

The Letters S, H, and I, in Ranpo's *Monogram* for Shigemi

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I recently ran across a curious dictionary of nothing but one-letter words. The author of *One-Letter Words: A Dictionary* spent fifteen years compiling 275 pages of definitions of words consisting of only one letter.¹⁾ This is the dictionary, as one reviewer put it, for “anyone who has forgotten that Z was the Roman letter for 2000.”²⁾ It also reminds us that “X” has no fewer than seventy meanings in addition to “10,” including everything from “wrong” (“batsu” in Japanese as well) to the place where one’s signature on a ballot should go, to a rating for an adult movie, a power of magnification and, of course, the symbol for a kiss.

I discovered this little alphabetical chrestomathy because its author, Craig Conley, cites as his inspiration a story by a detective novelist that I have written about and translated. “It’s hard to pinpoint exactly when I first got the idea to write a dictionary of one-letter words,” Conley writes. But “I remember once hearing about a bizarre Japanese crime novel from 1929, *The Devil’s Apprentice* by Shiro Hamao, and how the entire work consisted of a single letter.³⁾ The single letter was obviously a written correspondence, but I initially envisioned a single letter of the alphabet. And I marveled at how bizarre indeed it would be to write a detective story that all boiled down to a solitary letter of the alphabet!”⁴⁾

Hamao’s story is indeed taken up by a single letter. It is written by a man in jail for murder, and addressed to his former lover, who is also the prosecutor trying his case, and whom the alleged murderer blames for leading him astray into homosexuality and other crimes. Conley’s productive misinterpretation of the story as a novel consisting of a “single letter” (一つとの文字) rather than “a single letter” (一通の手紙) is a great example of what can be gained, rather than lost, in translation. The misunderstanding, based on single scrap of text without context, opens his mind to the signifying capacity of single letters and leads him to produce his dictionary of one-letter words, like some queer companion volume to George Perec’s *La Disparition*, a detective novel that was famously written without ever using the letter “e.”⁵⁾

Might it be possible to tease a narrative out of just one letter? A single “character” one would have—a protagonist perhaps. If not a majuscule, a miniscule character, one who could at least play a minor supporting role in a drama to which our imagination might supply the rest. Conley continues, “I imagined some sort of gritty retelling of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*, where a bloody letter A serves as the only scrap of evidence to unravel a seedy tale of adultery, heartbreak, and murder.” If Craig Conley could come up with thousands of

meanings for the 26 letters of the alphabet, who's to say how many stories might not be condensed into any one of those letters?

It was with such silly thoughts in my mind that I happened across a story by Hamao Shirō's good friend Edogawa Ranpo. The story is titled "Monogram" (モノグラム) and Ranpo wrote it in 1926. As the title suggests, "Monogram" is a story about letters in their singularity. And although the story is written using many more than one letter, a close reading of Ranpo's text shows that it has quite a lot to say about how one might, or might not, spin a tale out of "a single letter."

I'm a big fan of close reading. This is because I am poorly read, which requires me to make the most of the things I do read, particularly when they are written in Japanese. I am especially attracted to close reading in what D.A. Miller has called its "humbled, futile, minoritized state." As Miller writes, it is only in an age such as ours when "close reading has lost its respectability ...that it can come out as a thing that, even under the high-minded (but now somewhat kitschy-sounding) rationales of its former mission, it had always been: an almost infantile desire to be *close*, period, as close as one can get, without literal plagiarism, to merging with the mother text. (In an essay once, "Miller continues parenthetically," citing the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, I left out the quotation marks.)" ⁶⁾

Ranpo's "Monogram" may be written using many more than one letter, but it is still an extremely short story. Like his namesake Edgar Allan Poe, Ranpo preferred the short story form to the novel. This was perhaps because, as Poe himself noted in a review of a volume of tales by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the shorter form allows for a greater hold on the reader, who can read it in a single, riveting sitting. With a novel, by contrast, "worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book." ⁷⁾ The characterological complexity that is so indispensable to the prolix novelist are also anathema to the strict economy of Ranpo's stories, where characters are rendered with a few deft strokes of the pen. This is especially true of this particular short story, perhaps his shortest.

