a “negative dialectic.” Like Hegel’s dialectic, negative dialectics juxtapose concepts, one of which would represent the general, such as the term “cat.” Unlike Hegel’s dialectic, however, the second concept does not have a positive valence. Rather, it is a “limit concept,” a placeholder that acknowledges the limits of conceptual understanding (56). In the case of our feline dialectic, this second term would be something (impossible to delineate because that would

generalize it) signifying the “thisness” of *this* cat. In such a way, Adorno posited an antidote for our predilection to attempt wholly to understand things through concepts, thereby dominating them (57). Negative dialectics give the particular its due.

This is what Gotô Meisei does in his “The Unwritable Report.” The story centers on a nameless man about whom we know little, other than that he has a wife and two young children and that he used to live in a stucco two-story house in Tokyo. While this is a man who exists as a particular, embodied consciousness, he nonetheless behaves much as one who has been “dominated in thought.” “The Unwritable Report” portrays the man’s attempts to reconcile these two qualitatively different registers of his existence. As might be imagined, the results are darkly comic.

The stage is set for the man’s hapless struggle when, at the beginning of the story, he receives a telephone call from the social education section of the prefectural government. The unidentified male caller informs the man that he is one among seventy men who, out of the seven thousand units in “R-Danchi,” have been selected to write a report on life in the *danchi*. He is informed that the report is to be “free-style,” that it has no set theme, that it can be as long or as short as he likes, and that it has no deadline, but that, “however, because it’s also not to be an impressionistic essay . . . we ask for your understanding on this point” (Gotô, “Kakarenai” 172). Caller and called engage in a protracted conversation about the nature of and reason for the report, and why he has been chosen. In answer to the latter, the caller says, “That’s because you have the qualification of having been chosen” (172). The man has therefore been summoned by the voice of an abstraction incomprehensible in its immense complexity, the prefectural government. The basis for this summons is explained with the false clarity of tautology, and the nature and purpose of the task he is to perform are not made clear. In this respect, the man’s position seems similar to those of the protagonists of Gotô’s beloved Kafka. Like the protagonists of *The Trial* and *The Castle*, Gotô’s nameless man is summoned by the “monological” voice of what Lacan called *le grande autre* and Slavoj Žižek glosses as “the big Other” (Žižek, *Sublime*, 73- 74). This voice is that of the symbolic order through which each man ineluctably finds his being. In terms of Gotô’s elliptical structure, it may be said that the passage presents a man who has been laughed into a corner by unseen forces.

Ultimately, Gotô’s protagonist uncomplainingly assents to the voice’s incomprehensible request. Indeed, as the narrator relates, his assent is a *fait accompli* from the moment the man picked up the phone: “What surprised [the man] . . . was not the telephone. It was of course that, despite having received no

advance notice, the man had been named. . . He had already been accepted. His “self” had been made to accept in answer to his name. . . It was also his own voice that had accepted in answer to his name” (Gotô, “Kakarenai” 173). This passage portrays not only his utter docility through the use of the passive voice, but also the fragmented nature of his subjectivity: “self,” “name” and “his own voice” are represented as if they were discrete entities responding independently of the being to which each pertains. It thus comes as little surprise that, as the narrator relates, the man regards himself as a “diffident person” (*enryogachi na hito*) (172).

