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Author(s)	Yamada, Yuzo
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The Unreliable Representation of the Subaltern:

The Case Study of Tokunaga Sunao's Reportage¹

Yuzo Yamada

1. Introduction

When we look back on the earliest phase of British Cultural Studies, it seems to have been obsessed with the literary form of reportage. In the preface of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Richard Hoggart, the founder of the CCCS, appealed to the “intelligent layman” by adopting a unique reportage form to depict his own working-class community in Leeds. He wrote: “it seems to me that those of us who feel that writing for him [that is, the intelligent layman] is an urgent necessity must go on trying to reach him”.² Even Stuart Hall, when he subsequently became Chair of the Centre, carried on his research about *Picture Post*, the most popular reportage magazine in the 1930s and 40s, so that he could clarify why its reportage form made such an impact on the British public in those years. And he concluded that *Picture Post*'s documentary style was “an emergent form of social consciousness” in that “it registered, in the formation of social rhetoric, the emergent structure of feeling in the immediate pre-war, and the war, periods”.³

If that is the case, it cannot be meaningless to focus on the genealogy of the genre that fell in shape in the worldwide Proletariat movement in the 1930s. It was around the end of the nineteenth century that the new sense of this French-original word, reportage, came through. It is defined in *the OED* as “the describing of events usually by an observer, specifically the reporting of events for the press or for broadcasting, especially with reference to its style” (my emphasis). It is, therefore, clear that at this historical stage of reportage there was considerable emphasis on an agency (or an observer) and the style he or she employed. In fact, André Gide's *Return from the USSR* (1937) was an exemplary reportage, for Gide reported on that newborn communist state from his own peculiar viewpoint. As a matter of fact, the genre Gide developed in his travel writings of the 1930s became so popular worldwide that quite a few Proletariat writers in Japan eagerly imitated his style. For example, in the June 1937 issue of *Chuo-Kōron*, one of the most influential literary magazines, the

¹ This is a revised version of the paper read at the international conference of “Selective Tradition in the Pacific: A Conference on Class, Writing, and Culture”, on 1 September 2017 at The School of English, Film, Theatre, and Media Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

² Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (New Brunswick: Translation Publishers, 1998), xli.

³ Stuart Hall, “The Social Eye of *Picture Post*,” *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 2 (Spring 1972), 100.

real-time Spanish Civil War was reported in translation by the writings by Gide, André Malraux, Romain Rolland and other French writers.

If reportage was the emergent literary form in the world of the 1930s, the socialists' struggle for alignment with the Proletariat can be traced in two writers who attempted to observe and participate in their respective working-class communities: George Orwell (1903-1950) and Tokunaga Sunao (1899-1958). There is an interesting coincidence of experience between these two writers, that is, the experience of imperialism. As far as Orwell's experience is concerned, the five years from 1922 to 1927 he spent in Burma as an imperial policeman allowed him to acquire a "double vision", which, as we shall see later, played a decisive role in his reportage writing. By contrast, Tokunaga went through an appalling imperial experience in colonised Manchuria in 1938 after he had established his fame with his reportage on the steel-workers and poor peasants in Japan. As a result, his imperial experience irrevocably undermined his style of reportage thereafter. But before that, let us turn our eyes to Orwell's decisive experience in Asia.

2. Orwell's "double vision"

When he came back to England from Burma in September 1927, Orwell was totally disillusioned by the British imperial system in which he had been educated and for which he had worked. Therefore, he strongly felt there was no longer that old familiar England he could return to. He confessed what he felt and thought at the end of this journey in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).

I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants. . . . At that time failure seemed to me to be the only virtue. Every suspicion of self-advancement, even to 'succeed' in life to the extent of making a few hundreds a year, seemed to me spiritually ugly, a species of bullying. It was in this way that my thoughts turned towards the English working class.⁴

This is an exquisite narrative in which alignment with the working class is tinged with his personal escape from imperialism. And this is the way Orwell tried to find the road towards spiritual success out of ugly imperialism.

