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Imperfect Beauty in the Forests of Musashino

The cultural isolationism of Japan led them to develop largely on their own, culturally separated from the rest of the world. According to Karatani Kojin in the first chapter, “Discovering Landscape,” of his book, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, that this isolationism led to the late development of the Japanese idea of landscape. He argues that prior to the new perception of landscape, depictions of nature were idealized mental images created to be beautiful rather than realistic. For instance, sansuiga paintings never portray existing locales or terrains, but the perfect picture of a mountain or stream. When Kunikida Doppo writes of his time in the forests of the Musashino region of Japan, he paints an honest picture of the existing landscape. He tells of clouds, rain, bitter cold, and dark woods, but also of striking beauty. Kunikida’s step away from idealistic mental pictures of nature marks his *Musashino* as one of the first Japanese works to portray Karatani’s new perception of landscape.

*Musashino,* writers, painters, and poets portrayed heaven-like picturesque nature scenes. Sadly, few places on earth could their portrayals be found because simply, they did not exist. No artists copied real existing forests or mountains and instead used what they thought a mountain should look like in the ideal. Karatani states, “in *sansuiga* the painter is not looking at an object but envisioning the transcendental” (Karatani 21). Artists painted heaven or the scenes of their dreams rather than the reality around them. Sansuiga could be created from the comfort of a castle or tatami room. This created beauty and reverence for nature and classic fairy tales, but was more of a false highborn appreciation of the scenic Japanese countryside who’s reality was largely unrepresented in art. To reach Karatani’s definition of landscape, “…the transcendental vision of space had to be overturned before painters could see existing pine groves as their subjects” (27). Kunikida does just this, and embraces the land of Musashino and shows the Japanese to view the nature as a subject.

Kunikida immerses himself in his surroundings and truly opens his eyes to the real beauty of nature around him. In his journal he writes, “I sat in the heart of the trees, looking around me, straining my ears, and silently contemplating” (Kunikida 99). He allows the forest around him to influence his mind and he sits, receptive to nature rather than trying to conjure the perfect beauty. Karatani even mentions, “…the link between landscape and an introverted solitary situation” (Karatani 25). He emphasizes the near requirement of solitary inward thought to truly accept the scenery and landscape. Kunikida’s time by himself brings him to question the established ideals and views of the countryside. He remarks, “according to long tradition, Musashino in ancient times was incomparably beautiful on account of the endless vistas of miscanthus reeds all over the plain, but nowadays it is covered with woods” (Kunikida 101). The grand woods described by Kunikida cannot have sprung up recently and must have existed in ancient times. The depictions of rolling reeds could easily be another exaggeration or idealistic imagining. Kunikida mentions that deciduous forests are never even depicted in Japanese art: “when a Japanese writer wrote of woods, he was thinking principally of pines so that the very idea of listening to the early autumn rains in an oak forest does not figure at all in our literature, not even in poetry” (101). Artists do not even acknowledge the beautiful forests of Musashino and fabricate their own environments to pass on to society. Kunikida, contrary to other artists of his time, actually takes the time to absorb the world around him and report the true beauty and nature of the forest of Musashino.

When immersing himself in the woods, Kunikida reaches a very unique conclusion relative to his time period: Musashino is not perfect. Musashino can be cold, wet, and dark: “The trees are green as they are in summer, but the skies are completely different, for the driving south wind brings low cloud and frequent rains” (98). He never lies and says the sun always shines brightly on Musashino. He accepts that sometimes the weather can be uncomfortable and writes honestly about the landscape. Sansuiga paintings do not portray rain or clouds in a negative light, they only show the perfection of a scene. However, Kunikida in his journeys does find true beauty and serenity in the forest: “Morning; the sky was cloudy and the wind died away. There was a cold mist and a chilly dew. Everywhere I could hear the chirruping of insects and it was almost as if the very heart of heaven and earth had woken from a dream” (99). He accepts the imperfection of his world, but also comes in contact with the gorgeousness of the woods. This ability to realistically depict the Musashino region is indicative of the shift towards Karatani’s definition of the new Japanese landscape.

Not only does Kunikida portray Musashino realistically, he even goes to portray it in a negative light. When winter sets in, he says, “the whole scene begins to take on the look of the withering decay of winter” (99). Never before had any artists portrayed a land as special as Musashino in this way or described it as withering. Kunikida is the first of a new generation of artist who use honesty and vision to portray the world around them. This gives the new form of landscape even more weight with readers, “By contrast, the Musashino rains are somehow more human and have a kind of whispering charm” (103). This new human aspect creates a much deeper connection with the readers and population of Japan, who feel that nature is not on the level of heaven anymore. The beauty of Japan is accessible to everyone, not just the gods and emperors. Karatani’s new definition of landscape is ushered in by Kunikida, who writes honestly about what he perceives in the world around him, transforming Japanese art and literature forever.

Works Cited

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