Clearly, the man’s “diffidence” has much to do with his having ceded his desire to the big Other in having sought out and moved into a *danchi* unit; he now largely identifies with the *danchi* tribe. The alienated nature of such an identity comes across as ambivalence toward the various newfangled aspects of his strange new home. For example, he marvels at the unit’s front door. Made of steel with an embedded “coward’s window” and a chain for security, the door is of a stoutness that, paradoxically “ties” “inside” and “outside” together (193). The narrator also relates that the man never ceases to be impressed at how, whenever he flushed the toilet, it made a “terrific sound. It sounded to him just as though a violent whirlpool had suddenly been expelled only to instantly recede into the distance. In all of a second! In a flash, gone!” (174). Yet, the very things that impress him are also a source of anxiety. He reasons that the door seemingly a stalwart defense against “invaders,” may also be a trap for the inhabitants should invaders get in. The toilet efficiently whisks his waste away to where, “he didn’t know, but somewhere having nothing to do with him” (174). Such thoughts, revealing a fundamental anxiety about the opacity of his relationship to his environment, extend to anxious thoughts about his neighbors. The man realizes that, in regard to them, the only connection that he is certain to have is the green enamel pipe that stands behind his toilet and, so he reasons, must run from the fourth floor to the basement, connecting the toilet of one unit to that of the unit below.

Not only do such speculations reveal the limits of the man’s knowledge of his environment, but they also disclose how his identity as *danchi* dweller has congealed into a brittle shell resembling the ego. His musing over the bathroom’s sewage pipe leads to thoughts of “people’s families being placed one on top of the other, each a stranger (*tanin*) to the other,” and all “wriggling under his feet” (177). Speculating on this state of affairs, the man realizes the competitive consciousness such living arrangements engender. He considers how the child of one unit in his building goes to a certain apartment in the complex for piano lessons, while a child in another unit is sent elsewhere. The man reasons that, living on top of each other, people cannot but begin to hate one another. The narcissism of small differences

that such an architecturally enforced standardization engenders is revealed by the man's wife who, in response to his questions about a water leak coming from the unit above, relates how she went to visit the woman living in that unit to discover that the varnish had come off the wood floor in the her dining-kitchen, and that the grain in the floorboards had risen up. She then boasts to her husband of the good repair of their own unit's flooring (177-78).

At one point, the man tries to tame his dis-ease by aestheticizing his condition. Realizing that he simply *happens* to live in this particular place because his number was chosen in a move-in lottery, the man feels as though he has "washed up from the sea;" he is an urban castaway of sorts (182). While standing outside his *danchi* one evening, he extends the metaphor, envisioning the entire building as a ship run aground. The sun begins to set and, as lights from the various units start to seep through the curtains of various colors hung over the windows, the man begins to feel "almost satisfied" (182). He even mutters these bits of poetry: "Facing night's darkness / A sail-set ship / Our dwelling" (182). The man thus tries to become a homeowner in an existential sense, by transforming contingent space into place. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the very image that makes him feel "almost satisfied" mirrors the final scene of *Introduction to the Danchi*.

As all of the preceding observations suggest, the man's ambivalence toward his *danchi* has ontological implications. These are evident from the moment the man hangs up the phone following the call from the prefectural office. Seated in the dining-kitchen area, he raises his eyes to the ceiling, to the presumably water-made stain. The sight of this mark on the otherwise spotless white ceiling sets off a chain of abortive thoughts and images. Aware that the building where he lives is made of a putatively fireproof material, he finds himself unable to imagine the nature of the space that must exist between the ceiling of his unit and the floor of the one upstairs. He reasons that there are probably no wooden beams and "not so much as a dead mouse floats up in his mind" (176). His imagination thus rebuffed, the man recalls the wise observation of his wife and son that these buildings will not burn in a fire, but he recalls hearing sirens in the night, and even the "kan-kan" of the fire bell. Moreover, he recalls having visited the site of a fire in a unit of the complex that had been occupied by the family of his son's friend. The man and his son had gone to inspect the site, and the former realized that the burnt unit was analogous in its position to that of his own apartment. It was a 3DK, the same as his own, and the 4.5-mat room, where the fire had apparently broken out, mirrors the one where he normally sleeps. "I see," he says. "This is what a fire in a 3DK looks like from the north side." (176).

