

## Self-Destroying Egotism

—On the Narrator Sasaki's Subjectivity in Shiga Naoya's  
"The Case of Sasaki" with an English Translation—

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エゴイズムから破局まで

—志賀直哉の「佐々木の場合」に於ける  
語り手の自己中心性について—

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"Sasaki no Baai" (here translated 'The Case of Sasaki') was written in 1913, but not published until 1917. In the intervening years, Shiga married, lost his first child, reached the high point of his dispute with his father, and finally achieved a reconciliation. This period has generally been recognised as marking a turning point in Shiga's outlook as an author. In contrast with the resolute, and often dogmatic self-assertion to be found in many previous works such as "Han no Hanzai" ('Han's Crime', 1913), Shiga's writing after 1917 usually reflects a fundamentally trustful attitude towards his heroes' existential environments, taken in the broadest sense. Coming as it does immediately before this change of outlook, this seldom discussed work offers us an intriguing insight into the reasons that may have led Shiga to a break with his earlier egocentric approach to life's problems.

### 1. Introductory.

The events of "Sasaki no Baai" were originally taken from a newspaper article. A student-lodger had a love affair with a nursemaid, causing her to neglect the little girl in her charge. Unattended, the girl fell onto a fire and received terrible burns. The maid in remorse offered her own skin for graft surgery, whereas the student fled the house. To this plot Shiga added the characters' motivations as we find them in the finished story.<sup>1)</sup> It is the hero's subjective view of his own and others' motivations that will form the main subject matter of this short essay. The narrative presentation of the hero's thoughts will then be contrasted with Shiga's treatment of similar situations in other works.

Like many of Shiga's works, especially the earlier ones, "Sasaki no Baai" is best seen as the portrait of an earnest man in a morally and emotionally ambiguous predicament. However, it is unusual in having two superposed narrators: Sasaki, and an unidentified friend referred to as 'Kimi' (an intimate word for 'You'). At first, the story reads as a straightforward first-person narrative, the only puzzling aspect being how far the reader may identify with the 'Kimi' whom Sasaki is addressing. Half way through

Kimi interrupts with an explanatory note about Sasaki's army career, and it then becomes clear that he is in fact an autonomous third person, and that Sasaki's 'own account' is reported speech, transmitted to us by Kimi. Kimi concludes the story with some comments of his own, virtually constituting an epilogue. He voices his deep pity for Sasaki, but does not hesitate to contradict Sasaki's evaluation of his position, Kimi calls Sasaki's view egotistic, and morally speaking 'just too low'.

Kimi's conclusion cannot but relativise our belief in the accuracy of Sasaki's narration. His loyalty to Tomi comes to be seen as a private obsession rather than as a virtue in itself. Though admittedly Kimi is no more omniscient of the female characters' real motives than Sasaki is, his inclination to take Tomi more or less at her word on such matters at least poses the possibility that the fatal bond Sasaki sees as joining his own destiny with hers, far from being all-important, has never in fact existed. A one-way relationship is no relationship at all.

Given the apparent hopelessness of Sasaki's wooing of Tomi, we might be led to regard this story as darkly pessimistic. However, in one respect such a judgement may be too hasty. If the way to marriage is closed, at least the path to self-knowledge may yet

be open. Sasaki's concluding words: "I hope you won't think too badly of me for talking so egotistically," suggest that the hero has already gained some insight into the real nature of his problem, which is his own attitude towards life. If so, there is hope that he may in the future learn to transcend his egotism.

In the following sections we shall consider Sasaki's case from three viewpoints: his own, Tomi's and Kimi's. This should help us to reach a better understanding of Sasaki's over-subjective outlook. We may then consider the question of what hope the future may hold for him.

## 2. Sasaki, the egotist.

The first thing to beware of in reading Sasaki's account is his language, reflecting as it does the mode of thought of a man constantly stopping to ruminate both upon his own emotions and the decisions that arise spontaneously from them. Typically, Sasaki lays bare his response to any situation or event in two stages: first the response itself, and secondly ponderings as to how or why he reacted in that way. In reading or translating this story we thus become aware of abrupt changes of pace, accompanied by various other linguistic phenomena. External action or spontaneous response is described in brisk sentences, simple in structure, and strewn with colloquialisms. But between the relatively short paragraphs of this type we find much longer passages in which the narration progresses very little, if at all. Here the language becomes less colloquial, and sometimes rather contrived metaphors intrude ('a vast wilderness', 'a shadow on my heart'). The syntax also becomes more involved, with a profusion of 'although' and 'as if' clauses. Naturally, many other writers besides Shiga alternate their narrative pace in this way, but in few is the switch between spontaneity and introspection so drastic. To take a slightly incongruous simile, we may say that Sasaki's thoughts, proceeding as they do from one external shock to the next, resemble the relentless movement of an internal combustion engine through its repetitive cycles of pressurisation, explosion and exhaust.

It should be stressed that the introspective passages are not rational trains of thought leading up to the next decision. Indeed, in some cases the finishing point of the thoughts is contradicted by the action that follows:

"... But in that case, any kind of letter would now be useless.

I wrote and tried asking. . ."

Any causal relationship between thought and action in Sasaki's account is far more likely to be emotional. The hero simply revolves a problem in his mind until he has reached such a state of nervous tension that some kind of instant relief is necessary. This relief comes through making a decision, whether to write a letter, to run away from a house, or to appeal to Kimi

for advice where none is possible.

Since Sasaki's decision making is impulsive and dependent upon nervous stress, it need not surprise us if our hero shows considerable laxity in testing some of his basic assumptions. A case in point is his belief that since the time of the accident, when he held back from volunteering his own skin for the operation, he has become a less selfish man:

"I don't feel the same way now."

In fact, only a week has passed since this same Sasaki started obtruding himself upon a frightened young woman who clearly wants nothing better than to be left alone. Sasaki knows not only that Tomi opposes the marriage, but also that for him to marry her would be to bring still greater unhappiness to Tomi's Mistress, who is still suffering the results of his earlier selfishness. Yet, just as before, he brushes such scruples aside.

