Lines of Force: 
Finding One’s Place in Shiga Naoya’s A Dark Night’s Passing

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Introduction

Naoya Shiga’s lengthy and autobiographical work, A Dark Night’s Passing (1951), has been the subject of controversy and critical discourse for readers and literary critics in Japan as well as the West. While A Dark Night’s Passing was “the favorite of successive generations of Japanese youth” there are Japanese critics such as Nakamura Mitsuo, Katsumoto Seichiro, Ono Kenji, and Honda Shugo who criticize Shiga’s masterwork as too narrow, too egoistic and lacking in dramatic content (Mathy 83). Nakamura has dismissed Shiga’s work as “adolescent” because of the novel’s “complete trust in intuition and impulse” (167) and has gone on to say that “If Journey Through A Dark Night is the highest peak of modern Japanese literature, then modern Japanese literature is a very low range indeed” (168).

Tanikawa Tetsuo, a Japanese literary critic and one of Shiga’s supporters, in an effort to explain the nature of Shiga’s novel, compares A Dark Night’s Passing to the ink paintings (sumi-e) of the Muromachi period. Francis Mathy takes this notion one step further and suggests that Shiga’s novel “is rather a kind of picture scroll (e-maki) drawn from the point of view of the hero” (168-9). While provocative, these tantalizing notions are developed no further. Mathy further explains that “Journey Through A Dark Night is not really a novel, in the Western sense of the word” and that, “If criticized from the Western conception of the novel, any number of pejorative judgments can be made about it. But this would be tantamount to requiring of a sumi-e the effects of an oil painting” (169). While Roy Starrs notes the “extraordinary gap between native and foreign critical evaluations” (6) with regard to Shiga’s importance as a modern Japanese writer, he also attempts to explain Shiga’s aesthetic accomplishment in terms of an ink painting titled “Haboku sansuiizu” or “Broken-ink Landscape” (see fig. 1) brushed by a 15th century Zen monk and painter named Sesshû Tôyô, whose “spontaneous, irregular ‘artless’” brushstrokes embody a “paradoxical aesthetic ideal” which Starrs feels closely resembles the calligraphic sketches of Western artists such as Rembrandt and Picasso (9-10). Starrs summarizes his comparison of aesthetic ideas between East and West by pointing out that the West has always valued the “finished, studied work” over a “mere sketch,” whereas Shiga’s aesthetic is more a kin to the ‘artless art’ of Zen ink paintings (10).

Fig. 1. Haboku sansuiizu or Broken-ink Landscape by Sesshû Tôyô, 15th century. 28 May 2009 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/zang/93945706/>.
While Starrs, Mathy and Tanikawa all bring up comparisons of Shiga’s literary style to examples taken from the visual arts, these critics stop short in their efforts to probe the aesthetic nature of the visual arts in order to shed light on Shiga’s literary aesthetic. This essay will intervene at this juncture, for if we may surmise that sumi-e and emaki are appreciated by non-Japanese as well as Japanese just as oil paintings and pastels are appreciated by Japanese as well as non-Japanese, then it would appear that the extraordinary “cultural difference” to which Starrs attributes international reception to Shiga’s novel may also rest on the ways in which we, as individuals, are trained to appreciate an aesthetic work (33). This paper will probe the visual metaphor as suggested by Tanikawa (sumi-e), Mathay (e-maki) and Starrs (sumi-e), but will seek to avoid the “ultimate legitimacy” of essentializing Japanese culture in an over determined binary between East and West, while at the same time, challenge Starrs notion that a comparison between image (Sesshû’s ink drawings) and text (Shiga’s writing) “is so hard to define in words” (9-10).