In his flashback, the man also recalls his visit to the *danchi* office to inquire about the source of the water leak in the ceiling. A female employee drew an

explanatory diagram of the unit above his that did not shed light on the cause of the water mark. In addition, he recalls having realized that “by means of [her] sketch [he] had received an explanation of the house of a stranger he had never seen” (179). More disturbing is his realization that, because all units are alike, the employee had effectively diagrammed the inside of his own dwelling. Despite her drawing, which he regarded as “clarity itself,” he was unable to tie into a meaningful whole all the related components: “washing machine, rubber hose, drainage water, bathroom, the round metal drain cover, the dining-kitchen” (180). The employee’s extreme politeness, however, discouraged him from further questions.

Not conceiving his connection to the world outside his unit, the man defensively ensconces himself within it. Initially envisioning the stain on the dining-area ceiling as a “scar,” he begins to think of such leaks as “injuries” and “wounds” to himself (175, 184, 188). At one point, two repairmen arrive at his unit to sand down the balustrade of the veranda. As the man well knows, they do this to get rid of the rust before repainting it and, in this respect, their actions constitute a “defense” of his dwelling; he tells himself that these men are not “a suddenly invading enemy from outside” (185). But the fricative sanding noise makes him see their work as an “attack on his house” (186). He feels that they are robbing him and his family of the one material touchstone to the time spent there. However, when they finish the job and are talking with the man’s wife in the dining area, one of the men looks up and says, “Seems like you’ve got a leak, ma’am” (187). The man, sitting at the table, suddenly stands up because he feels that his head is being pressed by a middle finger from above. The narrator adds, “The middle finger of what? It was a natural enough question” (187). There is nothing there, but the feeling is real to the man.

The surreal nature of this moment underscores the man’s having come too close to the real of his desire. Though the man has found his being in the desire of the big Other, his ability to apprehend the nature of his dwelling and his place in it extends only as far as his existence permits; he has come to see that, like everyone else in the *danchi*, he is a member of the *danchi* tribe. In this regard, he is utterly interchangeable with any of them. Inasmuch as this is the case, he regards the realm that he calls home as they do. It is here useful to consider what Daniel L. Collins says about perception:

The functions of perception are never simply about negotiating the physical world; rather, they are about the apprehension and the making of the self. When an observer gazes upon the world of things, the self of the observer is not lost in the construction of the object. Instead, the observer is brought into being as a function of the gaze (Collins 80).

The man's apprehension of the ceiling stain, however, posits his existence in a *particular* sense. This is so because the stain *bothers* him or, in Lacanian terms, it "sticks out." The stain enables the man to view his world with an anamorphic gaze. As Collins points out, anamorphic viewing can be seen as a critical project because it re-inscribes the source of vision in the physical body (74). Rather than replicating the disembodied, neutral—hence, "universal"—viewpoint of a Cartesian perspective analogous to the symbolic order and the reigning discourses it subsumes, anamorphic vision instantiates the *particular*. The reason is, as Collins notes, that anamorphosis casts the viewer in an active position relative to the object; through this process, the observer comes into being as a *subject*, as one who creates her own experience (78).

Collins regards the function of anamorphosis as analogous to that of a writerly text because it "gives the reader a role, a function, a contribution to make" (78). But, as he adds, for this to happen one must behold the loss of the "previous reading" (78). The man, however, is unwilling to relinquish what has become his primary reading of himself, that of "*danchi* dweller." At one point, after becoming aware of all his dining-kitchen floor indentations, he wonders whether there may also be an "indentation of consciousness" (Gotô, "Kakarenai" 178). We see such an indentation as what must be the big Other's finger jabbing him on the forehead. The man is prompted to lift his hand from the table and to stare long and hard at his own middle finger, turning it over and inspecting it. He presses the tips of his thumb and middle finger together and pushes down hard, with another finger, on the surface of the table. In so doing, he happens to kill "a small, black bug whose name he didn't know" (188). He realizes that the bugs, of which his wife and son have told him that they were aware, seem to be "diagonally crossing the floor of the dining-kitchen, from the sink to the trash can" (188). His son then takes up a fistful of *kaminendo* (a clay-like substance) and smashes it on a bug. The boy turns it over and the man inspects the underside of the clay, discovering that the bug's body has disappeared into the white mass. He ponders the bug's body in the mass of clay with his own relationship to "this four-story ferroconcrete structure" in mind (188). The man wonders whether the bug has "become clay," and the narrator relates:

Since the bug seemed to have melted into the clay, the clay had become part of the bug. In such a way, the son's white clay had become tied to the nameless black bug. Wasn't that so? Hadn't it become tied to it? Naturally, then the man had thought of a thing being tied to himself. In what sort of form was the man tied to anything like the bug was to his son's clay? (189)

The man abandons this line of thought after he discovers that the black bugs

are crawling into his dwelling through the hole where the drainage pipe from the sink passes through the wall, a hole that he regards as a new “wound opening” (195). As the bugs stream nightly across the table, the man makes a practice of sitting at the table to kill them, a process narrated in detail:

At first the man pressed down hard, directly over the head of a crawling bug, crushing it with the tip of his right-hand middle finger. But before long he was using matchsticks for the purpose. . . . [He stuck with this method] because one evening the matchstick, flung down next to the dead bugs, looked like an august spear that had been knocked down a strong enemy (190).

Having made this discovery, the man lays out the dead bugs beside the match on a piece of white tissue paper, a background against which their antennae resemble the “stag beetle depicted on a renowned general’s armor” (190). Consequently, the man begins to view the table’s brown top as a “literal battlefield” (192). Like the poetry that dignifies the *danchi*, the man’s conceptualization of bug extermination in military terms dignifies their exterminator. As the narrator relates, however, through engaging in this nightly practice “the man took on the role of one who is often made to wait by bugs” (192).

We are thus left with a protagonist who is both humorous and horrifying as he absurdly attempts to establish “ties” (*musubitsuki*) with the inanimate objects that constitute his humanity-eschewing environment. Unable to see the critical potential in viewing his world awry, the man has come to an existence where, to paraphrase Žižek, his *danchi* is in *him* more than he is in *it* (Žižek, *Sublime* 76). In other words, the unending stream of bugs, the “wound” through which they flow, the “cut” that lets the water in—all are what Lacan calls “sinthomes.” These physical phenomena have ontological significance because they are psychosomatic signifiers, located outside his body, that are “not enchained in a network but immediately filled, penetrated with enjoyment” (Žižek, *Sublime* 76). The man is consumed by his desire to kill what he believes threatens him from without. This desire lends consistency to his being, for he is, after all, a “*danchi* dweller.” Such a one, his unique incarnation so starkly at odds with his discursive constitution, cannot be the author of his own life. No wonder his report must remain unwritten.

To the reader who *is* able to forsake a given reading for an anamorphic one, the man’s condition perhaps evokes other (apparently) equally absurd conditions. In this regard, I have in mind certain hermit crabs that one occasionally finds on a beach. These, presumably for a lack of a suitably sized shell, contort their growing bodies to the contours of bits of refuse such as a bottle, toothpaste caps, ends of PVC piping, and the like. Concatenations of the organic and the unique with the inorganic and the mass-produced are perhaps only of interest to humans who

find these assemblages absurdly photogenic, images worthy of uploading to the Internet. Like the nameless *danchi*-dwelling man, inasmuch as they stay with their abodes, they have effectively acquiesced to their condition.

This still does not answer the question as to why such sightings (probably increasingly common) are so arresting. Certainly, the interest lies in an apparent incongruity between “nature” and “culture” (in garbage form). Moreover, the very incongruity—the apparent “aporia”—between two seemingly irreconcilables strikes me in a way that sightings of “ordinary” hermit crabs do not. However, there may be another reason why such sightings stun me; they so compactly evoke a sense of a wider totality, a refreshed awareness of a world in peril, the real of our existence. Gotô Meisei, for whom contemporary Japanese existence amounted to being shut up in a 3DK, wanted to bring to mind the relationship of a part to its whole, of individuality to totality, by “writing the 3DK as the world” (Gotô, “Zentai” 143). Much like the plasticized hermit crab, Gotô’s nameless *danchi* dweller unwittingly does precisely that.