Another very questionable point in Sasaki's thinking is the hostile view he holds of the little Mistress and her relationship with Tomi. He tells us that even before the accident the girl disliked and feared him. His most vivid depiction of her alleged hatred comes in a short scene immediately before the accident:

"The little girl had been clinging to Tomi's skirts, silently gazing up at the two of us and scrutinising each of our faces in turn. Now, quite unexpectedly, she blurted out:

"Sasaki's a silly pig! Sasaki's a silly pig!"

It was as if she was swearing at me with all the malice her heart could muster."

At first sight this may be convincing. However, the words 'as if' remind us that Sasaki is interpreting the girl's behaviour from his own, unfriendly viewpoint. A third person might well object that for a five-year-old to respond to a situation of fear and stress by shouting "Silly pig!" is no evidence at all of deep-seated malice. The same might be said of any other instance Sasaki gives us of the girl's alleged hostility to him. As for the nature of her relationship with Tomi, it is quite impossible for us to say, on the basis of Sasaki's jaundiced view of it, whether it is really something out of the normal, and capable of engendering real jealousy in the girl, or whether it is no more than a pronounced case of the intimacy that is perfectly commonplace between a little girl, especially if an only child, and her young nursemaid.

One other area in which we must distrust Sasaki is in his attitude towards the strokes of coincidence which are such a feature of this story. When a coincidence works to his advantage, as in his unexpected sighting of Tomi in the Ginza, Sasaki is content to regard it as a lucky chance. On the other hand, when something happens to thwart his intentions, as when the little Mistress wakes up crying in the night, he becomes distinctly superstitious:

"For me the unescapable impression was that something was causing this deliberately."

It may be that Sasaki is at least partly aware of his inconsistency in this area, since he concludes his account with a reference to causality which appears to be intentionally ambiguous:

"Perhaps I will to the end be labouring under the Mistress's curse."

This melodramatic conclusion is out of tone with the rest of Sasaki's account, which is studiously low key. One's inclination is to take it as a piece of whimsical irony. But at the same time, there is no escaping the resentment of ill-luck or ill-fate that lurks behind the choice of words.

As far as regards the greatest coincidence in the story—the Mistress's fall onto the fire at the very moment when Sasaki was physically abusing Tomi—Sasaki remains utterly mute. Though he speculates on the circumstances of the fall, he uncharacteristically omits to ask why she was on the chair at that moment, whether she knew of what Sasaki was doing, whether the accident was the result of pure chance, of Fate, of a curse, or—just possibly—whether jealous spite had a partial role to play. However, this silence is a pregnant one. The various sentiments Sasaki has elsewhere mentioned in connexion with previous encounters with the girl all flow together to make of this fall the most complex image of the story, at once the result, the reflection and the reinforcement of Sasaki's egotism and its corollary, his isolation from the social world in which Tomi and the Mistress have their place.

It is not our aim here to decide whether Sasaki's view of events is objectively right or wrong, but rather to point out that it is not objective at all. Sasaki's self-judgements are questionable, his assessments of others largely reflect his own fears and desires, and when it comes to generalisations about his situation he is either inconsistent or wilfully ambiguous. Such a man may impress us with his tenacity or his loyalty to an ideal of his own choosing. But he is ill-equipped to face problems that have to do with social skills or the reading of others' thoughts.

### 3. Tomi, the conventionalist.

To understand Sasaki's case objectively, it would be necessary to discover the truth about Tomi's real motives in refusing to speak of marriage. This in turn would entail finding out what Tomi really feels about Sasaki. However, the very subjectivity of Sasaki's account prevents us from even approaching facts of this sort. Even when we are able to read her own words in justification of her refusal, our lack of reliable information about her past attitudes means that we are unable to judge her letter's sincerity.

What we know about Tomi with tolerable certainty can be recounted in few words. She adheres closely to conventional moral norms. She has a greater than average timidity, which expresses itself in fear and weakness towards bullying characters such as Sasaki

and the little Mistress, and in awe and obedience towards any form of established authority. Corresponding to her timidity, she has a powerful yearning for security, be it as a soldier's wife or as a gentleman's attendant.

Though it seems likely enough that the sixteen-year-old Tomi loves Sasaki in her own way, it is hard to say whether her love is a thought-out commitment or mainly the excitement of a first experience, perhaps coupled with a search for protection. Her attachment to her Mistress is equally obscure to the reader. While her loyalty seems genuine, it also conveniently coincides with her self-interest. At the same time as sacrificing herself, Tomi is able to enjoy a life of ease and security far beyond the scale that Sasaki could have afforded had she married him. When Tomi says that she is 'not in the least unhappy', or when Kimi speaks of the 'happiness she even now possesses', we need not understand these words only in their heroic sense.

Perhaps the most ambiguous trait of all in Tomi's manner, certainly one which deeply affects her attitude to Sasaki, is her love towards the Mistress. Both before the accident and in the days following the meeting in the Ginza, Sasaki repeatedly speaks of Tomi, the Mistress and himself as of three figures in a love triangle. From the start Sasaki and the girl are each intent (in Sasaki's view of events) on commanding Tomi's sole loyalty. And sixteen years later Sasaki feels the instant return of this jealousy as he sees the two women entering a shop dealing exclusively (for him, excludingly) in ladies' articles. From this scene on, Sasaki never mentions the Mistress again unless it be to declare her a hindrance or wish her gone. But it is very difficult to know whether Tomi sees her own position *vis-à-vis* Sasaki and the Mistress in anything like analogous terms. True, Sasaki refers to her as loving the girl 'in a way no other person could possibly conceive of'. But only a moment later he speaks of Tomi's calm manner of 'taking life as it came', specifically contrasting this with his own jealous turmoil of mind. It may be that for Tomi the two kinds of love, the one romantic and passive, the other quasi-maternal and protective, are so distinct in quality that the idea of comparing them never so much as presents itself.

Whatever motives we postulate to explain Tomi's behaviour towards Sasaki and the Mistress, and however we interpret her final decision to place her love or loyalty to the one above her love or loyalty to the other, our understanding of her is bound to be as questionable as Sasaki's. The ultimate reason for this is simple: our understanding of Tomi comes to us from Sasaki's lips. Even Sasaki's picture of the surprisingly strong-willed woman holding firmly to her beliefs comes from the same source, and is as suspect as any other persona of Tomi we care to envisage. All that can be said for certain is that for

reasons best known to herself Tomi is unwilling to see her role in this story the way Sasaki sees it, or to act in accordance with his self-centred principles of what is right and proper.

