Art, Labor, and Utopia in the Early Fiction and Criticism of Satō Haruo

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Abstract

This paper discusses the early writings of Satō Haruo (1892–1964), a well-known poet and fiction writer of the Taishō and Shōwa eras. Because many of his most famous texts make heavy use of fantasy elements, Satō's work is generally read as an example of Romantic fantastic reverie. This has obscured the author's strong interest in questions such as what the meaning of art and the artist's labor should be in the context of the modern market economy. In his discussion of these issues, Satō shows a deep connection with the ideas of European 19th-century Aestheticism, but also an intimate awareness of the particular conditions of his contemporary cultural market.

Through an analysis of fictional writings like "To Love a Rose or A Fable Without Moral" ("Bara o koi suru hanashi, arui wa Gūi no nai gūwa," *Chūō Kōron*, April 1919) and "Beautiful Town" ("Utsukushiki machi," *Kaizō*, August, September and December 1919), and some of his early critical essays such as "The Art, That Is the Person" ("Geijutsu sunawachi ningen," *Shinchō*, June 1919), "The Joy of the Artist" ("Geijutsuka no yorokobi," *Shinchō*, June 1920), and others, I argue that Satō proposes an understanding of artistic creative labor as an activity irreducible to any other value system beyond itself, against utilitarian notions of art as a "useful medium" for moral or didactic content. In his writings, creating art becomes both the space in which the artist's "highest self" can come to be, and the catalyst for a fundamental change in the relationship between humans and their own labor. Satō's writings contain a clear utopian drive that sees this potential of art for self-creation as an ideal that should be extended to all forms of human labor.

1. Introduction

Satō Haruo (1892-1964) is generally remembered in literary histories for his dream-like fantastic works. The popularity of texts such as his debut story "The House of the Spanish Dog" ("Supein-ken no ie," *Seiza*, January 1917) or the short novel *Gloom in the Country* (*Den'en no yūutsu*, 1919), refreshingly original when they appeared,(1) have created an image of Satō as an author disconnected with the historical conditions of his time, often obscuring other more ideological facets of the author's work during his youth. Recent monographs have endeavored to produce a more complete understanding of Satō's life and work, focusing on his sustained interest in the psychology of modern experience,(2) or the influence of contemporary political events in his world-view.(3) In this paper I want to contribute to this re-evaluation of the author, by highlighting how Satō's early fiction and criticism contain several motifs that point to a clear concern with the meaning of art, and the artist's labor, in the context of the modern market economy.

Satō studied at Keiō Gijuku (now Keiō University) under Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), and was introduced into the late-Meiji literary world by critic Ikuta Chōko (1882-1936), first translator into Japanese of Friedrich Nietzsche

(1) Some years later, in his series of critical essays *Bungeiteki na*, *amari ni bungeiteki na* (*Literary*, *All Too Literary*, 1927) Akutagawa Ryūnosuke would remember "Satō Haruo's tale "The House of the Spanish Dog" has not lost its appeal yet. How fresh did it feel when it came out in the journal *Seiza*! The literary world mostly ignored it then, but I never doubted of its value, as I imagine neither did Mr. Satō." In *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*. Iwanami Shoten, 1997, vol. 15, p. 215.

(2) Exley, Charles, *Satō Haruo and Modern Japanese Literature*, Brill, 2016.

(3) Yamanaka Chiharu, *Satō Haruo to taigyaku jiken*, Ronsō-sha, 2016.

(1844-1900),[4] who noticed Satō when he won the first prize in a short essay competition sponsored by the journal *Shin shōsetsu* (*New Novel*), that Chōko edited. Through his interactions with Kafū and Chōko, Satō would soon develop a deep interest in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). He felt comfortable enough with Wilde's oeuvre in particular that his first piece of published criticism was a scathing review and analysis of Honma Hisao's translation of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that appeared in Japan under the title *The Debaucher* (*Yūtōji*, Shinchōsha, 1913).[5] Satō's early theorizations of art show a strong resonance with the preoccupations of 19th-century thinkers associated with the British Aesthetic Movement, not only the aforementioned Wilde, but also Walter Pater (1839-1894) and William Morris (1834-1896). Satō shared with these authors a concern with the limitations placed upon artistic creativity by moralism and didacticism, that is, the idea that art's worth should be evaluated by how well it transmits a particular moral or educational content. Aestheticist slogans like "Art for Art's Sake," emphasizing art's intrinsic and self-directed value, speak against this utilitarian concept of art.

Besides his distaste for utilitarianism in artistic matters, a doctrine that had already entered mainstream discourse in modern Japan,[6] Satō's early writings also show a continued worry about the uniformizing impact of art's commodification within the modern market economy. Satō's literary debut coincides with the Great War Economic Boom (*Taisen keiki*), a period of high export-driven economic growth in which Japan benefitted from higher global demand for consumer products as all major European economies were pouring all their resources into fighting each other in World War I.[7] Even if this boom was suitably short-lived, and soon came to a spectacular crash in 1920, it produced a dramatic change in the market for cultural products, and fiction writing in particular. As the research of scholar Yamamoto Yoshiaki has shown, competition among general-interest magazines such as *Chūō kōron* (*Central Review*), *Kaizō* (*Reconstruction*) and *Kaihō* (*Liberation*) caused manuscript fees to rise rapidly in this period, and created a real possibility for many new authors to live off their writings.[8] The promise of professionalization, brought however in Satō's eyes a new danger to artistic autonomy, if commercial profitability were to become a new standard to evaluate the worth of a work of art.