Notes

¹ Political sociologist Kurihara Akira sees developments such as the *danchi* and the aspiration of eventual home ownership as part of a wider production of space that subsumed the activities of daily life to prerogatives of “productive power nationalism” (*seisanryoku nashonarizumu*). Kurihara maintains that, in making their daily spatial rounds on the commuter line from suburban dwelling to office/factory/school and back and, in traversing the temporal path from home to school to corporation over their productive years, the Japanese became co-opted into this instrumentalist project, at an unconscious level, in their daily lives (Kurihara, 102).

² These works are as follows: Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991; various works by Henri Lefebvre, including *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume I: Introduction*. Trans. John Moore. New York: Verso, 2000; *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*. Trans. John Moore. New York: Verso, 2002, and *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. Trans. Sacha Rabinovitch. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003; and Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995.

³ According to the *Shinkangorin* (dictionary), The suffix “min” (民) means “person” (*hito*), but this “person” is understood as ruled by the nation/sovereign; hence she is one of the “*tami*,” (nation/people. “Tami” is the pronunciation of 民 when the character stands alone). The term connotes one of no rank and low status; i.e., a “*shomin*” (a member of the masses, a commoner). All translations of Gotô’s work are mine.

⁴ This realization is particularly disturbing when we consider Heidegger’s claim that to *be* a human being is to dwell on the earth (Heidegger 145). “Dwelling” for Heidegger was an apprehension of one’s existence as inextricably bound up with one’s environment, both geographical/spatial and social. Although he laments that, in modernity, people increasingly cease to dwell in this sense, dwelling “as an abstraction” would have constituted a degraded existence indeed.

⁵ In this sense, he does not come across as “substantially” as other Gotô’s protagonists, many

of whom evince an acute, autobiographical awareness of childhood in Korea, or who find in the fluids that flow forth from their bodies a connection to that past. See, for example, Gotô's "The Nameless First-Lieutenant's Son" ("Mumei chûi no musuko." *Bungakukai*. Sept. 1967: 150-83. Print), "Who's There?" ("Dare?" Gotô Meisei shû. Tokyo: Kawade Shôbô Shinsha, 1972) and *Shot by Both Sides (Hasamiuchi)*. Trans. Tom Gill. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008.

⁶ As Slavoj Žižek notes, there is no symptom without its addressee, "without the position of some subject which is presumed to know the symptom's meaning" (Žižek, *Sublime* 73). Significantly, it is through the symptom that the subject "organiz[es] his enjoyment," which makes the symptom a difficult thing to renounce even when the symptom has been correctly interpreted as such; one "loves his symptom more than himself" (74). Žižek says, "The symptom implies the field of the big Other as consistent, complete, because in its very formation [it] is an appeal to the Other which contains its meaning" (Žižek, *Sublime* 74). Žižek's term "big Other" is a gloss on Lacan's *le grande autre*. Each of these terms refers to the symbolic order, entry into which follows the so-called "mirror stage" through which a young child begins the process of misperceiving itself as an integral self (Lacan 1-7). The symbolic order is the world of signifying practices including language; for our purposes, this includes the predominant discourses of a given time-space. "Symptom," says Žižek, "implies and addresses some non-barred, consistent big Other which will retroactively confer on it its meaning" (74). Significantly, the big Other exists as an abstraction; it is a *generalized* other, in contrast to a given, individual person with whom one interacts. In the case of "The Unwritable Report," the field of the big Other is a contemporary realm of immense complexity comprised of the interlocking machinations of corporate interests, a huge national bureaucracy and conservative politics. Their pronouncements synergized as discourses fomenting an aspirational life-style, as discussed below.