I. Distinguishing Aesthetic Approaches

Linear perspective (also referred to as Western perspective) renders depth by using actual or suggested lines to intersect at the background of the picture plane in order to delimit relative size. The use of these (visible or invisible) lines distinguishes foreground from background and renders an apprehension of depth. By contrast, aerial or atmospheric perspective (also referred to as Eastern perspective) creates depth in the picture place by changes in form, size, tone and color in order to render an apprehension of the recession of objects. Both “Western” and “Eastern” codes of perspective have the potential to educate their audience in so far as one’s mental experience of visual images is conditioned by repeated exposure, but the ability to apprehend the contents of the picture plane is available to people of all cultures. As Ernst Gombrich points out with a quote from Herbert Read, “We do not always realize that the theory of perspective developed in the fifteenth century is a scientific convention; it is merely one way of describing space and has no absolute validity” (247).

In the aesthetic world of linear perspective, the eye of the beholder is trained to travel from point A (foreground) to point B (background) without any particular regard for the movement of the line itself. In this aesthetic world line is a means to an end – here, the creation of depth in the picture plane. By contrast, in the aesthetic world of atmospheric perspective line is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. In atmospheric perspective the eye of the beholder is trained to travel the length of line in order to fully engage in an experience of the line itself. Lines in this sense are executed with (and designed to evoke) emotional power, and are not simply a means of getting from point A to B, engineered in order to create an optical illusion designed to facilitate an apprehension of depth. Lines in this latter (emotive) sense convey a sensual experience of a felt body, a body that wields a brush and whose expressive abilities determine the nature of an aesthetic experience. As Tsuda Noritake in his book *Ideals of Japanese Painting* points out, an “appreciation of Japanese painting requires the understanding of the expression in the line,” as:

> the function of line is not merely to depict form but also to be the medium through which the feeling of the artist is expressed. Its function differs markedly from the function of line in European painting for while in general, the eye in European art travels quickly over the line to grasp the form, in Japanese painting the eye enjoys the movement of the lines, very often requiring of each line independent articulation and strength. (3)

With regard to picture scrolls (emaki) and the use of line in the context of atmospheric perspective, scholars have shown that lines have a particular function wherein they often function as *shasenbyo* or “oblique line description,” a technique “that uses to fullest advantage the limited depth of the emaki format (Okudaira 61). Most of the slanted lines in picture scrolls are drawn from the upper right to the lower left, carrying the eye of the viewer from right to left; the
order in which the scroll is unrolled. However, there are moments when:

the emaki artist sometimes seems to suggest or stress the emotion inherent in a scene by reordering these slanted lines to create a disturbing visual effect. Scenes characterized by nearly vertical lines that are charged with a sense of drama and tragedies include the “Kashiwagi” (Plate 7), “Law” (Plate 2) scenes from the Tale of Genji, both depictions of movements of sorrowful reflection. Slanted lines drawn in reverse, from upper left to lower right, as in Plate 11, may also suggest the unease underlying a certain scene. (ibid) (See fig. 2, 3 and 4 respectively.)

In sumi-e, boundaries that separate inside and outside, or the emotive (subjective) life of the artist from the (objective) landscape have collapsed, and the artist uses line as a vehicle through which his or her inner emotional world is rendered visible through the depiction of mountains, trees, rivers and natural contours. Line used in this sense is a very different conception from that of line in the context of linear perspective. Notions of objectivity in the sense of portraying what is ‘out there’ have been jettisoned from the aesthetic world of sumi-e. In this way, line is used in both picture scrolls and sumi-e to render visible the inner lives of the characters portrayed (emaki) and as well as that of the artist (sumi-e). In both picture scrolls and sumi-e, expertise is revealed to the degree that the inner emotional state of the artist and/or the characters merges with the outer, objective world of the scene depicted, culminating in a work of art that emerges from elements of both.