The key to success in reportage writing is whether a writer can create his first-person reporter reliable enough for readers. In this light, "Orwell" was, as Raymond Williams said, the most successful creation by Eric Arthur Blair.⁵ As Orwell went down right into the world of the oppressed, he was exposed to poverty and misery, even filth and stench of the slums in London and Paris as

⁴ George Orwell, *George Orwell the Works*, Vol. 5 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), 138.

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Orwell* (London: Fontana, 1971), 52.

well as the terrace houses in Wigan. Since Blair himself was not completely free of the middle class prejudice about the working class, it was inevitable for him to create a character who could fully submerge himself in that environment strange to Blair. This is the way Blair impersonated Mr Orwell when a reviewer of the *Manchester Guardian* commented that he only exaggerated the evil side of humanity: “Wrong. Mr Orwell was ‘set down’ in Wigan for quite a while and it did not inspire him with any wish to vilify humanity. He liked Wigan very much —the people, not the scenery”.⁶ As Williams said, when we read all of Orwell’s writings until 1937 (before he set foot in Catalonia) we should regard them as the necessary process towards the creation of the most reliable reporter: Mr Orwell.

However, the creation of Mr Orwell would not have been so successful if it had not come through a tension of the writer who was simultaneously outsider and insider, or dominator and dominated. In other words, it depended on whether this created character could successfully acquire a “double vision” or not. The double vision is Williams’s term, (recently, Kono Shintaro and Onuki Takashi turned our eyes to the importance of this term) and is a key concept to our understanding of Orwell’s way with reportage. The double vision can be defined as an epistemological action to go beyond the current divisions such as outsider/ insider or dominator/ dominated. There is an interesting episode in *Wigan* that illustrates Orwell’s double vision. He picked up the four-word phrase he had learned when young, that is, *the lower classes smell*. Through his deliberate double vision, he found out a very simple fact, getting over that middle-class myopia, the fact that “[a] working-man’s body, as such, is no more repulsive to me than a millionaire’s. I still don’t like drinking out of a cup or bottle after another person —another man, I mean. . . —but at least the question of class does not enter”.⁷

3. Tokunaga’s theory of reportage

So far, we have looked over some characteristics of Orwell’s reportage. What can we then say about Tokunaga’s reportage in comparison with it? As was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, reportage was the hottest topic for the professional literary society in Japan of the late 1930s. In this trend, Tokunaga was one of the leading figures in terms of theory and practice both. Tokunaga defined reportage this way: “What can be called reportage, including press reports, is based on literary materialism that a thing in itself excites in us some sensations”. (従つて第一種の場合も含めてルポルタージュなるものは、「物が人をうごかす」といふ唯物論的文学観に拠る。) ⁸ Or, in the wording by Georgi Plekhanov on whom Tokunaga depended, a social event exists first in itself, secondly in our representation. It might be possible to say that this is the writer’s “negative

⁶ *George Orwell the Works*, Vol. 5, 68.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Orwell*, 122.

⁸ Tokunaga Sunao, ‘Reportage and Documentary Literature’ 「ルポルタージュと記録文学」, *Shincho* 34:11 (November 1937), 59.

capability”. As Williams pointed out, it is a kind of structure of feeling some particular types of writers of the 1930s (such as Aldous Huxley and W. H. Auden) had worldwide in common when faced with a row of social upheavals.⁹

Although Tokunaga was best known as a convert from communism, he was still a self-proclaimed socialist. Unlike numerous “Shi-shosetsu” (Ich-Roman) writers, Tokunaga did not give up his own belief that it was necessary for a socialist writer to represent the ordinary life of the poor as it was. In an essay titled “Reportage and Documentary Literature” in 1937, he gave an answer to the most fundamental question about what qualifications are required for promising reportage writing, saying:

First and foremost, it is necessary for a writer to represent an event and what he perceived in it with his own sensitivity. Two qualifications are required for this: to submerge himself in the event wholeheartedly is one qualification, and the other is to gain an insight into the core of the event. (報告者の文学的感性によつて、その出来事と出来事を通して直覚しうるものを翹へるのであり、その出来事へ対する報告者の一貫した身のいれ方、及び出来事の裏まで見ぬき得る感性—が条件なのである。) ¹⁰

These qualifications are harsher than they seem to be, because it is required that the writer should stand both inside and outside the event. In this respect, we might say that the qualifications Tokunaga imposed on himself verged on Orwell’s double vision.