#### 4. Kimi, the sympathiser.

The reader's natural expectation at the start of Kimi's epilogue is that there should be some kind of judgement, either from a moral or from a pragmatic point of view. But this expectation is not fulfilled. Kimi neither takes the standpoint of Sasaki, whose view is 'just too low', nor does he wholeheartedly endorse the position of Tomi, whose clearcut ideas of morality he does not share. Rather, he voices his admiration for both characters' perseverance in holding firm to their respective principles, even though these are at variance. Not only does Kimi avoid taking sides, but he carefully avoids any consideration at all of the possibility that characters' motives may be different from their uttered words. The relationship between Tomi and the Mistress, so central in Sasaki's presentation of events, is passed over by Kimi in silence. He never so much as mentions the Mistress's existence. We might be tempted to imagine that he omits speaking of her role in the story deliberately, in order to remove an unquantifiable factor and leave the way free for a solution which, if not just, is at least pragmatically satisfactory. However, this is simply not so. Despite his talk of the need to respect others' happiness, the answer Kimi finally comes up with for resolving the case is a totally impracticable one, as he himself immediately recognises:

"But if in spite of it all the woman refuses her consent, it seemed to me that, like it or not, a line had to be drawn. . .

. . . Sasaki, knowing the woman's weak and submissive character inside out, had every reason for being unable to agree."

The function of Kimi's intervention in the narrative, then, cannot be to draw a wise moral or to pass meaningful judgement. His real role operates at an emotional level, in providing an escape from Sasaki's closed mode of thinking, that relentless alternation of compression, explosion and exhaust alluded to earlier. He affords the reader, and Sasaki himself (who has, after all, just appealed to his friend for advice) the privilege of a fresh vision. While the new vision may, objectively speaking, be no less fallible than the old one, it does offer an answer to Sasaki's real problem, which is not his misunderstanding of Tomi but his obsession with himself.

Interestingly enough, Kimi's intervention seen in this light is no more than an extension of the process Sasaki has already initiated by the simple act of having put his story into words. By recounting his case to a third person, Sasaki has already taken a first step away from his previous isolation. Without Kimi's

epilogue, the communication between the two friends would be in one direction only, but the very wording of the end of Sasaki's account shows that a response from Kimi is being solicited:

I hope you won't think too badly of me for talking so egotistically."

We should notice that this final appeal of Sasaki's is less for concrete advice than for sympathy. Kimi's final words, though unhelpful in terms of application, are notable for their expression of human warmth and fellow-feeling:

"So I just did not know what to say."

Far from signifying ultimate despair, both men's words contain a hint that the whole question of marriage with Tomi may be secondary, and that, within Sasaki's strongly emotional sensibility, the rift of alienation from the outside world may already be healing. I am inclined to judge the ending of this story in the light of some words by Sudō Matsuo:

"The same life force which was strong enough to produce his antagonistic relationship towards Nature and his principle of ego-assertion in the height of his youth, quietly supported the writing of the older Shiga during the several decades that followed."<sup>2)</sup>

To me, the unescapable impression of "Sasaki no Baai" is that Sasaki is a man who, though he has not yet found it, is in earnest pursuit of the harmony-in-life of which Sudō is here speaking.

#### 5. The triumph of egotism, and its defeat.

It is not uncommon in Shiga's works to find a situation depicted in dark terms from a protagonist's viewpoint for most of the story, only to be turned inside out and judged from its other, brighter side by another character at the end. The clearest example of this is to be found in "Wakai" ('Reconciliation', 1917). There is a similar movement in "Kōjinbutsu no Fūfu" ('The Good-natured Couple', 1917). And even the much more complex long novel "Anyā Kōro" ('A long Night's Passing', 1921-1937) finally comes to its end in a similar fashion, when after several hundred pages of self-centred striving the hero drops into unconsciousness, leaving his wife to voice the principle of harmony in the most unproblematical of language:

"Whether he lives or not, I shall never leave him."<sup>3)</sup>In Shiga's works before 1917, however, this

type of ending is not to be found. True, a work like "Aru Asa" ('One Morning', written 1908, published 1918) may end in reconciliation. But the ending of strife results from a simple change of mood in the hero himself. The Grandmother remains from start to finish the same sympathetic, reliable and predictable character, and the hero feels none of the forebodings experienced by Junkichi in "Wakai" or the Husband in "Kōjinbutsu no Fūfu". In several of the pre-1917 stories, Shiga actually seems to revel in the idea that solutions are to be found from within, without

reference to the individual or collective expectations of others. This is an idea which greatly preoccupied him in the early Taishō years, as can be seen from several famous entries in his diary :

"I do not wish to look to others for the purpose of obtaining my freedom. But in order to obtain my own freedom I will respect the freedom of others. If I do not respect the freedom of others, my own freedom will be obstructed. Where the two are in contradiction, I will try to crush the freedom of others."

(March 13, 1912.)<sup>4)</sup>

"I have come to believe that few people are as great as I am. I must spend my whole life in mining that in me which is lovable, beautiful and great."

(March 8, 1912.)<sup>5)</sup>

This kind of attitude pervades the long story "Ōtsu Junkichi" (1912).

The story in which egotism is most convincingly extolled as a positive value in itself is generally taken to be "Han no Hanzai" ('Han's Crime', 1913). This story is of especial interest to us here, not only because it was written in the same year as "Sasaki no Baai", but also because in many ways it treats the same themes and exhibits the same attitudes, both in the hero himself and in the sympathetic hearer of his tale. The setting of the story is a lawcourt, where Han is on trial for the murder of his wife. The facts of the killing are clear, but even after the questioning of two witnesses and Han himself it cannot be ascertained whether the act was deliberate or accidental. Not even Han himself can be certain of this. Finally, the Judge, giving up all hope of reaching a verdict based on legal logic, passes his own spontaneous judgement on the basis of his personal impression of Han.<sup>6)</sup> His failure to decide on any reasoned or principled interpretation of the case, and his ultimate recourse to pure human sympathy for the protagonist, cannot but remind us of Kimi's conclusion to "Sasaki no Baai".