Like many of Ranpo's stories, "Monogram" is a framed narrative. We are initially introduced by an anonymous "I" to a certain Kurihara Ichizō, who works as a security guard at the factory where the narrator works. This Kurihara-san, who is "this side of fifty" and yet seems older than his years, is a good story-teller (*hanashi-jōzu*) —a kind of lay novelist. On an evening not long after the narrator and Kurihara have become friends the two men find themselves sitting around the stove in the guard house—a prototypical setting for storytelling if there ever was one. Kurihara lets loose with a story that "he seemed to have been waiting for a chance to tell." After warning the reader that the story in question seemed "not without the traces of embellishment," the narrator tells us that he will try to relate it in writing "borrowing the

manner of speaking of Kurihara-san.” No sooner does he signal this shift into Kurihara-san’s narrative than the text switches to the latter’s voice. There are no quotation marks to denote the shift. Only the trace of orality evident in the first line of Kurihara’s story. “Ahh. It’s just a little joke of a story you know. I mean, I don’t want to spoil it for you, but just think of it as an ordinary, uhh, a silly little love story.”⁸⁾

This framing situation, in which a scene of intimacy between two men yields to the narration of a heterosexual love story, is soon repeated in the content of the story itself. Kurihara begins his story by describing his meeting with another man, in Asakusa Park. When he was still in his thirties, he tells the narrator, he often went to this park both to relieve the boredom brought on by chronic unemployment and to get away from the cramped quarters where he lived with his “hysterical wife.” (More on her later...)

“One day I was sitting on one of those benches, lost in my own thoughts as usual. Spring had just arrived and the cherry blossoms were gone but the movie theater on the other side of the pond was crawling with people. You could hear the music of a band playing mixed in with the sound of those flutes people blow bubbles with and the shrill cries of an ice-cream vendor. But where we were in the forest it was all quiet, like another world. The men that hung out there were a sorry-looking lot. None of them could afford to see a movie so they just kept sitting there in the same spots exchanging hungry, sad looks.”⁹⁾

The scene described by Kurihara here is evocative of the distinctive temporality and atmosphere of gay male cruising. As Hamao Shiro wrote in an article published in 1930, Asakusa Park was indeed a popular cruising ground for gay men (or “Urnings” to use the term popular at the time) through the Taisho and early Show periods.¹⁰⁾ Before long, a young man of about thirty comes on the scene and sits down on a bench next to Kurihara. He lights a cigarette and soon Kurihara realizes he is being stared at. Time seems to stop for the two of them. “The noise of Asakusa Park was all around us but we sat there for a long while enveloped in a strange silence. I kept thinking that he was about to say something.”

And indeed he does say something.

“Haven’t we met before?”

At first Kurihara says that the man must be mistaken. Kurihara has no recollection of ever having met him before. But the “handsome young man” with whom it is “not at all unpleasant to talk” and whose name we learn is Tanaka Saburō (三良), continues to insist that they have indeed met before. He is so convinced of this that eventually Kurihara begins to think it might be so. There is something familiar about this young man, particularly when he smiles. In an attempt to figure out how they know each other, the two of them list all the places they have lived in the past few years. The young man has only recently moved to Tokyo and the memory

seems older than that, so it can't have been in Tokyo that they met. They discover that they both lived in Osaka for a while but never overlapped. But while they fail on this occasion to figure out where they met, they do become friends. They go for a meal together and exchange addresses with the promise to meet again another day.

A few days later, Kurihara visits Tanaka at his lodgings and we finally learn what the connection was. Tanaka has remembered how he knew Kurihara's face. He takes out a pocket mirror enclosed in a small bag and removes the glass of the mirror. Behind it is pasted a photograph of none other than Kurihara in his early twenties. The pocket mirror, it turns out, belonged to Tanaka's older sister who has long since died. Tanaka has kept the mirror as a keepsake of his sister. He tells Kurihara that when he discovered the picture behind the mirror he assumed that it was someone whom his sister had loved. He had gazed upon this photograph so often, imagining his sister's secret love, that he recognized Kurihara himself when he saw him in the park. Kurihara, for his part, is stunned to find that the boy's sister was one Tanaka Sumiko, an old crush who, he imagined, had had no interest in him. The family resemblance between Tanaka and his sister thus explains the *déjà vu* that Kurihara experienced when they met.