II. Lines of Attachment

One of the first and most celebrated scenes in A Dark Night’s Passing recasts the shasenbyo use of line as described above. Now a young boy, Kensaku has climbed to the roof of his home and encounters the gaze of his mother, concerned and frightened, as she stands on the ground below. The line of sight from the
boy to his mother is perhaps drawn from the upper left (Kensaku on the roof) to the lower right of the picture plane (his mother standing on the ground below), and is inscribed at a dramatic, nearly vertical angle so as to indicate the underlying tension wherein “her eyes, staring with a strange intentness into mine...forced me to be still” (Shiga 17). This particular line is later re-inscribed in a work of art which Kensaku describes later in the text as:

a pair of eagles by Shen Nan-p’in. Perched on a small rock sticking out above the waves was the female eagle, its wings spread out, legs bent, back lowered, neck thrust out. It looked up at the male eagle standing on top of a large rock above. The male eagle stood straight, and stared back fiercely at the female below. Kensaku was intrigued by the bluntness with the artist had expressed the female eagle’s desire to mate; and no less interesting to him was the male’s overbearing posture. (362)

Shiga has drawn the same line once more, and in realizing its expressive potential has used the same mechanism with a different content; namely, two eagles. Whereas the first line supported the tension in an image/expression of a maternal/filial bond, this second line underscores the emotional energy of a male/female sexual bond. The power inherent in these lines of attachment provide a form of emotional release for Kensaku “as he remembered once more the time he went up on the roof” and “his eyes clouded over with tears” (150).

Kensaku’s courtship of his future wife, Naoko, is also composed of a series of lines of sight expressing emotional attachment. He wants desperately to “try to catch a glimpse of her again” and is rewarded by having “the opportunity to have a really good look at her” (205-6). Shiga further underscores the power of this type of line when he tells us the story of “a certain shabbily attired student” who caught sight of a beautiful woman in a rickshaw, followed her to her home and asked her father right then and there for her hand in marriage (26). The student’s proposal is accepted. Shiga is careful to point out that the expressive power of these lines can also be destructive. Lines of sight (their absence/presence) can kill as well. In another embedded story in the text, Shiga goes on to relate the legend of Okiku, “a girl, in love with a young man living on another island” whose line of attachment is rendered by Shiga through the image of a beacon of light (131). Okiku “swam every night from her island to his, guided by the beacon; the young man then ceased to love her, and one stormy night blew out the light and let her drown” (ibid). Here the erasure of a line of sight (and of emotional attachment) from the swimming girl to her beloved leads to betrayal and death.

III. Line/age

The basic propulsion of A Dark Night’s Passing is that of lineage, in that approximately one-third of the way through the novel Kensaku is told by his brother that his biological father is actually the man whom Kensaku had thought to be his grandfather. The question of Kensaku’s lineage highlights not only another aspect of the expressive use of line in terms of lineage, but also points to the function of line in respect to relation and place. Kensaku is born out of line, and is therefore out of place in relations with his family on account of an illicit union between his mother and his grandfather. It is perhaps for this reason that Kensaku finds himself continuously out of line with regard to his behavior and endures increasingly difficult emotional circumstances as the novel progresses. Kensaku’s increasingly tentative emotional state may be attributable to his need to negotiate and renegotiate his relations with family members; (and of walking such a fine line in his familial relations) with Nobuyuki (whom Kensaku thought was his full brother but now realizes is his step-brother); with his mother (whom he loves deeply); with his father (whom he now realizes is no blood relation at all); and his grandfather (whom he dislikes and now must acknowledge as his biological father.)

A Dark Night’s Passing consists primarily in Kensaku’s efforts to negotiate and accommodate his place in relations with family members, an
accommodation that extends to his relations with human beings at large. Kensaku sets about addressing and refashioning his own place in the family by continuing to experiment with his own line(age), first by attempting to marry his birth-father’s mistress named Oei who is more than 20 years Kensaku’s senior, then by marrying Naoko and beginning a family of his own, only to leave that family in his continuing efforts to find his own place (on his own) by traveling to the holy mountain of Daisen - a name which is homophonically inscribed with the meaning of Great (Dai)/Line (sen).