4. Tokunaga’s practice of reportage

It is not too much to say that Tokunaga’s practice in reportage met the standards he imposed on himself at least in the earliest stage of his challenge. In the reportage titled “Oboko-sama” (Our precious silkworms, 1938), “watashi”, the first-person narrator, attempted to stand both inside and outside the peasants in a mulberry field. The posture he adopts there reminds us of Orwell’s double-look at his unnecessarily tall and rickety body while stooping in the mine of Wigan. Orwell wrote: “I am handicapped by being exceptionally tall. . . . You have, therefore, a constant crick in the neck, but this is nothing to pain in your knees and thighs. After half a mile it becomes (I am not exaggerating) an unbearable agony”.¹¹ Yet, this sounds as if Orwell were exaggerating in front of the experienced sturdy miners. Like Orwell, “watashi” in “Oboko-sama” described his awkward move through a cramped mulberry field in this manner.

As I was sandwiched between two rows of the extending mulberry branches, I could not but

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Orwell*, 88-89.

¹⁰ Tokunaga Sunao, ‘Reportage and Documentary Literature’, 55.

¹¹ *George Orwell the Works*, Vol. 5, 23.

walk stooping in the field. Out of breath, I walked on, with my glasses fogged up with dripping sweat. The pain in my waist was so unbearable that it unsettled all my nerves. When Wataru-san easily pruned two ribs of mulberry, I found out that one rib was my limit. (左右の枝條に自由を妨げられて、中腰に這ってゆくのだから、もう呼吸は乱れ、汗は滴になって眼鏡を曇らし腰骨の痛さが脳天までひびく。ワタルさんは二ウネづつ楽に切ってゆくが、私は一ウネがやっとだ。) ¹²

In this reportage, Tokunaga quite skillfully assumed a reliable first-person reporter, nothing short of “Mr Orwell” in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

There was a turning-point in his struggle with reportage. It was when he travelled around colonized Manchuria as a special correspondent of *Kaizō* (one of the leading literary magazines) from September to October in 1938. He wrote two versions of reportage based on this experience. But the result was not that impressive. Having felt himself alienated from the ordinary people in Manchuria, Tokunaga was not able to assume the first-person reporter, but created a dull character named “Ichida” undeniably modeled after himself. When we closely examine the first version of the reportage titled *Nine Days in a Hotel* (1939), it may give us an impression that the narrator is in the state of hikikomori or, withdrawal into his own small room. Apart from the final scene where Ichida is deeply moved by a performance in a local Manchurian theatre, he is not able to get in touch with any local people there in Manchuria. Symptomatically, Ichida repeatedly confesses that he is an incapable reporter there. Here are examples of this.

Ichida was writing a record of his travel, locked in a corner room in the top floor of this hotel, he felt as if he had never ever seen Manchuria. (一田はこの宿のてっぺん、三階の端っこのこの室でその旅行記を書きながら、満州に来てまるで満州を見ない気がしきりとした。)

“Quite a few days have passed since I came to Manchuria, but I haven’t seen any Manchurian yet”. (『それが、満州にはきたが、まだ満州人は見ないんですよ』)

“I wish I could take even a glance at their actual life, how they live in their place the authority dares not to step in”. (『ああ、何でもいい、満州人が他からわづらはされずに生活してるところを見せて下さい』) ¹³

We might say that despite difficulties he faces, Ichida is still an honest and reliable narrator, because he admits that it is almost impossible to participate in or stand inside the dominated in that

¹² Tokunaga Sunao, ‘Our Precious Silkworms’ 「おぼこ様」, *Kaizo* 20:7 (July 1938), 43.

¹³ Tokunaga Sunao, ‘Nine Days in a Hotel’ 「九日の宿」 *Chiisai Kiroku* 『小さい記録』. Tokyo: Miwa-shobo, 1946, 81-107.

imperialistic power relation.