2. Art as Fable Without Moral

The short text "To Love a Rose or A Fable Without Moral" ("Bara o koi suru hanashi, arui wa Gūi no nai gūwa," *Chūō kōron*, April 1919) is a good example of Satō's thinking on the issues of utilitarianism and the worth of art. In the piece, the narrator is walking through a garden when he finds himself distracted by a whispering conversation between two roses:

> "So one man looked at my shrub and sneered saying: "This can grow and grow but it will never become a pillar." A group of children said "This cannot be eaten!," pointing towards me with their toes and spitting on me. I wonder, wouldn't it be better if they went to the woods or to an orchard? But they don't admit their error and even dare to blame me!"
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> "You are so right! [...] Today came a traveler too, and said: "This is not a shortcut to our destination. Look at all the useless turns and undulations that it takes!" He really made me furious!"
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> "Today people are intelligent. Nobody loves anymore. Love is definitely not a shortcut to marriage, is it? We used to bloom for the lovers, but now we have become useless. [...] People do not like useless things. [...] People prefer stations and offices to gardens!"[9]

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(4) *Zarathustra*, Shinchōsha, 1911.

(5) "Yūtōji no yakusha ni yosete sukoshi bakari Wairudo o ronzu," *Subaru*, June 1913. For Satō's extensive knowledge of Oscar Wilde see Imura Kimie, "Satō Haruo to Oscar Wilde. *Den'en no yūutsu* o chūshin to shite," in Naruse, Masakatsu (ed.), *Taishō bungaku no hikaku bungaku kenkyū*, Meiji shobō, 1968, 217-261.

(6) The works of the main British utilitarian thinkers were widely circulated in Japan right after the Restoration. The first decade of Meiji saw the publication of several translations of their works, such as Jeremy Bentham's *The Principles of Civil Code* (*Minpō ronkō*, tr. Ga Reishi, Higashinari Kamejirō, 1876), and John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* (*Rigaku*, tr. Nishi Amane, Suzuki Keijun, 1877).

(7) For a concise and effective summary of this period, centered around the figure of the *nouveau riche* (*narikin*), see Takemura Tamio, *Taishō bunka: Teikoku no yuutopia*, Sangensha, 2004, pp. 82-90.

(8) *Kane to bungaku: Nihon kindai bungaku no keizai-shi*, Shinchōsha, 2013, pp. 15-23.

When the narrator intervenes and expresses his sympathy for their plight, he first gets a cynical and thorny reply: “Are you a bee? I am sorry to disappoint you, but I have no honey.” The narrator tries to win the roses’ confidence by telling them that he is a poet and, after some more sarcastic remarks by the roses, at long last convinces them by calling himself an “old-fashioned disciple of Heine.”[10] Just when one of the roses finally begins to speak to him in sweeter tones, it unexpectedly breaks in two. Devastated, the narrator collects the dead petals of the rose, who he calls his “eternal lover,” and takes them home, to preserve them inside his latest volume of poetry. When his wife finds out about it, however, she ridicules him for acting “like a schoolgirl.” After granting them a last kiss, the narrator blows the petals out of the window into the garden. They fall on the path of a rooster, who scampers towards the petals and pecks at them. Once he realizes they are not food, however, the animal wanders away trampling on the rests of the petals, sticking out his breast “like an important critic” and grumbling in English: “Nonsense!” The final sentence of the fable addresses the reader saying: “If you read this story thinking it would have any meaning, you are a fool!”[11]

The paradoxical title, “A Fable without Moral,” seems to prompt the reader to take the text as an allegory of sorts, all the while refusing to reduce it to a mere medium to convey a moral. The anti-utilitarian motif is established clearly in the dialogue between the roses, as they complain about the visitors’ expectations that they should fulfill a function beyond being roses. The dialogue between them focuses on their “uselessness,” when seen from a utilitarian point of view. They cannot become a pillar to support anything besides themselves. They cannot provide others with nourishment or be reduced to a container for honey. Their way doesn’t work as a shortcut to arrive efficiently from point A to point B, but is unnecessarily undulating and long.

The repeated connection of the roses with poets and poetry, as well as the rooster “critic” that appears at the end, opens up the possibility of a metaphorical reading in which the roses stand in for art. In terms of the Aestheticist reaction to utilitarianism, the parallels are easy to trace. Just as the roses expect to be admired for their mere beauty as roses, so does art propose an essentially auto-telic activity. Being “useless,” in terms of an audience or critic who would expect some moral or didactic “nourishment” from it, is in the very nature of art, according to this view. However, the text is careful enough not to take itself too seriously, undermining the pathetic potential of the dialogue scene when the rose suddenly cracks in two (a turn of events that produces an effect more comical than tragic after the haughty exchange they have had with the narrator), and explicitly reminding the reader in the closing sentence that the story is not meant to convey any meaning at all.