Throughout the novel Kensaku consistently questions, probes, destroys and creates these lines of attachment, authority and desire that surround him, yet he remains inexorably defined by and embedded in these relations, amidst lines of attachment that seal him within the patterns of human existence. Kensaku struggles with this tyranny of line and of the relations generated by these lines throughout the novel. The question of place and of one’s anxiety regarding one’s own place extends into Kensaku’s dream life as well. At one point Kensaku dreams that he has exchanged places with a soldier by exchanging clothes. The stationmaster (an official who wields the power of railroad lines) “pounced on him” in the dream because he had seen through Kensaku’s disguise (232). Kensaku is out of place, and once again, out of line. Issues of karma, fate, and destiny are Shiga’s metaphysical forays throughout the novel that also seek to reiterate questions of place, of establishing place and belonging, and of moving from place to place, albeit outside a temporal dimension. Kensaku yearns “to escape from the present” and “to live amongst ancient things” (201). The death of his child with Naoko is foreshadowed by a “bad omen” (306), and there is a heavy undercurrent running through the novel of “an oppressive atmosphere” (18, 31). Kensaku feels that he lives and works “in a tight box” (87) and is subject to a “dark fate”(315). This tyranny and oppression of lines of relation culminate in Kensaku pushing Naoko away, causing her to fall to the ground from a moving train (line) that is ridden by Kensaku. Perhaps it is Shiga the writer who is pushing away the warm, yet confining relations of human existence in order to achieve the solitude he requires to draw and redraw the lines that emerge from his brush/quill/pencil/pen in order to accomplish his work.

IV. Lines of Authority

In addition to rendering emotive states through lines as powerful expressions of love, desire, and family ties, there are also lines in Shiga’s novel that express a different kind of emotive power; namely, lines of authority. These lines are drawn initially in the relations between Kensaku and Nobuyuki’s father. Nobuyuki’s father expresses his outrage at both Nobuyuki and Kensaku in a tableau drawn by Shiga wherein he throws his pen at Nobuyuki. “It hit the floor just in front of me, and as it did a pen nib flew out, landed neatly on its point and stuck in the mat” (153). Again, the inherent tension and unease underlying the scene would suggest that, should we visually imagine the scene in a picture scroll, the pen would be thrown from the upper left of the picture plane and the nib would embed itself in the tatami on the lower right. The angle of descent is sharply defined. That a pen is thrown, a tool which creates both lines and words, is an image used artfully by Shiga who, as a writer himself, is familiar with the plasticity of language and the power of line (here the authorial line of a pen) which he draws onto the page as he writes down in words (and lines) the emotive states he seeks to convey in his work.

Lines of authority also appear in Shiga’s description of Nobuyuki’s father’s exertion of power on becoming the president of a railway company. Shiga’s own father was the director of a railroad company. It is perhaps for this reason that Shiga has invested so much emotional intensity into lines of authority inscribed in railroad lines. Nobuyuki’s father, “had immediately tried to put a line through the town” rather than building the railroad line overhead so that this line would not interfere with the townspeople (169). The outrage engendered by this railroad line drawn through the town and the emotional reaction of
the townspeople are so strong that Nobuyuki’s father is forced to acknowledge the townspeople’s demands to reconstruct these lines overhead, thereby freeing the townspeople from the tyranny of these (railroad) lines (of authority) that would have erased and/or redetermined their own lines of attachment between and among entire neighborhoods.

This image of lines imbued with authority and power as rendered in railroad lines is drawn again in another embedded story within *A Dark Night’s Passing*. A student of pottery, an artist (like Shiga) tells Kensaku the story of a Korean man named Min Togwon. This young man “was approached by a Japanese official who informed him that they were planning to build a railroad through the district” (30). Min Togwon is seduced by these officials who possess the power to lay down the railroad lines, but his seduction leads to betrayal, to desperation and alienation, and culminates in his death.

V. Erasure, Formlessness and Transcendence

The author’s meditation on the power of lines in drawing relations and the seduction/oppression of belonging to one’s place as drawn by these lines enters another register when Shiga narrates a series of events that unfold during a game of cards – an apt metaphor for a series of arbitrary rules (lines of authority) designed to lock players into modalities of behavior that determine their positions in relation to one another. Shiga reveals Kensaku’s thoughts when Kensaku believes that his wife, Naoko, has cheated during the card game.

