The Artist as Criminal in the Taishō-era Fiction of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō

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My paper looks at the motif of the artist as criminal in "Zenkamono" ("The Criminal," *Yomiuri shinbun*, February-March 1918), a short story by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965). I argue that the motif appears to thematize certain anxieties related to the position of the artist in the modern cultural market, and create a space for artistic value in direct contrast to conventional models of bourgeois success. The identification of artist and criminal has clear European scientific sources. Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) popularized the notion that genius was a form of insanity, very close to that of the criminal. His two most widely read works were *Genio e follia* [*The Man of Genius*, 1864] and *L'uomo delinquente* [*The Criminal Man*, 1876]. Both were immensely popular, and were widely translated into all major European languages.

Lombroso developed his own brand of evolutionary thinking, and combined it with phrenology and craniometry, to study the physical differences between social groups in Italy. One of the main results of his studies was the notion of the "born criminal," as an individual marked by physical stigmata as an atavistic retrogression, that is, a throwback to a previous stage in human evolution. In parallel, he devoted himself to the study of "geniuses," comparing historical records with medical studies on epilepsy, and other pathological phenomena, to find empirical proof of the assertion that genius shares its source with the same organic conditions for madness, an idea popularized by French psychiatrist Joseph Moreau de Tours (1804-1884). Lombroso explicitly mentions his "feeling of horror at the thought of associating with idiots and criminals those individuals who represent the highest manifestations of the human spirit", but eventually overcame his apprehensions with the theory that degenerative features in the psychology of a genius were simply "a compensation for considerable development and progress accomplished in other directions" (Lombroso 1891, v). Thus, "just as giants pay a heavy ransom for their stature in sterility and relative muscular and mental weakness, so the giants of thought expiate their intellectual force in degeneration and psychoses. It is thus that the signs of degeneration are found more frequently in men of genius than even in the insane." (Lombroso 1891, vi).

Lombroso's ideas received another boost of popularity in the 1890s, when Budapest-born polemist Max Nordau (pseudonym of Simon Maximilian Südfeld, 1849-1923) published

Entartung [*Degeneration*, 1893-93], which was translated very quickly into all major European languages, and prompted an international polemic that spawned several volumes written in direct response to its theories. Nordau presented himself as a student of Lombroso's method, and used it to diagnose what he saw as dangerous unhealthy trends in the European literature of the time: "Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil" (Nordau 1895, vii). *Degeneration* becomes then a sort of *exposé* of the dangers of contemporary fashions such as Naturalism, Symbolism or Pre-Raphaelitism, a public service announcement against the risks that exposure to such unhealthy materials may have on the general public. Over a long thousand pages, Nordau rages against Wagner, Tolstoy, Zola, Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Ibsen, among many others, reading their literary, musical and philosophical works as symptoms of a wide array of pathological conditions, and warning against their deleterious effects on their audiences.

In Japan, *The Man of Genius* had been partially translated earlier by Kuroyanagi Kunitarō (*Tensairon* [*On Genius*], Fukyūsha, 1898), but it wasn't until 1914 that both Lombroso and Nordau's works appeared complete in Japanese. Nordau's opus came out as *Gendai no daraku* [*The Decadence of the Present*] (Nakajima Kotō tr., Dai Nippon bunmei kyōkai, 1914), with a foreword by respected Shakespeare scholar and author Tsubouchi Shōyō. Lombroso's book was the object of two different translations published the same year: *Tensairon* [*On Genius*] (Uetake shoin, 1914), by Tsuji Jun, and *Tensai to kyōjin* [*Genius and Madman*] (Bunseisha, 1914) by Mori Magoichi, with a foreword by novelist Mori Ōgai, then serving Surgeon General of the Japanese Army. Tsuji's translation became an instant best-seller in Japan, going through over twenty editions in a short time. It was later re-edited as *Tensairon teisei* [*On Genius. Revised Edition*], at least five different times until 1940. Additionally, criminologist Terada Seiichi (1884-1922) published *Lombroso no hanzainin-ron* [*Lombroso's Criminology*] (Ganshōdo shoten, 1917), based on a summary of Lombroso's theories on the "born criminal" published in English by his daughter Gina Lombroso Ferrero.