It is interesting to note how, instead of depicting a moment of private intimate connection between this “poet” and the roses that nobody else seems to understand, the fable repeatedly focuses on the social dynamics surrounding its characters. Both the roses and their admirer are faced with the comments of the garden’s visitors, the narrator’s wife and even the rooster who comments “like a critic” on the “Nonsense!” that the dead rose petals represent. The question of what the roses are good for (what art is good for, in the metaphorical reading) is no longer a private issue but an activity that involves a whole community of people, who apparently give it a very different importance than the main character does. The ironic interruptions, both in the dialogue with the rose and in the unexpected ending, prevent a proper closing of the story’s meaning but that may be the paradoxical goal of the fable. The self-mocking humorous tone makes it possible to present both the narrator’s ideas on art, and his awareness of the essential conflict these ideas have with his contemporary world.

3. The “Beautiful Town” as Artistic Activism

A more fully developed elaboration of Satō’s ideas about the purpose of art, and its role within modern society, can be found in his short story “Beautiful Town” (“Utsukushiki machi,” *Kaizō*, August, September and December 1919). The narrative starts when a painter called E is visited by his old childhood friend Kawasaki, the son of an American father and a Japanese mother, who has recently returned from abroad to ask him for help in a “marvelous

(9) *Teihon Satō Haruo zenshū*, Kyōto: Rinsen shoten, 1998, vol. 3, p. 191.

(10) German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856).

(11) *Teihon Satō Haruo zenshū*, Kyōto: Rinsen shoten, 1998, vol. 3, p. 193.

and most pleasing plan" (34).[12] Kawasaki's project is to build an ideal "Beautiful Town" of a hundred houses inside Tokyo with the capital he claims his father left him. After enrolling the help of E, both of them start looking for a suitable piece of land to build the "Beautiful Town" and finally settle on the artificial island of Nakasu in the Sumida River. They hire an old architect to complete the team and they work on the plan together for three years. One day, Kawasaki suddenly reveals that he never had the money to undertake such a project: the "Beautiful Town" will never exist outside their imaginations and the paper model they built. After Kawasaki's flight from Japan, E and the old architect stay in touch and E winds up marrying one of the architect's daughters and living in a building designed by his father-in-law.

The text is often read as an example of the author's drive towards fantastic reverie mentioned earlier. Kawamoto Saburō, for instance, calls the story a "Märchen," a fairy tale.[13] Focusing on the fact that the plans for the "Beautiful Town" never become reality, the story is generally interpreted as the tale of a charming but ultimately quixotic dream and its eventual frustration. Scholars like Ebihara Yuka have pointed out that, by focusing on the fact that the "Beautiful Town" is never actually built according to the purported original plan, critics have missed strong themes like the growth of E as an artist throughout the text.[14]

I want to go a step further and argue that it is precisely by not being built that the "Beautiful Town" can be read as an attempt to establish a utopian space for art inside the modern market economy. I use the word "utopian" here both in the sense of "ideal," and in the sense of "not actually located anywhere" but able to provide a guiding principle for action in the world. Once one abandons the assumption that the value of the "Beautiful Town" lies in its actual construction, and that the failure to materialize the painstakingly designed plans means the defeat of the characters' purpose, it is possible to reconsider the question of Kawasaki's actual goal in starting the project. In the story, the "Beautiful Town" is never an end in itself but a stimulus, a form of artistic activism that attempts openly to subvert the values of the capitalist mercantilization of human life and serve as inspiration for citizens to take an active role in changing their lives. There is no frustration of Kawasaki's plans, insofar as they have never included the actual building of the city. The measure of their success is, rather, to what extent the project of the "Beautiful Town" is able to create a stimulus for the creation of art against the stifling environment of the modern market for cultural consumer goods.

In this sense, it is important to note that the text first appeared in serialized form in the socialist-oriented magazine *Kaizō* (*Reconstruction*), over three issues with the following special topics: "Defeating Capitalism" ("Shihonshugi seifuku," August 1919), ("Research on Union Strikes" ("Rōdō kumiai dōmei hikō kenkyū," September 1919), and "Class Struggle" ("Kaikyū tōsen," December 1919). (Incidentally, the September 1919 issue of the magazine was banned from circulation by the Japanese authorities.) Even if Satō's work is obviously very different from the papers on economics and political activism that filled those issues, it makes sense to think about how the story explores the ideologically utopian potential of artistic activity, and how it is possible to read in it a fulfilment of that potential, instead of mere escapism and/or failure.

From the very beginning, many hints point at the fact that Kawasaki has conceived the "Beautiful Town" as an exclusively artistic project. As Endō Ikuko notes, Kawasaki looks for E as painter first and foremost, not as an acquaintance. It is true that they were friends during their childhood, but it is ostensibly a painting of E titled "Tokai no yūutsu" ("Gloom in the City," incidentally the title that Satō would give to another of his stories written in 1922) that makes him think of contacting E again.[15] During their first conversation, the idea of the "Beautiful Town" is brought up while "talking on about the arts" and before even mentioning any figure or engineering matter, Kawasaki launches into a poetic rapture aided by the verses of Goethe's *Faust*. It should come as no surprise, then, when at the end of the story a project started in this vein turns out to be completely lacking in actual funds to make it a reality.