Had the photograph secreted behind the mirror been the only evidence that Sumiko had loved him too, Kurihara might have been reluctant to believe it. But this is not the only evidence. The bag containing the mirror is embroidered by hand with the initial "S" entwined around the letter "I." Kurihara's first name being "Ichizō" there seems to be no room left for doubt. Sumiko had pined for Kurihara Ichizō just as he had longed for her. But tragically, before either knew the other's feeling, Sumiko had gone to her grave. And now the two men are left alone, with no woman left between them.

At this point in the story, I couldn't help thinking of how Prince Genji, when he was frustrated in his attempts to seduce the proud Utsusemi, famously "made due" with her younger brother, whom he had employed as a messenger. Somehow the story seemed headed in that direction. But such was not to be the case.

In fact the onomastic fun had only just begun. Soon Kurihara is fantasizing about making a pilgrimage to where Sumiko is buried in the little town in Mie Prefecture where she was from. That's 三重 or "Three Again"... "san wo kasaneru," an echo of the homosocial triangles that proliferate across this text. The structure is evident again in the sentence where Kurihara describes this wish. "I wanted to go and leave some flowers and burn incense in front of the grave stone *on which Tanaka had told me* her sweet posthumous name was inscribed." Kurihara is unable to make the trip because his financial circumstances won't permit it. Instead he is stuck at home with his wife, who has only one characteristic in this novel: the aforementioned "hysteria." The more he thinks about the lost opportunity with Sumiko, the more he grows to dislike his wife.

One day he comes home to find that his wife has discovered the pocket mirror along with a

photograph of Sumiko. When he sees her sitting at his broken-down desk staring fixedly at these two items, he braces himself for what he imagines will be “four or five days of caring for the hysterical convulsions that are sure to result” from her jealous rage. But to his surprise, she is not in the least upset. “Where did you find this mirror?” she asks. “Did you dig it out of my trunk? I thought I lost it ages ago.”

The pocket mirror, we learn, had once belonged to Kurihara’s wife, whose name is Sonoko. It was she, not Sumiko, who embroidered the “S” around the “I” on the bag, and she who hid the photo of Kurihara behind the mirror. The “monogram” consists of “the ‘I’ for Ichizo and the ‘S’ for Sonoko. “I made this before you and I got married as a charm to make sure our love would last. But I thought it was stolen on a school trip to Nikko.” When Kurihara tells her he got the mirror from Sumiko’s younger brother, yet another mystery is solved. “Well Sumiko must have stolen it. You probably didn’t know it but everyone in our class knew that she had a problem with sticky fingers.” So Sumiko had never even known that the mirror contained Kurihara’s photograph. For Sumiko, the mirror would have related only to Sonoko.

As Ranpo surely knew, kleptomania was widely considered at the time to result from hysteria. As Wilhelm Stekel famously put it,

“The root of all of these cases of kleptomania is ungratified sexual instinct. These women fight against temptation. They are engaged in a constant struggle with their desires. They would like to do what is forbidden, but they lack the strength. Theft to them is a symbolic act. The essential point is that they do something that is forbidden, *touch* something that does not belong to them.”¹¹⁾

It is not just Sonoko, then, but the kleptomaniac Sumiko too, who was hysterical. Sumiko wants to touch something that doesn’t belong to her—perhaps Sonoko herself, but instead she steals her mirror. Ichizō, for his part, desires Saburō, a “handsome young man” with whom it is “not at all unpleasant to talk.” But he makes due by telling him a story about Sonoko. In this way, the twin displacements characteristic of female hysteria and male homosociality underpin the narrative of “Monogram.” And all of this is mediated through a series of single Roman letters and kanji. “S” and “I” superimposed like a dollar sign, and the numbers 一 and 三 in the men’s names. While “Monogram” is not, after all, a detective story “written in one letter” like that initially imagined by the author of the dictionary of one-letter words, it is just about as close to such a story as one could come.