⁷ Each of these terms refers to Japanese social formations, sensibilities or values that, from the perspective of most educated, urbanized Japanese sensibilities circa 1970, smacked of "feudalism." *Ie* refers to the "patriarchal household system" based on the structure of samurai households from the sixteenth century (Bailey 43). For the sake of instilling loyalty to the state through the structure of the family, the *ie* became a basic legal unit from 1898, as put forth in the Meiji Civil Code, and was not dissolved as such until the Allied Occupation (Ueno 63-88). *Tennôsei* refers to the "emperor system," the ideological apparatus of the emperor configured as head of a "family state" (*kazoku kokka*) and through which—at virtually every level of discourse during the Meiji period through the end of the Second World War—the Japanese were exhorted to find their identity *as* Japanese. *Giri* means "duty" and refers to one's obligations according to Neo-Confucian notions of filial piety that defined the social hierarchy during the Edo period. *Ninjô* refers to "human feeling," sentiments of whatever kind that often were in conflict with *giri* as well as often the source of Edo-era personal and societal turmoil.

⁸ Gotô writes "ego" in *katakana*, the phonetic script used for (among other things) denoting that a given word is of foreign (Western) origin.

⁹ Although critics have long disagreed on what an "I-novel" (*shishôsetsu*) is, as Donald Keene points out, "it is generally expected that an 'I-novel' will not merely recount events that have occurred in an author's life, but will expose them mercilessly in the manner of a confession" (Keene 506). Karatani Kôjin states that such a "confession" presupposes a "self" to do the confessing (Karatani). Writing on the I-novel as the predominant literary genre in Japan from the 1920s to the 1960s, Tomi Suzuki claims of the "special mystique" associated with the notion of *watakushi*, "the 'I' or 'self'" had much to do with "the privileged status of the novel . . . which emerged under the cultural hegemony of Western modernity" that began in the second half of the nineteenth century (Suzuki 2).

¹⁰ According to Gotô, the two terms are juxtaposed not by “and” (*to*) but by “or” (*aru*) (Gotô, “Meiro” 50).

¹¹ Hegel’s dialectic of lord and bondsman is also the basis for Lacan’s notion of subjectivity as inhering in a dialectical relationship between “self” and “other” (Osborne 83).

¹² “Minshushugi” (民主主義) is written in sino-Japanese ideographs (*kanji*). “Democracy” (デモクラシー) is written in *katakana*, one of two phonemic scripts used in Japanese. Katakana functions much like italics do in English: it makes a term stand out and is often used to denote foreign (especially Western) origins. Of course, “democracy” as it took root in postwar Japan was heavily informed by the Occupation’s so-called “reverse course.” Owing to Washington’s fear of the spread of communism to Japan in the late 1940s, the mission to demilitarize and democratize Japan was supplanted by one of ensuring, above all, that Japan’s economy be reestablished on a strong footing. This changed vision resulted in SCAP’s rolling back many of the democratic reforms it had decreed, and creating an environment friendly to conservative politics and corporate interests.

¹³ Nowhere is this more obvious than the “*senpai-kôbai*” system of relationships between seniors and juniors, which is drummed into first-year junior high school students and which becomes the basis for all but their most intimate social interactions for the rest of their lives. Moreover, on a more fundamental level, the Japanese language is structured in such a way that, in all but the most intimate relationships, one speaks differently to an interlocutor depending on the difference in relative status. Therefore, apprehensions of status as a lens for regarding oneself and others in the social world become naturalized.

¹⁴ Gotô’s sense of isolation as a writer living in the *danchi* must have been particularly acute because, as he notes, all the men who live there commute during the day to the city. In such a highly gendered time and place, it would have been awkward and odd for him to establish close friendships with their wives, who remained behind, tending to their domestic duties.

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