⑿ All page numbers after citations from the story refer to Satō Haruo, "Beautiful Town," *Beautiful Town*, *Stories and Essays* (F. Tenny, editor & translator), Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993, pp. 31-63.

⒀ *Taisho gen'ei*, Chikuma shobō, 1997, p. 63.

⒁ "Satō Haruo "Utsukushiki machi"-ron: Geijutsuka E-shi no shugyō jidai," *Tōkyō joshi daigaku kiyō ronshū*, 50(1), 1999, pp. 47-66.

⒂ *Satō Haruo sakuhin kenkyū: Taishō-ki o chūshin to shite*, Senshū daigaku, 2004, p. 43.

The very election of the site for the construction of the "Beautiful Town" indicates also the primacy of artistic concerns for the project. The island of Nakasu is not chosen after careful geological prospection or cunning analysis of the real estate market, but on a whim inspired by a copperplate engraving. While wandering aimlessly through Tokyo, dreaming feverishly of the "Beautiful Town," E goes to an exhibition that includes several old prints, among which there is one by Edo era artist Shiba Kōkan (1747-1818) titled "Nakasu no kei" ("View of Nakasu"), that gives him the sudden idea of choosing the place simply because of the atmosphere the picture creates.

It is important to consider the characters' reaction when they visit the place and discover that the actual Nakasu is nothing like the poetic landscape of the engraving. E is initially disappointed but, to his surprise, Kawasaki is "completely satisfied with that filthy, good-for-nothing land," and when he convinces E to look at the islet from the same perspective the picture was drawn in, even the painter admits that "as I visualized from the bridge in the winter's setting sun the "Beautiful Town" without form but with the potential for any form, and I put that vision in place of the cluster of dirty gray roofs that now existed, it was enough to make me change my mind and like the place" (41-42). Neither of the characters seems to notice that, as Angela Yiu has perceptively indicated, Nakasu is barely "one-fortieth the size of Kawasaki's vision of a four-acre development."[16] Rather than the practical issues of how to turn Nakasu into the "Beautiful Town" of Kawasaki's plans, what is highlighted in this scene is how the space he chooses as a setting functions as a stimulus for the narrator's fantasy, and his ability to achieve the "vision" of that idea "without form but with the potential for any form."

Kawasaki often speaks of the "Beautiful Town" as "a large living and moving work of art," but this should not be taken to mean that the character is solely interested in the superficial beauty of the Town. Rather, it shows the project's intention to subvert the conventional hierarchy of reality and art. To put it in Wildean terms, Kawasaki believes that it is not art that imitates life, but life that follows art. In consequence, the creation of a work of art, as gratuitous as it may appear at first, can ultimately bring a change to society. If the "Beautiful Town" has any creative potential at all, that will derive from its condition of art, and through its links with all the works of art that come together in its creation.

Kawasaki intends to ask for no monetary compensation from the inhabitants of his dreamed Town, but the conditions he sets down for them are very significant to understand the role he envisions for it:

> "(a) People most satisfied by the houses I built. (b) Couples who have married of their own mutual choice and who both have stayed with their first marriage and have children. (c) People who have chosen as an occupation the work they like best. Therefore they've become most proficient in their work and have made a living from it. (d) No merchants, no public officials, no military. (e) People to keep the promise never to engage in monetary transactions in the town. [...] (f) They must have a dog as a pet. If by nature they don't like dogs, they must care for a cat. If they don't like either dogs or cats, they can keep a bird..." (36)

It is extremely telling, as Stephen Dodd has pointed out, how violently this program clashes with the state-sponsored ideology of modernization.[17] The very individuals thought of as the basis of society in the official world view are banned from the "Beautiful Town," as well as their main occupation: the production and circulation of money. Instead, Kawasaki would privilege individuals who have achieved a certain level of self-realization in their professional and personal lives (through a marriage born out of their own initiative).

Many critics have seen in the last condition a connection with Satō's own well-known love of dogs, which feature prominently in his fiction. In addition, the obligation to keep a pet in each house of the Town can be read also as an ironic parody of the detailed regulations of the citizens' lives produced by the modern state, as well as a kind of ideological statement in itself: the basis of the "Beautiful Town" will be the very things that common sense considers "superfluous" or "not useful." This motif is also highlighted in the following passage:

> my beautiful town must be located in the city of Tokyo. It must form a distinct quarter situated in an unexpected part of the city; it must be a place where it will invite scrutiny by many people. I hope that people as they gaze

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[16] "'Beautiful Town': the discovery of the suburbs and the vision of the garden city in late Meiji and Taisho literature," *Japan Forum*, 18(3), 2006, p. 331.

[17] "Fantasies, Fairies, and Electric Dreams: Sato Haruo's Critique of Taisho," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 49(3), 1994, p. 296.

> will think how good it would be to live in a place like that and will be surprised to hear that anyone can. On hearing the conditions that enable them to live there, however, they will be puzzled at why some eccentric fellow wasted so much valuable money to build a town for whatever purpose. I'd like to have people raise these questions. (37)

The point of the project is then to surprise and prompt questions in the minds of the people. Kawasaki says explicitly that he hopes to "puzzle" his fellow citizens as to why so much capital was "wasted" in an ostensibly unprofitable and "useless" project. In the design of the "Beautiful Town," Kawasaki is obviously poking fun at the values of utilitarianism that reign supreme in the ideals of industrial progress. Against a system that sets the "useful" as its highest value, he pits an impossible plan, completely out of touch with the market and utterly devoid of funds. The "Beautiful Town" would be then an artistic interruption in the logic of capitalism that reduces human activity to a matter of investment, benefit and re-investment.