As was mentioned above, there are two versions of his Manchuria reportage: *Nine Days in a Hotel* and its revised version, *A Special Correspondent* (1940). The comparison between them may illustrate the way Tokunaga failed in observing (let alone participating in) the poor in Manchuria. First of all, this Ichida in *A Special Correspondent* is a different character from that in *Nine Days in a Hotel*. The new Ichida is consistently introduced with negative adjectives so that the writer can curry favor with readers in this modest way. As a matter of fact, the descriptions such as “careless Ichida”, “cowardly Ichida”, “absently minded Ichida”, “this stupid correspondent” can be seen everywhere. Yet, paradoxically, this Ichida becomes an active participant in Manchurian society. There is an impressive episode Tokunaga adopted for both of the versions. In that episode, Ichida witnesses a brawl between two groups of Manchurian kids in a poor block. In the original version, we can only find Ichida dumbfounded to know that only his silent presence as a dominator scattered the brawling crowd away. Whereas in *A Special Correspondent*, he actively intervened in the brawl, saying “Hey! Stop it, right away”. (「オイ、やめろ、やめろ」)¹⁴ It is symbolic that the new Ichida alienated from Manchurian society assumes power of an imperialist moderator.

What is the most striking in his revision is his handling of Manchurian women. In the both versions, there appears a prostitute, who is described as being the most popular among Japanese male settlers. Her name is “Wan-Chu-Ran” but interestingly, that name is given only in the former version but not in this revision. While Wan-Chu-Ran was portrayed in *Nine Days in a Hotel* as an inscrutable character who hid something from the dominators, this nameless girl in *A Special Correspondent* is depicted in a synecdoche of her icy palm to express her inscrutability. She is no longer a human but part of imperialism that mechanically serves her customers. That is why Ichida says “it would be almost impossible to make her smile or confess what she has in mind, even if he put her to torture for that purpose”. (ぶったって、叩いたって、ほんとに心から彼女を笑わせたり、喋らせたりすることは並大抵ではない。) This is, we might say, complete resignation on the side of the reporter. When Ichida leaves the brothel, she offers her icy stiff hand and says in Japanese “Mata-irasshai (You’re always welcome)”.¹⁵ Throughout this description, we can only sense sexuality tinged with sadism rather than Ichida’s disappointment as a reporter.

Having lost his double vision or his sense of participating in Manchurian society, Tokunaga became so acutely paranoid that he always felt himself under surveillance of imperial power. The new Ichida in *A Special Correspondent* is so obsessed with this paranoia while walking in the streets of Manchuria that he suffered from delirium that some glaring eyeballs drove him into panic. Gradually, Tokunaga became so much conscious of the source of power, so much so that he could

¹⁴ Tokunaga Sunao, ‘A Special Correspondent’ 「ある特派員」

<http://tokunagasunaonokai.org/sakuhin/arutokuhain.pdf>, 6. Originally published in *Kekkon-ki* 『結婚記』. Tokyo: Kawaide-shobo, 1940.

¹⁵ Tokunaga Sunao, ‘A Special Correspondent’, 20.

not observe things as they were. We may presume to say that this trajectory of a Japanese reportage writer remotely coincides with that of George Orwell after his Catalonia reportage. Orwell also gave up his first-person narrative, and created the new characters like Snowball or Winston to uncover the system of power and domination. Both in the far West (Catalonia) and the far East (Manchuria) of the world, the double vision of reportage was being irrevocably lost towards the darker decade of the 1940s. And this way Tokunaga became a propagandist.

5. Conclusion

Let me end this brief paper with my personal history. My grandmother, still good in shape at the age of 100, used to be a coloniser in Manchuria. During her life in Manchuria from 1937 to 1946, she had lost her two children and husband before she finally came back to Japan alone with my mother. She has never told me every detail of her experience yet, and I don't think she will ever do in future. If Wan-Chu-Ran and my grandmother had found their true voices in some reportage, the voices could have been valuable for our common history. Reportage is a form yet to be looked for. However hard it may sound, it is still worth exploring a new form of reportage in this maddening Post-Truth age.