Comparing (Sick)notes: Intercultural Reflections on Modernity and Disease in the Writings of Thomas Mann and Jun’ichirō Tanizaki

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Sprays of wisteria
Arranged in a vase –
The blossoms hang down,
And by my sickbed
Spring is coming to an end
Masaoka Shiki (Trans. Burton Watson)

Abstract

This article considers some of the key works of Thomas Mann and Jun’ichirō Tanizaki in the context of debates around Modernity, Orientalism, and Body-Images. Both Tanizaki and Mann create richly intercultural and intertextual fictional worlds that bring central features of eastern and western Modernity vividly to life in the experience of illness. This provides a specific focus for a series of penetrating critical insights into the experience of modern life more generally. As distinct from many academic and popular conceptions these interrelated texts expose the extent to which presumedunities of everyday experience are, in fact, constituted through a complex process of global historical interaction. Modernity is interwoven with Antiquity; East and West emerge in reciprocal, asymmetric interrelation; Illness forms, deforms, and reforms body-images which are themselves residues of long, intercultural traditions. Illness, rather than any systematic, abstract discourse, proves to be the most insightful guide to the real character of modern life.

Keywords: Modernity, West, East, Illness, Body

Translating Modernity

The unity and distinctiveness of any cultural tradition, from large-scale world civilization to local community, is now commonly viewed critically and externally as an unfounded and ultimately arbitrary form of life. The strong sense of identity and autonomy claimed internally as essential to the character of a particular, named tradition or associated with a generic property of the historical subject, such as gender or ethnicity, is in a broader perspective revealed to be the illusion of a necessarily limited and locally structured experience of life (Reiss 2002). Yet, for those living in and through these forms, the conviction that the conventions of everyday life are rooted in irreducible natural difference is often unaffected by the most transparent and rigorous intellectual deconstruction. Rather as neurosis resisted the most convincing of Freud’s interpretations, ordinary social experience remains constituted primarily in terms of imaginary identities (Ferguson 2009). The “givenness” of ordinary experience - its self-evident and seemingly invulnerable identities - is, in fact, an aspect and outcome of complex social processes of construction, deconstruction, and translation.