"Han no Hanzai" strikes us for its self-containedness, its economy of expression and its fluidity, qualities all somewhat lacking in Sasaki's haphazard progress through sixteen years of life and several tall coincidences. However, the pleasing succinctness of Han's story is at least in part the result of its conceptual narrowness. Han's one desire is to be rid of his wife, whom he sees as an obstruction to his attainment of a 'better, truer kind of existence'. Resentment of her adultery goads him to the same wish. Once his wife is gone, Han's desires are met, and he is in conflict with nobody except the representative of public morality, who, as we have seen, is unrepresentatively broad-minded. Han goes free, physically and spiritually. The principle of egotism seems vindicated. However, to end the story here, without considering the effects of Han's conduct on his later

life, is arbitrary. It is as if Sasaki's tale were to end with the hero passing his medical examination and congratulating himself on having become a soldier. In fact, just as Sasaki's hopes of marrying Tomi have perished on the fire that disfigured the little Mistress, so too, Han's aspirations to a better life have been destroyed (even if he does not realise it) by the same knife that killed his wife. Han's idea of Christianity may be austere and private to the point of heterodoxy, but he cannot fail to know the implications of such injunctions as: "Love thine enemy," and "He who is angry with his brother shall not escape judgement." In the demands made by the New Testament on one who would be perfect in his own strength, there is no significant difference to be drawn between the act of murder and the simple desire of murder. Han, if he considers this, has little reason to be 'happy' in the death of an irksome individual. Even if his own conscience does not trouble him on this point, it is hardly likely that his religious community will welcome him to their sermons with the same enthusiasm as before. Though the narration of the story ends with elation and does not speak of what follows, we may fairly guess that Han is well on the way to becoming an outcast like Sasaki.

## 6. De Profundis Clamavi.

We are often inclined to think of a De Profundis as being a cry of despair. However, as a reading of the psalm will show (Ps. 129 or 130, depending on the translation), this is not really the case. A De Profundis is actually the enactment of an experience of despair by one whose own attitude is one of hope or confidence. In this sense, "Sasaki no Baai" comes close to being a true De Profundis.

In "Sasaki no Baai" there is a definite distancing of the reader from the protagonist's viewpoint, which is not to be found in "Han no Hanzai". This distancing does not only derive from the fact that a critical epilogue has been appended to the hero's tale. More important is the fact that the hero himself finally recognises his own egotism, and appeals for sympathy—that is, a sharing of emotion by another person. Han, in contrast, never doubts or swerves from his initial egotistic outlook.

If we reflect on the implied relationship between Sasaki and Kimi, we will find that their sharing of emotions goes further and deeper than we might think. We saw in our introduction how "Sasaki no Baai" is formally speaking the retelling of Sasaki's tale by Kimi. Up until now we have implicitly assumed that Sasaki's first-person account is an accurate record of words Sasaki actually spoke to Kimi. The colloquial tone of certain passages reinforces such an assumption. For example :

"You were at the Middle School in our old home town in those days, but that's neither here nor

there.”

However, there are other passages which are stylistically far removed from colloquial narrative. One might cite the use of direct speech in the “Sasaki’s a silly pig!” scene referred to earlier. The alternation of colloquial and non-colloquial style seems to suggest that Sasaki’s account is actually a piece of composed writing.

Kimi specifically tells us that he saw the suffering figure of Sasaki in front of him as he heard the tale. If so, there are two possibilities to consider. Either Kimi reformulated Sasaki’s account to produce the text as we have it, or he heard Sasaki reciting what was already a written autobiographically based short story. In the latter case, as Sasaki’s intimate friend, Kimi would surely have taken the trouble to discuss with Sasaki the story’s events and the motives of Tomi and the Mistress. When Kimi tells us he ‘just did not know what to say’, he is strongly implying that Sasaki was asking his advice. Whichever of these possibilities we choose to prefer, it seems evident that close collusion has taken place between Sasaki and Kimi in the creation of the work as we have it. Their views are two facets of a unified and more complex vision.

If so, Sasaki is not the mere prisoner of egotism. Either the ‘Sasaki’ in the story is the result of Kimi’s reformulation, and therefore a fictional entity to be judged from Kimi’s dual viewpoint. Or Sasaki is autonomous but in close communion with Kimi. In either case, a strand of communication exists between the two narrator-figures, whom, very roughly speaking, we may take as the embodiments of self-centredness and fellow-feeling. The basis is already laid for the development of more complex narrator-figures who shall combine both attitudes within one evolving experiential view of life. The first narrator of this type is the hero of “Kinosaki nite” (‘In Kinosaki’, 1917).

The main interest of “Sasaki no Baai” is not its formal excellence. On the contrary, it is rather a ragged story, artistically far inferior to “Han no Hanzai”. But within this raggedness, if we probe beneath the narrative surface, we discover clear signs of one view of life being found wanting, and dim foreshadowings of a new, richer and more complex view emerging.

#### Notes.

- 1) Information about the story’s genesis is taken from “Shiga Naoya Zenshū”, Vol.3, p.640 (Iwanami, 1983).
- 2) Sudō Matsuo, “Shiga Bungaku no Shizen. Seimeiryoku” (See Bibliography.) The quotation is from p. 104.
- 3) “A Long Night’s Passing” (E. McClellan’s translation of “Anyā Kōro”), paperback edition, p. 408. (See Bibliography.)

- 4) Very frequently quoted by critics. See for example Honda Shūgo’s essay “Kami naki Jiga” in which this diary entry is discussed in relation with “Han no Hanzai” (“Bungei Dokuhon, Shiga Naoya”, p. 34. See Bibliography.). My translation.
- 5) Discussed by Francis Mathy in “Shiga Naoya”, p. 26. (See Bibliography.)
- 6) This summary is based on Stephen W. Kohl’s sensitive analysis in “Approaches to the Modern Japanese Short Story”, pp. 289-298. (See Bibliography.) The present essay was largely inspired by Kohl’s analysis. The story has been translated into English by E. G. Seidensticker, and a good summary appears, with comments, in Mathy’s “Shiga Naoya”, pp. 126-130. (See Bibliography.) There are numerous commentaries in Japanese.

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*Francis Mathy.*

“Shiga Naoya”. (Twayne’s World Authors Series, Twayne Publishers Inc., New York, 1974.) As far as I know, the only comprehensive book on Shiga in English. It does not mention “Sasaki no Baai”, however.