Unethical behavior - and cheating at cards was unethical - Kensaku had always regarded with distaste. Why then, he wondered, did he not feel the slightest distaste or ill will toward what she had done? The tenderness that he now felt was overwhelming; through the unfortunate incident, it seemed he had become aware of a love for her that was deeper than what he had known before. (278)

During the card game Naoko has stepped out of line – she has broken the rules, and Kensaku now apprehends her in relief – for she has stepped outside the rules of the game. At this moment Kensaku’s wife has broken from patterns of behavior drawn by the lines of authority demanded by this particular form of behavior (card game). In breaking the rules Naoko has achieved a particular form of transcendence. In the radical presence that this break engenders she appears more lovely to Kensaku than ever before. Kensaku’s sense of belonging with Naoko, once drawn into the everyday patterns of human existence, now transcends normative codes of behavior.

Yet both Shiga, as a writer and artist, and Kensaku, the artist/writer whom Shiga writes about, work as artists, and they must write (create their own lines/forms) in order to live. How is this aesthetic work to be done creatively when the artist is already in the work, and patterns of lines in the novel just as patterns of relations in life are already determining the artist in a series of relations that he/she seeks to create and to determine in the first place? This is the metaphysical and aesthetic quandary that Shiga’s momentous novel seeks to explore, and eventually resolve at the end of the novel.

Shiga’s response to the ontological problem of the artist and humanity is hinted at in the same scene above, during the game of cards/game of life. Mizutani, when describing Suematsu’s game-playing style, declares that “it’s what we call ‘prayerful’. It has no form to it” (277). Kensaku is curious about this term - prayerful, and queries Mizutani. By way of explanation, Mizutani explains that Suematsu “puts his trust in providence” (ibid). This theme of no form, or formlessness, suggests an absence of line, of an absence of attachment to relations of existence and to established patterns of behavior. This absence of form challenges the mission of an artist whose work consists precisely in giving form to what is as yet unformed, and also challenges the ontology of being human – a state wherein one must act in determinate relation with others. Formlessness, absence or void, is literally an erasure of line, of all lines, and this absence transcends betrayal, resulting in a transcendence of line/relation/attachment/place. Naoko, by breaking with lines
of authority, becomes that much more present, that much more lovable to Kensaku. While Suematsu continues to play the game of cards with Kensaku and his friends, he does so in a very different modality of being – an attitude in which lines of authority, lineage, desire and attachment have been erased and form – in the sense of an attitude determined by codes of behavior rooted in lines of authority and attachment, no longer exists.

Shiga draws our attention to an erasure of line once again during his description of a fire festival. Kensaku tells the reader that in order for the participants of the festival to enter the shrine “the rule was that until this rope had been severed by fire from the torches, no one could go up the steps” (292). There is another rope closer to the inner shrine, and that too must be cut. These lines drawn by ropes and the boundaries these divine ropes form must be broken (erased) if Kensaku is to transcend the tyranny of line and enter into relation with formlessness – an unattached (prayerful) modality of being which Shiga renders in the figure of Zen practice.

But where does this prayerful modality, this being/non-being place of attachment/non-attachment, this freedom from the tyranny of line and the relations these lines engender, leave the artist/writer? According to Jacques Derrida “access to writing is the constitution of a free subject in the violent movement of its own effacement and of its own bondage” (132). Kensaku’s bondage to the linear relations of his work (writing) and his life (questions of lineage, relations to people, belonging to place) and his own effacement in the formlessness of the transcendental state into which Kensaku is drawn at the end of the novel inscribe the moves which Derrida feels are inherent in the act of writing itself. Indeed, *A Dark Night’s Passing* is propelled by Kensaku’s “genealogical anxiety” both in his anxiousness with regard to his birth and in his metaphysical anxiety concerning his place, his obsessive need to settle down, and his consequent peripatetic state (124).