But what was it that might have driven Ranpo to write such a story? In a fascinating book on what she calls the “Economy of Character,” Deirdre Lynch describes a conception of human character to be found in the 18th-century British novel that was based on tell-tale outward signs such as birthmarks, moles, noses, or initials. These reflected, in Lynch’s view, the culture’s fascination with the newly invented wonders of typography.¹²⁾ By the end of that century, with the rise of the novel, this notion of character as “type,” went “down market” as novelists like

Jane Austen strove to get readers to look beyond the typographical characters on the page, to see deep within the *minds* of the characters that peopled her novels. For Lynch and many other scholars of the novel, this marked the birth of personhood, the emergence of the human. While this process felt liberating for some, it was oppressive for others, to whom the fullness of “humanity” was denied. As D.A. Miller argues in the book I quoted earlier, it was oppressive not least for Jane Austen herself. As a frustrated “old maid” in real life, someone like her could appear only as a figure of fun in her own marriage-obsessed novels. She took refuge therefore in an omniscient and invisible narratorial voice located fully outside the text, transforming herself into a creature of letters rather than flesh, an impersonal “Style” impervious to injury. In Miller’s reading of Austen’s last unfinished novel *Sanditon*, a novel about hypochondria written when its author was actually ill and dying, he traces the dissolution of Austen’s “Style.” Ever watchful to avoid the infelicity of repetition, in *Sanditon* the sick Author finds herself writing too many words beginning with the letter “H.” Miller’s reading is so close that it cannot be paraphrased so forgive the lengthy quote.

What Barthes calls “the goddess H” beckons with the pleasure potential of homosexuality and hashish; no less euphoric, Austen’s aspirate presides over the hale, the healing and the whole—or would, that is, if the unfortunate phrase ‘our health-breathing Hill’ did not breathe too heavily not to give the game away. So densely distributed as to convey, by onomatopoeia, the whole hard labor of respiration, the aspirate comes virtually to stand on its own, detached from, most strikingly, one phoneme in particular: ill. Here we see Austen’s style decomposing into a mixture of Sanditon’s first hill: half rock, half sand. The granite of the sentence crumbles before our eyes into a grit of sounds, senses, letters that scatter themselves across the page into patterns that seem neither entirely intentional, nor entirely random.¹³⁾

I realize I have wandered a little far afield here. What I want to say is that, like Sanditon, and like much of Ranpo’s queerest work, “Monogram” gestures towards both a de-hystericization of language and a short-circuiting of male homosociality. It does this in a way that seems neither entirely intentional, nor entirely random, just as both of these words happen to begin with “H.” In my very closest reading of this work, I see a cure for these illnesses in yet a third word “H” word. This is the word that would bring Ichizo and Saburō together, and Sonoko and Sumiko too. We will never know just how much happier they might have been that way.¹⁴⁾

Notes

1) (Conley, *One-Letter Words*)

2) (Maslin)

3) The story is Hamao’s 「悪魔の弟子」, which I have translated as “The Devil’s Disciple.” (Hamao, “Akuma No Deshi”) (Hamao, *The Devil’s Disciple*)

- 4) (Conley, "The Skinny on the Dictionary of One-Letter Words")
- 5) (Pérec)
- 6) (Miller) 58.
- 7) (Poe)
- 8) (Edogawa)
- 9) 268.
- 10) (Hamao, "Dōseiai Kō")
- 11) (Stekel)
- 12) See (Lynch)
- 13) (Miller) 91.
- 14) I thank Yukiko Hanawa for pointing out the lesbian subtext of this story to me, which I had utterly failed to notice.

This paper was originally written for a symposium on Edogawa Ranpo held at New York University in 2007, where Nakagawa-san was one of the organizers. Almost ten years later, we were together at yet another Ranpo conference in Paris. In the decade in between, he and I have met at conferences and symposia all over the world, from Talinn, Estonia to Kyoto, Tokyo, Ann Arbor, Chicago, and Toronto. When asked to contribute a paper in Nakagawa-san's honor for this volume, I immediately thought of this one, because of the way Ranpo has bookended our friendship. It depends too much on the words themselves to survive translation intact, so I offer it in English, with thanks to Nakagawa-san for so many great conversations in so many countries over the years. The translations of passages from Ranpo's "Monogram" are all mine, as are their flaws.

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