*Sudō Matsuo.*

Essay: “Shiga Bungaku no Shizen. Seimeiryoku”, in “Bungei Dokuhon, Shiga Naoya” (Kawade Shobō Shisha, 1976.). Though not mentioning “Sasaki no Baai”, this essay deals heavily with the transition, with underlying continuity, in Shiga’s narrative attitudes in the period just before and after 1917. This essay is shortened from “Shiga Naoya no Bungaku”, (Ofūsha, 1963.).

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*In English.*

“A Dark Night’s Passing” (“Anyā Kōro”), tr. E. McClellan (Kōdansha, 1976.).

“Han’s Crime” (“Han no Hanzai”), tr. E. G. Seidensticker in “Modern Japanese Literature” (Ed. Donald Keene, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1960.).  
 “In Kinosaki” (“Kinosaki nite”), tr. E. G. Seidensticker in “Modern Japanese Literature” (See above.).  
 “The Bonfire” (“Takibi”), tr. Dennis Keene in Japan Quarterly, vol. 22, (Asahi Shinbunsha, 1975.).

“Seibei’s Gourds” (“Seibei to Hyōtan”), tr. I. Morris in “Modern Japanese Shōro Stories” (Ed. I. Morris, Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1962.).

"*Reconciliation*" ("Wakai"): no English translation, but a good summary and discussion in Mathy's "Shiga Naoya" pp. 58-67 (See above.).

#### The Case of Sasaki (Sasaki no Baai).

Dedicated to the memory of Natsume Sōseki.

I wonder whether you can remember the time in my student days when I was working for my keep at the Yamadas' house? You were at the Middle School in our old home town in those days, but that's neither here nor there. It all happened at the time I was the Yamadas' doorboy while preparing for the entrance exam to the Military Academy. I had a romance with the maid who looked after the Yamadas' little daughter. The maid was about three years younger than me. I suppose she must have been sixteen. At that time she wasn't very big for her age, but she had a nice figure, and though her face was ordinary enough, she was the sort of girl who might attract a man. It was my first experience as well as hers, so I was fairly excitable, but anyway, as she was a timid girl and always far too afraid of other people, I often got angry. Many nights she stood me up, and I was left waiting in the storeroom with its smell of pickled vegetables. It was a shabby setting for a rendez-vous, but we were just a nursemaid and a doorboy, and beggars can't be choosers. It wasn't as if she had any specially good points about her, either. But she was utterly submissive. That may be a good point of sorts, but on the negative side it could also turn out as a complete lack of courage, and that's why I used to get so furiously angry with her.

Two months or so went by without mishap. I daresay some of the maids got wind of things just a little, but anyway time passed and nothing happened. About that time at the house they were just building a separate set of rooms for Mr Yamada's mother to retire into, so every day there were seven or eight builders and suchlike in the grounds. And every evening when they finished work they'd got into the habit of making a bonfire out of plane-shavings and odd chips of wood, and stopping around it to have a quick smoke. There was one funny old fellow there who used to mix the daub for the plasterers, and he would often become the focus of all the talk, keeping everyone amused with stories of what the geisha quarters of Yoshiwara and Nezu were like when he was young. Much as I used to take myself to task for being interested in such tales, the fact is that in those days I didn't know anything about places of that sort and my curiosity was thoroughly aroused. Sometimes, almost without meaning to, I would join in the group gathered around the fire. And when they all went home, I would occasionally get the job of dowsing it. I would stay on there beside it until after they'd gone, and then put it out.

One evening I was in the group by the bonfire when Tomi came and called me. She told me to go

immediately to Tsukiji on an errand for Mr Yamada. I got up at once from where I had been crouching. Tomi started along with me.

"Don't you go running right off like that!" the old plasterer's mate shouted out. "Your little sweetheart here's going to cry!"

And they all burst out laughing. Tomi overtook me and went dashing off ahead, blushing to the ears. I felt as if I'd been insulted, too. And for some reason I felt angry with Tomi. That evening I lost my temper at her, but as I hardly knew myself what it was I was so angry about, Tomi couldn't understand the point of my rage either, and stood there with a peculiar expression. Yet the mere fact that I was angry with her put her into a helpless state of worry.

The nursemaid's name was Tomi. After such an incident she would never approach again while everyone was there, but when they had all gone home she sometimes came by with the little Mistress. The child would have been about five, perhaps. She had a terrible squint, and her face was thin and strangely pointed. Her whole personality was ugly and perverse, as well. She was quite a repulsive little girl. I didn't like children at the best of times, but I disliked this one particularly. And she liked me no better. Even more than disliking me, she had a strange fear of me. I certainly never said anything friendly to her, and what's more, it's a fact that when I was reading a book or something and she came into the room I used to glare at her and make a frightening face. But the odd thing was, I couldn't escape the feeling that, though only a child, the little Mistress knew about the goings-on between Tomi and myself. I sometimes thought I was imagining it all, but there were many incidents to suggest I wasn't. At any rate, she absolutely detested to see Tomi and me meeting. As for Tomi, though the girl was such a brat, she loved her in a way no other person could possibly conceive of. And the little girl, too, for all her spoiledness and bullying, was deeply attached to Tomi. Their relationship seemed quite extraordinary. I often had to listen while Tomi, through her tears, complained about how the little girl wouldn't do as she was told. And there were two or three times when she said it was all more than she could cope with and asked my advice about giving in her notice. On occasions like these I generally agreed with her, but no sooner had a little time passed than Tomi would be walking around with the air of having completely forgotten about it. For me, watching the pair of them together went so thoroughly against the grain that I couldn't stand it. On top of that, the little girl was jealous of my relationship with Tomi even though she didn't properly understand what it was all about, and as something similar was at work in me too, I must admit to disliking her more than any mere outward impression of her would warrant. I often had the feeling that the little Mistress was going to dog our

romance like some kind of a curse. Though only a child, she frequently got in our way quite deliberately. For all that, however, there were certainly plenty of other times when her hindering us was by pure chance and completely unintended. Somehow it all gave me an uncanny feeling.