Yet for all his doubts about state-driven capitalist modernization, Kawasaki is in no way interested in a ruralist or pastoral utopia. His is not a project that romanticizes pre-industrial times as more authentic than his present, or wants to escape urbanization and return to a primeval "Nature" ready to welcome back Humanity into its bosom. He explicitly states that "I don't like to see the times do a backflip. That's nothing more than nostalgia. We should look ahead and not fix our eyes on the past" (48). He is also clearly separated from traditionalist dreams of a return to the "pure Yamato" both by his condition of "foreign" (as the son of an American father) and by his faith in the possibilities of modern science to make a crucial contribution to the betterment of life conditions.

During the story, Kawasaki appears reading aloud sections from William Morris' utopian futurist novel *News from Nowhere* (1890),[18] a work that deals extensively with the uneasy relationship between labor, art, and alternatives to the capitalist commodity economy. The most interesting point of connection between "Beautiful Town" and *News from Nowhere* is the idea that in order for a change to be possible in society (a change that takes the form of a socialist revolution in the case of Morris' novel) all human work should be creative and pleasurable. In the futuristic England of *News from Nowhere* goods are produced because individuals find pleasure in the manual work of the artisan and are given away for free. Work thus manages to escape being reduced to a standard exchange value that allows it to enter the capitalist system at the expense of killing the individual connection between product and producer.

In "Beautiful Town," the particular character of Mr. T, the old architect, is especially significant in this regard. It cannot be a mere coincidence that among the "crowds of applicants," Kawasaki chooses for his project someone like him. Already an old man, Mr. T studied in Paris in the 1880s but was already out of fashion when he returned to Japan. Because of the changes in fashion and cultural policy, "the knowledge he had taken pains to acquire in his middle years was unexpectedly useless in Japan" (43). However, even if the market had no place for him, he kept creating and designing. Obviously, none of his designs were ever actually used, but that is exactly what makes Mr. T valuable in the eyes of Kawasaki. The same condition that makes him a "failure" in the eyes of society, makes him a "success" for the planning of the "Beautiful Town." He is a pure artist, untouched by the economic system and laid aside as "useless" by the market. He has the value of the valueless: somebody who creates for the sheer pleasure of it and not for the value that his production has according to an external standard, independent from the individual and his creation.

Understood as a work of art, the project of the "Beautiful Town" can be seen in a new light. Plotted by a group of people who don't produce anything valuable by industrial standards: a swindler, a painter, and an architect who has never built anything, it becomes a starting point to bring the creative potential of art back into modern society. In this sense, I believe it can be argued that the end of the story does not necessarily constitute a complete frustration of the project. The idea of the "Beautiful Town" brings the three characters together and ultimately results in the marriage of E into Mr. T's household, described in the following terms: "I thought old Mr. T was the happiest man ever. Even if his worldly life was a failure, he was a person of such peace, with a good wife, a good son, good daughters,

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[18] *News from Nowhere* first appeared in Japanese in 1904 with the title *Utopia* (*Risōkyō*, Heimin-sha). The translation was the work of the famous socialist activist Sakai Toshihiko.

good grandchildren, a warbler singing in his sunny window, and even more good things in his everyday fancies. You could hang the title “Beautiful Town” onto that happiness” (61).

At the end of the story Mr. T finally sees one of his dreamed houses become reality, significantly as an artist’s studio. E used to “brood seriously about the need for a monastery to sever writers and artists,” and the new house that Mr. T builds for him ends up fulfilling that desire. The “Beautiful Town” may never see its hundred houses, but at least one of Mr. T’s works, born out of the stimulus of Kawasaki’s useless and unrealistic plan, is actually made reality and it is from this one house that E will keep producing his art. To further drive the point home, the newly-wed couple who will live there plan to get a dog as pet “according to the rules for Beautiful Town.” Kawasaki’s “Beautiful Town” never materializes, because it was never intended to be actually built, but the questions it raises and the inspiration it produces helps the other characters to build at least one household on the model they dreamed together.

In “About Mushanokōji Saneatsu” (“Mushanokōji Saneatsu ni tsuite,” *Chūō kōron*, July 1918), commenting on the communal project called “New Village” (“*Atarashiki mura*”), started by the writer Mushanokōji Saneatsu (1885-1976) in Hyūga (Miyazaki Prefecture, Kyūshū), Satō wrote: “Even if [the utopian project] fails every time it is tried, it doesn’t mean it’s fruitless. Rather, it must be attempted once and again without ever giving up.”[19] In a sense, it can be said that the story “Beautiful Town” is trying to find a way to keep the utopian project alive through art, while at the same time avoiding the danger of producing a work of art that ends up closing in on itself and becoming severed from reality. Kawasaki’s project is doomed to remain in the realm of dreams from the start, but rather than ending there, it serves as the spark for continued artistic activity, even after his creator disappears fleeing his creditors. Its value lies in its potential for further creation, rather than in its worth for the real estate market. Interrupting the logic of capitalist exchange and re-valuing what has been left aside as “worthless,” the “Beautiful Town” is a testimony to an alternative economy of value that seeks to create a space for art beyond the logic of market exchange.