Kensaku’s anxiety of place takes a lexical turn when “the fact that he could not remember where exactly Gazenbô was troubled him inordinately. He must have known its location once; how then could he have forgotten it?” (194). Shiga registers Kensaku’s confusion of place as an ontological confusion of identity when Kensaku begins to stutter, and he says ‘gan’ (がん) rather than ‘ga’ (が). The first character of Gazenbô (我善坊) not only means ‘we’ but is also homophonically identical to ‘ga’ - a Japanese particle which marks the place of a noun in a sentence - a place marker for a ‘we’ that Kensaku can no longer articulate. ‘Zen’ in Gazenbô means ‘good’ and is also homophonically identical to Zen (as in Zen practice). ‘Bo’ is the character for a Buddhist priest or monk. Kensaku’s inability to articulate this place name, Gazenbô, is metonymically related to his anxiety in realizing the devotional energy required for an artist to accomplish the creation of good work – work that is not only good for Kensaku himself (as artist) but is also a beneficial contribution in his relations with others.

At the end of the novel Kensaku has found his peace, his place, and it is formlessness. In a move that lexically reflects the paradox of rendering formlessness by means of form (for that is the nature of an artist’s work), Shiga has provided us with a sacred mountain in the Buddhist tradition named Daisen (大山), literally, Great Mountain – a place where Kensaku finds his place of no-form, and a noun (place) that is homophonically inscribed as Daisen (大線), or Great Line. It is on this mountain – the iconic incarnation of line - that Kensaku “could feel his mind and his body both gradually merging into this great nature that surrounded him” (400). He experiences rapture, and from that point forward wavers in and out of consciousness. He has a dream in which “his two legs had detached themselves from his torso and were walking about the room, making a terrible nuisance of themselves” (404). He tries to drive his legs away. Here Kensaku has become detached from that which signifies his peripatetic state and his metaphysical anxiety of place. While his “legs would pace around him noisily - thud, thud, thud, thud” he is now, quite literally, detached and at the same time at one with
his place, merged with the being presence that is the sacred mountain of Daisen (ibid). He no longer suffers. In the presence of “such contentment and quiet, ...words seem hollow” (407). “Language itself is form” and in formlessness, lines and linear relations have no place (Derrida 57). Shiga has taken us to the most meaningful aspect of writing for the writer, that place where “the thing that constitutes language (l’essentiel de la langue) is...unrelated to the phonic character of the linguistic sign” (55).

VI. Conclusion

A Dark Night’s Passing can be read emblematically as an extended meditation on the meaning of line (sen/線) and the ways in which sen/line proliferate (in art and in life) through a lexical exploration of semantic relations among the homonyms: sen/line/線, sen/good/善, sen/mountain/山 (usually read ‘san’- but here read ‘sen’ as in Mt. Daisen) and zen/Zen/禅 (in calligraphic practice the dakuon that renders an ‘s’ a ‘z’ is omitted). In a series of aesthetic reminders scattered throughout the text, Shiga references his emotive and spiritual rendering of line in art and nature, and in this way draws us closer to an understanding of his own artistic perspective and to the central importance of line in the composition of art, nature and life (32, 42, 45, 52, 53, 113, 131, 133, 207, 361, 369). The spiritual urgency of Shiga’s work results from the depth of his meditation and his commitment to an artistic inquiry which examines the ways in which an aesthetic work intersects (or does not) with humanity in the pursuit of what is good – here ultimately figured through the epistemology of Zen practice. That the climax of Kensaku’s artistic/humanist inquiry ends on Mount Daisen further underscores the depths (and heights) of Shiga’s inquiry not only into the role of the artist/human in rendering their work through the vehicle of an authentic self, but also in rendering that self amidst contributory and beneficial relations with humanity at large.

SOURCES CITED

要約
日本とアメリカの文芸評論においては、『暗夜行路』の価値観を説明する際に「絵巻」と「墨絵」に関する比較論的観点に立つケースが多く見られる。しかしながら、この種の研究は、いまだ十分に展開されているわけではない。本論は作品の「線」のイメージに焦点をしぼることによって、視覚に関する分析と文学に関する分析との共通性に留意しながら、『暗夜行路』の顕著な特徴を浮き彫りにする。