The best time for our meetings was after the family had their baths, when there wasn't enough hot water left to go round and the fire had to be relit. It was generally Tomi who got that job, and also it was about then that the little girl usually went off to sleep. We often took advantage of this moment. But strange to say, the child, who should have been asleep at that time, would suddenly wake up and start crying. "Tomi! Tomi!" we would hear Mrs Yamada calling. "Tomi!" the other maids would join in.

It sickened me every time I heard it. Tomi didn't appear to make so much of it, but for me the unescapable impression was that something was causing this deliberately. Tomi would always go off in fear, but without showing the slightest sign of regret at abandoning me. Then I would feel annoyed with Tomi too.

It really worried me to see what a scared mouse Tomi was. Not only that, but it dismayed me that she should be so engrossed in the thought that what we were doing was utterly wicked. I don't know how many times I told her that our relationship was not just one of those 'mischievous liaisons' and that once I got my commission as a second or first lieutenant I would marry her in all due form and without fail. Tomi in her turn was exceedingly glad to be told this, but still she couldn't get away from the idea that we were doing something bad. She was simply a girl tied to old-fashioned ways, an ordinary silly girl. But to me she was none the worse for being that. I can't say what it was, but there was something about her I couldn't help being in love with. I was almost invariably getting angry with her, but never for a single moment did I ever hate her. And although she was always being shouted at, Tomi would never think of bearing me a grievance. Her one germ of anxiety, though she didn't speak of it, seems to have been the poor view I took of the little Mistress. However, by and large, Tomi used to take life as it came. In contrast, my own mind was constantly in a turmoil. This was mostly the result of jealousy, but thinking back over it, it all seems very petty. I was jealous of Mr Yamada himself, and even experienced the same unpleasant feelings about a fifty-year-old rickshawman who was there. I shan't list the examples one by one, because that would be petty, too. But even if I choose not to mention all the insignificant episodes, each and every one of them affected me. In reality the sensation might be faint enough, but it was there. I couldn't help it and I couldn't change it. Next I started to grow very sensitive about the jobs Mr and Mrs Yamada used to give Tomi to do. I took offence

at many tasks they gave her which I thought should have been given to the other girls. When it came to my own jobs I could be fairly broad-minded, but in Tomi's case it was different. Still, seeing how I wouldn't have cared if it had been some other maid, I had to admit that this too was my own purely personal feeling.

One evening when New Year was almost upon us, I was left alone by the bonfire looking through a book of exam questions after the builders' fireside gathering had broken up. Just then Tomi came by with the little Mistress. Something had been annoying me, and suddenly I said:

"You scared little mouse."

I said it in a tone that was neither exactly teasing nor angry. Tomi seemed to think she was in for a bout of my anger again, and a slightly anxious expression started to appear on her face, but as if doing her best to make a joke out of it, she gave me a fawning look and replied:

"You big brave mouse."

"You bloody fool!"

"You clever man."

The girl had been clinging to Tomi's skirts, silently gazing up at the two of us and scrutinising each of our faces in turn. Now, quite unexpectedly, she blurted out:

"Sasaki's a silly pig! Sasaki's a silly pig!"

It was as if she was swearing at me with all the malice her heart could muster.

"Miss! We don't say things like that!"

As Tomi reproved her, I just stood there with a sour face.

It occurred to me that the shutters in the parlour had been left open because of a visitor and that I had to go and close them. But before doing that, the strong urge had seized me to try and give Tomi a good hard kiss. You might have said that kisses were the main ingredient of our romance. We neither of us had much free time to sit about and talk. In what little time we did have it was really only through kissing that we showed each other our affection. But my kisses were intense and violent. We would stand there and I would squeeze her in my arms as if to enfold her. Poor little Tomi would frequently gasp and groan.

Picking up a dropped nail, I said:

"Just read this a bit, will you?"

"What? . . . Just a moment, Miss."

Tomi got the girl to stop clinging to her and to stand up properly, then came over to where I was.

"Can you see?" And I wrote on the ground:

JOB TO DO.

As soon as she saw it Tomi nodded. She was laughing a little.

"Afterwards," I said. And I wrote again:

COME QUICK.

But Tomi just went on laughing, she didn't nod. I



wrote :

**BLOODY FOOL.**

Then I stared hard at her. Tomi looked embarrassed, and said with her eyes that we couldn't because the little girl was there. At times like these I have a bad habit : I am completely incapable of going back on my ideas. I made an angry face, rubbed out the last words I had written, then got up in silence and went. My anger was genuine enough, in fact. But I also knew that if I acted this way, weak-willed Tomi had no choice but to come.

I went to the mouldy-smelling storeroom and waited. Next moment, just as I had expected, Tomi showed up looking worried. In a small voice that sounded like pleading, she said .

"Only just a kiss."

"Of course."

Her dutiful manner irritated me, so when Tomi stretched up to me and jutted out her chin in an attempt to kiss, I purposely raised my head too, so that she couldn't reach, and then squeezed her to me hard. Tomi was in pain.

A maid's scream rang out. We both dashed out of the storeroom in alarm. The little girl had fallen. . . and the fire was just ashes by now but there she was lying on her back in it. I took her up in my arms at once, but she was already unconscious. Was it singed hair or burnt flesh that made the strange smell? Lying overturned beside her was a rickety makeshift chair the builders had made. Presumably she had climbed onto it and then fallen and landed on her back. She must have hit her head when she came down and given herself concussion. Otherwise even the smallest child would surely at least have crawled out of the fire before things came to this state. Anyway, the shoulder of the little padded coat was burnt right through. The cotton smoked and smouldered away and refused to stop burning. I tried rubbing it, but it wouldn't go out, so I whipped the coat off instead. But by this time the back of her shoulder had already suffered quite atrocious injury. Her head, at least, had fortunately come to rest at the fire's edge, so the burns there weren't so serious, but even so the back of the neck was all blistered at the top, and apparently even afterwards no hair would ever grow there. She remained unconscious for some time, but even after she came round, for two or three days it was all touch and go. Fortunately, in the event she didn't die. Just try and imagine the uproar in the household.