4. Art as Labor, Labor as Art

Satō’s reflections on the utopian potential of art as labor are not limited to his fiction. The many critical pieces that he wrote during his youth offer another interesting look at the possibilities of art as an end in itself, and a space for human self-realization, beyond its use as a didactic or political tool. Satō’s starting point there is the understanding of art as an activity through which human beings can create their “best self.” In the piece “The Art, That Is the Person” (“Geijutsu sunawachi ningen,” *Shinchō*, June 1919), he reverses in Wildean fashion the commonplace observation that “Where there is no good person, there is no good art” into “Where there is good art, there is a good person.” Rather than concede that there has to be a morally upright individual first to be able to create good art, he argues that the “good person” is a result of artistic activity and thus follows it instead of preceding it: “[The artist] creates a self for himself, the self he believes is the best self. He provokes a revolutionary upheaval within himself and rules over it by his highest self. He throws all of himself into a crucible. From what of the self is burned and melted in that crucible he picks out only the precious metal part of the self. This operation of the spirit is called the artistic drive [*geijutsuteki shōdō*]. The person who can thus reveal the highest self is called the artist. He is said to have artistic genius [*geijutsu no tensai*].”[20] Just as Kawasaki’s “Beautiful Town” is not the real goal, but a launching point for the transformation of its purported environment, so is artistic activity is in this essay the starting point for the self-fashioning of the individual.

It is important to point out here that Satō does not seem to understand the “best self” as a pre-existing entity that can be expressed spontaneously in artistic activity, but instead presents it as the result attainable by the “artistic drive.” In this sense, his use of the term “best self” is markedly different from that of the Shirakaba (White Birch) group, organized around the journal of the same name. It is undeniable that Satō’s thematization of the artist’s self-creation through art builds upon the discursive space established in the early 1910s by the Shirakaba group, and the glorification of the idea of “self-expression” by authors like Mushanokōji.[21] Under the banner of Humanism

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[19] *Teihon Satō Haruo zenshū*, Kyōto: Rinsen shoten, 1998, vol. 19, p. 72.

[20] Translation by Francis B. Tenny: “The Art, That Is the Person,” *Beautiful Town*, pp. 250-254.

(*jindōshugi*), the Shirakaba group viewed the development of one's "self" (*jiga* or *jiko*) as the highest mission of human beings. Artistic work was for them a means to "give life to the self" (*jiko o ikasu*) and achieve through it contact with an abstract idea of Humanity (*ningen*). Against this model, Satō redefined this idealistic conception of "self-expression" by placing art at the center, as a privileged utopian space from which the value of this expressed "self" derives. Unlike Mushanokōji, then, Satō does not see art as an avenue to express a pre-existing individual self. He also does not argue for the need to set "human nature" free. Instead, Satō understands art as the starting point for the creation of that self, an indispensable means to give form to one's "highest self" in the same way that one might create a metallic alloy. It is significant that the metaphor used is not one of spontaneous natural growth but of conscious artificial creation. Artistic activity thus becomes a continuous process of self-fashioning, guided by the search for a utopian "highest self," for "the artist can reveal his true self fully only in the arts–only through the technique of searching for the self in his own deepest recesses."[22] Art is here the highest possible sphere of human activity and the starting point of the elevation of the self.

If art is the highest possible human activity, it is not surprising that, in the tradition of "Art for Art's Sake" thinking, Satō considers it a self-contained and self-fulfilling activity. He refuses to assign it any other objective than its own existence, because to do that would compromise its status as origin of the "highest self." In one of his key pieces, "The Joy of the Artist" ("Geijutsuka no yorokobi," *Shinchō*, June 1920), he gives these ideas the following formulation: "As art is its own objective, the joy of creation is simply to create. In all the highest of human activities, there is no other aim but that. To think there is a further aim for the highest of human activities would be like thinking there is another divinity above divinity. Everything with any aim but this itself is but secondary in significance" (244).[23] The logic may appear circular, but that is precisely the point of Satō's piece. To search for an objective for art outside of art itself implies putting it into a hierarchical relationship with other concerns that would take then precedence over the supreme task of bringing to light the "highest self." Medium and goal must be conflated together to avoid their separation into primary and secondary significations. Otherwise one (the medium) would end up being understood as accidental and subservient to the other (the goal).

This understanding of art may seem rather solipsistic at first, but following Satō's elaboration makes it clear that he sees in it a very direct connection with the real world issues facing modern artists. Discussing the "joy of creation," he states: "When I work thinking of the critic, when I work with thoughts of my readers, when I work thinking of my editor and his deadline, when I work thinking of fame, when I work to establish some principles, when I work thinking of my own skill, when I work thinking of any other aim or result, I feel I have lost the joy of creation" (245). As this enumeration shows, the question of the "further aim" of art has a very practical dimension. By the late 1910s, art has become embedded in the web of relations of the modern market economy, and the artist's work has to deal with the demands of a growing culture industry that caters to the mass audience. Editors, critics, readers are all indispensable actors in the circulation of art as a commodity, but when they effect a restraint upon artists by imposing on them concerns foreign to the self-fulfilling mission of creating the "highest self," Satō considers that they strip them of the condition of "creative person" and make them into no more than "artisans" (*shokunin*).