In 1910s Japan, the reception of Lombroso and Nordau's ideas developed them in a unique direction. To begin with, the 19th-century European authors and works that they had diagnosed as "unhealthy" were in the process of being canonized as the models for "modern literature" in Japan. Authors like Baudelaire, Maupassant and Strindberg were already established as examples, and the value of their works as literature was beyond discussion. Even though it had been originally conceived as a scathing attack on these and similar authors, in Japan Nordau's book became almost a guidebook for late-19th-century European literature, as it was one of the

few examples available of a wide-ranging explanation of Western modern literary trends, and included plenty of quotes from a variety of works.

A look at the presence of Lombroso and Nordau's ideas in 1910s Japanese literary criticism reveals how they became identified with the idea of "modern art." Kuriyagawa Hakuson, for instance, in his *Kindai bungaku jikkō* [*Ten Lessons on Modern Literature*] (Dai Nippon tosho, 1912) summarizes Nordau's analysis, but ends up concluding that many of the features that he calls morbid have become key characteristics of modern art. Similarly, Kobayashi Aiyū in "Shin bungaku no kenkyū" ["Research on New Literature"] reproduces the medical language of Lombroso and Nordau, explaining "new writing" through four characteristics: impressionism, sensualism, nervosity and symbolism.[1] In the preface to his translation of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), one of the key texts responsible for canonizing French Symbolism in English, Iwano Hōmei explicitly recommends *Degeneration* as reference book to get to know European Symbolism.[2] All these examples point to a certain naturalization of the idea of the modern artist as psychologically abnormal, and close to the "born criminal." Mental illness becomes thus not an unfortunate side effect of a heightened artistic sensibility, like in Lombroso's explanation, but almost a necessary condition for it, as the modern and the pathological become identified with each other.

Tanizaki appropriated these images of morbidity to create his particular image of the "modern artist." They allowed him to clearly differentiate this "modern artist" from conventional patterns of bourgeois professional success promoted by the state. That this was a recurrent worry for him can be gleaned from the many examples in his early fiction that dramatize the rivalry between an artist and a successful man who has become a lawyer, a scholar or a businessman. Stories like "Suterareru made" ("Until Abandoned," *Chūō kōron*, January 1914), "Jōtarō" ("Jōtarō," *Chūō kōron*, September 1914), "Konjiki no shi" ("A Golden Death," *Tōkyō Asahi shinbun*, December 1914), "Shindō" ("The Child Prodigy," *Chūō kōron*, January 1915) or "Oni no men" ("The Demon's Mask," *Tōkyō Asahi shinbun*, January-May 1916) provide many rich examples of this conflict. To build an identity as artist on pathological images is particularly powerful in this regard, because these images constituted a direct challenge to official hygienic discourse, at the same time that they provided a scientific legitimization for writers to understand themselves as unique individuals with an essentially different experience of the world.

"Zenkamono" is basically a long conceptual elaboration about the possibilities of an aesthetics of evil. The protagonist narrator, a well-known painter who has spent time in prison for swindling money, presents himself from the very beginning as "a criminal, and also an artist" (Tanizaki 1981, 263). Most of the story consists of the protagonist's conversations with Baron K, his only benefactor and the main victim of his monetary scams. Baron K serves also to illustrate the opposition between artist and scholar mentioned above. The Baron may have

had a good enough eye to buy the main character's paintings and help him become a household name in the art world, but he is ultimately nothing more than a "dilettante," whose "scholarly knowledge" will never equal the protagonist's "sharp artistic sensibility" (Tanizaki 1981, 281).