At any rate, we were beside ourselves. My own mind reeled atrociously. My long-dating dislike of the child only added to the queerness of my anguish. I felt I had done her a most terrible wrong. But even that thought was not enough to release any flood of affection for her in my heart. To be aware of this was utterly sickening. I felt I couldn't go on in such a way. Apart from anything else, the entire blame for

everything had fallen on Tomi. As for Tomi's worrying, it was awful. She seemed to go half mad. She ate next to nothing. Knowing what a nervous creature she was, I was assailed with the worry that she might even resort to suicide. But my opportunities for speaking with her ceased. Or even if one arose, by now Tomi had become totally indifferent to me, as if I no longer existed in her world. Even if by some good fate she didn't kill herself, I was afraid she might really go mad. I wanted to go before Mr Yamada and confess everything. But considering how it would only double Tomi's suffering, I couldn't bring myself to do that, either.

Apparently the doctor had said that if the injury were left as it were there wasn't the slightest chance of the flesh healing. The only method of treatment would be to cut some flesh from another person to replace what had been lost. When I heard this, I thought of offering to let them take the graft from me. I felt this was what I had to do. But to be honest, it was only the pressure I was under that made me think this way, and my feelings were not such as to make me really want to step forward. From what I heard, the flesh was to be taken from the buttock. And probably a scar would be left in the form of a hollow. If so. . . and I'm ashamed to admit it, but quite suddenly, from deep within me, an egotistic aspect of the matter caused me to open my eyes. Up until now I had been absorbed in the event itself, but this new view of things seemed to lead me on to the edge of some vast wilderness. I felt I could see the incident as a mere part of something much larger. I didn't know whether this was right or wrong of me, but I thought about how I was just then preparing to take my exams for the Military Academy. If the hollow scar made no difference to the outcome of my medical examination, there was nothing at all frightful about the idea. But the thought of changing my career plans all because of this accident certainly did frighten me. I don't feel the same way now. But at the time I had the tenacity of a nineteen-year-old approaching his ambition, and I was totally unable to rise above it.

Then Tomi offered to do it. She specially requested they give her permission to. I breathed a sigh of relief. I thought myself an underhand rogue. But I also thought it was the best thing for Tomi herself. Unless she did this her weak and honest nature would surely never allow her to set her heart even temporarily at rest. It seems Mr Yamada's first thought had been to get rid of Tomi on the spot, but as he couldn't very well send her off home to Ishikawa Prefecture without giving prior notice, he had written to inform her family and was just now awaiting the reply. However, the genuine agony Tomi was going through was evident to everyone who saw her, and once they had got over their initial spell of anger even Mr and Mrs Yamada, though they didn't speak of it to each other in so many words, found their hearts softening

towards her a good deal. Naturally, that doesn't mean to say that they wished to go on employing her as before, but about then when the need for a donor came up it seems that Mrs Yamada said something to the effect that 'of course, the graft should be taken from Tomi'. Mr Yamada apparently opposed this, saying that such things couldn't be done. And the whole question seems to have been left up to the doctor. That was the moment when Tomi came forward with her request. It was quite clear that what she said came from her heart. As a result, Mr Yamada's attitude considerably softened.

Perhaps you remember how I returned home so unexpectedly from Tokyo. Though I concealed the fact, I was actually running away. I simply couldn't go on staying there as if nothing was biting me. Tomi by then was in the depths of remorse. From now on she ceased talking to me altogether. In Tomi's mind, her affair with me had been the whole source of the disaster. Even before the accident she had been having her pangs of conscience, so it was inevitable that she should be so firmly convinced now. I honestly had no intention of shirking my responsibilities. And I was sorry for the little Mistress. But even stronger than all this was my desire to fulfil my obligations towards Tomi. I was determined to honour my vows to her sooner or later. I wanted to tell Tomi that and then leave. But in the end I never had the chance to. Stung by her heartfelt remorse, Tomi was bent on not providing me with the chance. Two days, I suppose it was, after she went into hospital for the operation, I finally ran away from the Yamada household. My leaving certainly left everything in an unpleasant mess. But to stay on there as if nothing were amiss was simply more than I could do.

None of what followed needs telling in detail. That part that concerns me is only what you already know. (As a captain, Sasaki was attached to the Embassy in Russia, stayed over there some seven or eight years and returned just recently.) But during all that time I never forgot Tomi. Even if perhaps I wasn't all that insistently thinking of her, I never forgot her. Frequently I had suggestions made to me about possible marriages, but again it was because of Tomi that I turned them all down. During my time in Japan I never had a single chance to see her, but I kept informed about her all the same. Tomi was the kind of person nobody could resist loving, but after the operation even Mr and Mrs Yamada took her to their hearts and finally she settled in with the family permanently, still in her old job of looking after their daughter.

Now my story suddenly jumps to recent events, something that happened a week ago, in fact. I happened to catch sight of Tomi out walking with the young Miss Yamada in the Ginza. It seemed a bit extraordinary that returning to Japan after seven years abroad I should so suddenly bump into the very

person I had failed to see even once during my years in Japan. We had changed, and of course she had forgotten me. But I noticed it was her because of the young Mistress. The young Mistress was twenty or twenty-one, I suppose, by now. She still retained her childhood features, but it was the burn-mark running up from the back of her neck across to her cheek which really jogged my memory, and in the same instant I also recognised Tomi. Tomi was utterly changed. She used to be a small girl, but now she was a taller than average woman. I expect you know the wrestler Hitachiyama's wife, the one who died? Well, the impression you'd have got of Tomi's person, while not the same, would have been along those lines. She's thirty-two or thirty-three now. There was something very young and fresh-looking about her, on account of not having had children, I suppose, and she had the noticeable serenity of a person enjoying a secure life. Up until then my sense of having an obligation to discharge had always tended to be my main reason for not forgetting her, but on seeing her now I felt the rush of a fresh passion. Rather than going about things deviously, at any rate, I strongly felt the desire to meet her face to face. The two of them went into a shop dealing exclusively in imported articles for ladies. I stood a little way off waiting for them to come out, but wait as I would, they never left the shop. If it had been Tomi on her own I might have been able to go on waiting there indefinitely. But the girl's being with her cast a shadow on my heart. I felt a strange dread of the young Mistress. I decided I would ring Tomi later and talk to her on the telephone.