The relationship of art to the mass market is presented as adversarial, with comments such as "Crowds are hell... They knock the breath out of people of stature. A person cannot be independent in a crowd" (247). At the same time, however, there is a clear attempt to establish a sphere of artistic value that always remains untouched by the scales of commercial exchange. Speaking of the interplay between art and criticism, Satō denies that criticism "that lacks understanding and good faith" could ever harm the value of a work: "How can that destroy the joy of its creation? The only thing lost or damaged is the work's commercial value. Its empty popularity. It is better if the work lacks just that. For the true artist that is relief; it is freedom from care, freedom itself" (249). Not only are the

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[21] For a representative example see Mushanokōji Saneatsu, "Jiko no tame no geijutsu" ("Art for the Self," *Shirakaba*, November 1911), and the ensuing debate with Kinoshita Mokutarō, from the poetry and visual arts journal *Myōjō* (*Bright Star*), started when Kinoshita criticized impressionist painter Yamawaki Shintoku (1886-1952) in the pages of *Chūō kōron*.

[22] *Beautiful Town*, p. 253.

[23] Translation by Francis B. Tenny: "The Joy of the Artist," *Beautiful Town*, pp. 244-250.

obvious demands of the market understood as fatal constraints to creative work, but also ideological objectives have similar effects upon the artist. The refusal of "work to establish some principles" (*shugi wo tatete shigoto o suru*) separates Satō's understanding of art clearly from any form of programmatic literature: art is never a medium but an end in itself. Reading these lines together with the piece "Geijutsu sunawachi ningen" mentioned before, there emerges an image of art markedly different from that of didactic or party literature of any sign, but no less involved in its contemporary society. Art is presented as an activity responsible for creating a value beyond that of the commodity (*shōhin*), that opens up the potential for the artist's "best self" to come to life.

Real world issues are not entirely banished from art, nor is the participation of the artist in society negated. Rather, Satō argues for the expansion of art into everyday life against the standardization and utilitarian drive that artistic expression encounters in the world of modern capitalism: "I curse the making of art into a vocation [*shokugyōka*]. Now in these times when *the spirit of the true artist* is most needed, how can we afford to let it vanish? I'd like to see all of man's occupations converted into the arts. All those occupations without meaning derived from the self I'd like to see abandoned by humans. In this sense, I'd like to see all mankind made into *true artists*. I'd like to see all human life made into art. Then would man be close to the gods. There will be no utopia until every occupation has become an art" (247). The fragment explicitly links the way to utopia with the inversion of the contemporary trend of professionalizing the production of art. Instead of letting all artists become artisans (*shokunin*), all artisans should become artists so that the self-fashioning potential of artistic activity is extended to all human activity. Calling for a transformation of life through art doesn't imply a desire to simply escape from reality into an artificial world of dreams. Rather, it serves as basis for an active criticism of the social model that industrialization has produced, in which mechanization has made humans into interchangeable pieces of a structure that has no meaning for them.

Satō was not alone in imagining art and artistic activity as models for human labor in general. His teacher Ikuta Chōko wrote the following description of the ideal conditions for human work in "My Foundation as Social Critic" ("Shakai hihyōka to shite no yo no rikkyakuchi," *Chūgai*, April 1918):

> "Being interesting and pleasant contains in itself the objective of work. It cannot be something done solely as a means for anything else. It is work at the same time as amusement. A real society needs work that is suited to the individuality of every person, interesting and pleasant, like an amusement. Work that is interesting and pleasant, like an amusement, is in itself like producing art. Its products are all works of art. The unification of work and amusement is the unification of life and art."[24]

Christian labor activist Kagawa Toyohiko also uses similar language in "Theory of Human Architecture" ("Ningen kenchiku-ron," *Kaizō*, January 1920):

> "Nowadays, painters and architects cannot produce an art with their full personality, their full spirit, their full life. [...] That is too integral [*zenbuteki*]. In the material world of capitalism, the human being itself is turned into capital and investments are made only on human activity [*katsudō*] and life without benefitting the workers. Unless humanity itself becomes an art, our life will be most pitiful."[25]

Art, conceptualized as an activity that involves the individual as a whole and cannot be reduced to a means for anything else, appears here as a promise to overcome the alienation of modern industrial workers from their work and its products. These calls for the "art-ification" of labor or humanity itself, however, come from a general sense of crisis produced by the incorporation of artists into the market economy, and the risk that they will not be able to produce "integral" art. It is in the process of negotiating the position of art as a product in the capitalist market that art's extra-economic value is foregrounded as its defining characteristic.

In this context, Satō's autotelic definition of artistic activity goes further than the simple attempt to create an

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[24] *Ikuta Chōko Zenshū IV Hihyō: Shakai*, Daitō Shuppansha, 1936, p. 116. That particular issue of *Chūgai* was banned from circulation, most probably because of Chōko's piece. See Aranami Chikara, *Chi no kyojin: Hyōden Ikuta Chōko*, Hakusuisha, 2013, p. 194. The Marxian overtones of the passage are not coincidental. Chōko was well acquainted with the work of Karl Marx, whose *Capital* he translated: *Shihonron*. *Dai-1-bun satsu*, Ryokuyōsha, 1919.