The story is very explicit in its thematization of Lombroso's theories. The protagonist is described in the following terms:

> Your character was non-existent from the beginning, but your genius was great. Even having become a criminal doesn't change the confidence in your art. The theory that a person with flawed character could never become a true artist seems reasonable, but it's nothing more than the flawed excuse of mediocre neophytes jealous of your genius. The fact that a despicable immoral person like you could produce such great works of art refutes their theories. Both the immorality and the artistic imagination you have within you are gifts of Heaven, and there's nothing that mere humans can do about it. Just like we can't stop the planet from turning, we can't do anything about your artistic and criminal tendencies. From now on you'll probably commit crimes that will land you in jail. You'll also produce creations that will astonish the world. You are the same race as the pickpocket, and at the same time can also fly into the land that Dante and Michelangelo inhabited. You have to realize that you are a defective man of narrow shoulders who can't walk brazenly on the public road of society, but know that you can rely on your genius. (Tanizaki 1981, 265-266)

The narrator is presented as living proof that moral infirmity and artistic creativity are two sides of the same coin in the case of the genius artist. The "criminal" embraces his nature as a "defective man" as something that precludes him from occupying a central position on "the public road of society," but at the same time gives him the "wings" to reach heights of genius unattainable to common "non-defective" individuals. It is thanks to this realization that the narrator claims to have been "saved" from killing himself in prison. With remarkable self-awareness, he recognizes how the same diagnosis as "socially defective individual" that had previously driven him to the conclusion "I am an inferior breed" now serves as justification for the idea "my art is that of a genius" (Tanizaki 1981, 266). Artistic value is thus not only separated from social recognition, but explicitly opposed to it, as any theory that attempts to link art to the possession of a "great character" is dismissed as pure "jealousy" from the mediocre common folk.

What makes "Zenkamono" particularly interesting is the degree of self-awareness that the protagonist shows. The narrator is very conscious throughout the story of his own position as a recognized artist in society and reflects upon the shock received by his audience, when his crimes were discovered and he was sent to prison: "If my crime had been because of a woman,

they would have commiserated with me somehow, but since it had been a fraud motivated by simple money problems, nobody had any sympathy left for me" (Tanizaki 1981, 263). The character seems to be hinting at the prevalence of public sexual scandals that had artists, and specially writers, as their protagonists in Meiji and Taishō Japan. The combination of contemporary media reports and fictional pieces that depicted writers' sexual liaisons meant that the public would have been familiar with the idea of an artist caught up in a scandalous romantic affair. In contrast with these sexual scandals, the main character of "Zenkamono" seems very much aware that his criminal activity, a vulgar case of swindling, marks him as a unique specimen, separate from the public persona of the artist his audience expects. Staying one step ahead of the mass market, the protagonist actively attempts to differentiate himself from the conventional moral abnormality that has become commonplace for the circulated image of writers. Paradoxically, it is by resorting to the most vulgar crime of stealing that he can maintain his project of remaining unique, and unbound by mass culture conventions.

The conceptual tone of the story and the repeated foregrounding of the character's conscious manipulations of his public image open the possibility of an ironic reading of the piece. After all, the reader is presented purely with the words of a convicted swindler trying to convince the world that his flaws are actually marks of a peculiar artistic aristocracy. Even if one does not take the narrator's explanations at face value, however, the text remains an interesting dramatization of the symbolic maneuvers attempted by writers in order to open new spaces of legitimacy for themselves as artists, against established narratives of social and economic success, even as the very image of the writer as a morally abnormal character was becoming commodified in the mass media.

In Tanizaki's 1910s stories, exploring evil becomes for the characters a way to spectacularly mark the difference between their aesthetics and the mass audience's undeveloped taste. In the end, they are working to establish a space for the modern artist beyond the logic of economic exchange. At the same time, it is in this very interaction with the market's dynamics and implicit values, and never independently from it, that this space can be created. Tanizaki's characters are painfully aware of the theatricality of their performance, and the many operations to commodify the artist's persona for mass consumption that they take part on. The multiple contradictions and ambiguous endings in these texts point to the anxieties present in the process of professionalization of the artist in the modern cultural market.

Reference List

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Notes

1 Included in Satō Giryō (ed.), *Shin bungaku hyakka seikō - kōhen*, Shinchōsha, 1914, pp. 1125-1148.

2 *Hyōshō-ha no bungaku undō [The Symbolist Literary Movement]*, Shinchōsha, 1913.