That evening I tried ringing the Yamadas' number. Tomi answered. To me she sounded like a completely different person. Earlier that day she had looked so young, so fresh, but now I had the impression of a considerably aged woman. I hadn't clearly stated my name when she answered, so it may have been partly that she was ill at ease about not being able to ascertain the caller's identity. She said everything in an unpleasantly staccatoed voice.

"It's me, Sasaki," I said. "It's been sixteen years since I left."

She seemed very surprised. To Tomi my name could hardly have spelt anything but misfortune. She made no reply at all. I said I was dying to meet her just once to have a chat. She still said nothing. Then I stopped talking too. For a while both of us said nothing. Then, quite unexpectedly, she said:

"Where would be a convenient place to meet?"

She spoke in an utterly lacklustre tone of voice.

"Anywhere would do. But my hotel would be a good place, if you can manage to get here. How about tomorrow?"

She seemed to spend a moment thinking it over, but then she said:

"I'll be there if possible."

I told her the hotel's name and we fixed a time, then I rang off.

The complete absence of tenderness in her voice dampened my spirits to such an extent that my mind went slightly blank. Up until now I had somehow or other felt that my lot in life was a fortunate one. I mean in the conventional sense, of course. And I had thought of Tomi's life, seen from a woman's point of view, as being unhappy. Therefore this whole idea of meeting to discuss everything had been to my mind an attempt by one fortunate being to come to the aid of another less fortunate than himself. That was more or less how I saw it. But the impression I got from our talk now was quite the other way round. I appeared in my own eyes as somebody using a past love affair as an excuse for disrupting another person's perfectly happy existence.

The next day I was waiting for her, but in the end she stood me up. There was no phone call, either. That evening I rang up again, but was told that she wasn't at home because she had gone to see a play with the young Mistress. It didn't appear to be a lie.

There was still no word from her the day after. Thinking there was nothing to be gained by this direct approach, I didn't even phone again. Then, the next morning, a letter came.

Sure enough, the gist of what it said was that she had made up her mind not to see me. Her frame of heart now, she said, was like a nun's. She would inwardly reproach herself if she were to have meetings with me for no good reason at a time when Miss Yamada still had no marriage prospects and was feeling lonely. If my business could be settled by letter, would I be so kind as to write to her, using the envelopes provided. Enclosed were two envelopes bearing women's names. She had evidently written them herself. It was cheering to see that she hadn't only enclosed one. Finally, in the postscript, she asked me not to telephone any more.

"Still the same little scared mouse," I thought.

I was busy during the day, so it was evening when I sat down to writing a long letter. About two days later the answer arrived. Then I wrote again.

What it boiled down to was that Tomi most deeply regretted the romance she had had with me. She couldn't get away from the thought that we had ruined the young Mistress's future. Come what might, she was resolved never again to start an affair with a man. She had sworn as much to Mr and Mrs Yamada, to Mr Yamada's old mother and to the young Mistress, and especially now that only Mrs Yamada and the daughter were left alive, how could she ever forgive herself in her own heart if, after the exceptional kindness they had shown her for so many years and the way they had relieved her of all further need to worry about her livelihood, she were ever to do such a thing? And in fact, how could the world at large ever forgive her? Though I felt so sorry for her,

she said, she wasn't now in the least unhappy, except inasmuch as she viewed the young Mistress's lack of good marriage prospects as her own personal misfortune. To tell the truth, she had also felt unhappy that time I had run away and left her. It had embittered her to think that for all my fine words I should be such a shallow-hearted young man. But she was now delighted to have learnt from my letter how things had turned out since my going away. She now felt satisfaction. For herself, as she was in any case no longer a physically unimpaired woman she had no prospective husbands in view, nor indeed did she wish to marry. It was therefore her intention to spend the rest of her life serving at Miss Yamada's side. She urged me to forget her, find myself a good wife with all speed, and build a happy home. If I really wanted to console her, that was the way to do it.

Those were the kind of things she said. Everything eminently reasonable. All so cut-and-dried and reasonable as to get on my nerves like a sore tooth. If only I could meet her, I felt something would come of it, But in a letter, dashing down all the thoughts in my head would only frighten her the more. So it couldn't be written that way, either. What on earth should I do, in fact? Don't you see how it gets on one's nerves? Writing a second time would leave no more envelopes, so I must leave things as they were. But in that case, any kind of letter would now be useless.

I wrote and tried asking how she would feel about it if and when a good marriage was arranged for Miss Yamada. But she hasn't answered. Apart from anything else, who knows whether Miss Yamada will ever be able to marry? Though it's concealed under her hair, they say she has quite a hideous bald area at the back of her head, so her chances may well be nil. Perhaps I will to the end be labouring under the Mistress's curse. I hope you won't think too badly of me for talking so egotistically.

\* \* \*

Sasaki seems to be thinking that what forms the present block in this woman's mind is her cut-and-dried sense of morality and sacrifice: if this could be taken away the problem would be solved. As Sasaki himself appears to attach no such very great worth to notions of morality and sacrifice, I found it slightly difficult to sympathise with him, sorry as I feel for his plight. It isn't that I set such great store by such things myself, either. Only, I did feel Sasaki was taking just too low a view. And then, even if she was acting from negative motives, I was also favourably impressed by the woman's strength in holding so firmly to what she believed in. Sasaki also has something of a tendency to boast of his own present position. By no means without justification. Yet I do not consider that it would inevitably add to the woman's happiness if she were to become Sasaki's wife. Certainly, as Sasaki himself believes, he might very well provide her with one sort of happiness. But

then it is equally certain that the woman would have to discard another sort of happiness which she even now possesses. What is more, one feels Sasaki really does not comprehend what this present happiness of hers is all about.

I just did not know what to say. Looking at Sasaki's suffering figure in front of me, I pitied him too. Sasaki is definitely an egotist. But he is by no means an unpleasant egotist. In his efforts to bear the responsibility for his actions, he has stayed single up to an age when you might expect an ordinary man to have three or four children. Never forgetting the past, he has been trying to pour forth all the love that is in his heart. This does not strike one as bad. But if in spite of it all the woman refuses her consent, it seemed

to me that, like it or not, a line had to be drawn. But how could I answer like that, either? Or if I did, Sasaki, knowing the woman's weak and submissive character inside out, had every reason for being unable to agree. Besides, he has within him a strength of passion such as a person like me will never experience. So I just did not know what to say.

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