[25] *Kaizō*, January 1920, p. 77.

autonomous space where art can exist independently from the influence of political or moral concerns. In his understanding, it is precisely this potential that art offers for individual self-realization beyond any other external concern or constraint, what gives it a special significance in the context of modern society. Art becomes then an irreplaceable alternative to the homogenization of human experience brought by professionalization. If the industrial economy threatens to turn individual expression into another interchangeable commodity, the social significance of the artist lies in countering that trend by exploring the possibilities of the "joy of creation."

This understanding of art shapes Satō's position in the contemporary debates about the question of subject matter (*shudai*) in art. Placing himself in sharp contrast with those who think that art cannot exist without it, he sidesteps the question of the communicability of "subject matter"-less autonomous art by resorting to the classical Aestheticist topos of music as the ideal condition to which all arts aspire, given its most famous formulation in British art historian Walter Pater's "The School of Giorgione" (*The Renaissance*. *Studies in Art and Poetry*, 1873). In a 1919 piece titled "Music-like Works. The Religious Significance of Art" ("Ongakuteki na sakuhin, geijutsu no shūkyōteki na igi," *Yūben*, March 1919), Satō writes: "As long as [music] has feeling, I do not think it needs any intellectual subject matter. Nevertheless, it can move the human heart like a wonderful form of art. I would like to try and write a work that, like that music, would have feeling but no meaning."[26] Music is understood as a form that achieves the goal of moving its audience all the while avoiding the intellectual distinction of matter and form that plagues other arts. Satō points to the arabesque (*karakusa moyō*), the decorative art that Wilde praised as "unspoiled by meaning,"[27] as the closest example of "music-like" art over literature and figurative painting. The essential characteristic of music sought here is that it escapes from the risk that the mere incidents depicted or ideas exposed become excised from their artistic expression and is immune to the danger of being reduced to a subservient role to the moral that is supposed to be communicated through it.

In a later piece on "Art without Thought" ("Shisō naki bungei," *Shinchō*, November 1924), Satō brings up a lecture where Ueda Bin speaks of a sculpture by Rodin with the title "La Pensée" ("Thought," 1893-95), that consists of a gentle female head emerging from an unformed mass of marble. The image of the sculpture is used to criticize the standard understanding of "thought" as something clear-cut and coherent (*hakkiri to toritome no aru koto*) and separable from superficial beauty: "The mass of thought is nothing more than a stand and its real life (*hontō no seimei*) is nothing else but the beauty that emerges clearly from the depths. [...] What has the mass but not the beauty is just common sense, which is very different from thought. There cannot be thought were there is no beauty."[28] Satō inverts in his reading of the image the conventional hierarchy of "thought" and "beauty" in art. Not only beauty is not subservient to thought, but it turns to be its "real life." To transcend the interchangeability of "common sense," Thought must find its very own "highest self" in the process of artistic expression. The focus on "life" (*seimei*), one of the classic keywords of the era, serves here to highlight the potential space for self-fashioning that art creates, in contrast with the standard exchange value of coherent "common sense."

By placing art above morality in "The Art, That Is the Person," above content in "Music-like Works. The Religious Significance of Art," above thought in "Art Without Thought," and above commercial popularity and doctrinal value in "The Joy of the Artist," Satō is conceptualizing art as an activity irreducible to any other value system beyond itself, beyond the "joy of creation." At the same time, as both his critical writings and his fiction show, Satō is clearly aware of the essentially social and economic dimensions of artistic labor. On the one hand, his interest in cordoning off artistic activity from other value systems is explicitly connected to the conditions of the circulation of art in the mass market, where it becomes subject to the evaluation of readers, editors and critics. On the other hand, art is also presented as an activity that can challenge other value systems, just like the "Beautiful Town" would surprise passers-by who would wonder why somebody would "waste" their capital in such a project, by incorporating its potential to create the individual's "highest self" into all human labor in an "art-ification" of humanity itself. The

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[26] *Teihon Satō Haruo zenshū*, Kyōto: Rinsen shoten, 1998, vol. 19, p. 87.

[27] "The Critic as Artist" (1891), in Josephine M. Guy (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Volume IV*. *Criticism: Historical Criticism*, *Intentions*, *The Soul of Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 195.

[28] *Teihon Satō Haruo zenshū*, Kyōto: Rinsen shoten, 1998, vol. 19, p. 319.

tension between the individual dimension of artistic creation, and the collective aspiration to “see all human life made into art” is never fully explicitly resolved in Satō’s criticism, but his repeated attempts at developing these ideas show his awareness that one cannot be discussed without the other.

4. Conclusion

By looking at relevant examples of Satō’s early fiction and criticism, read both in their contemporary Japanese context, and against the backdrop of the European Aestheticist thinkers that the author read extensively in his youth, I have attempted to trace a particular ideological drive in Satō’s early writings. The fact that this is most often expressed in fantastic or dream-like motifs, and not in the technical language of communism, socialism or any other such political project, does not make Satō’s preoccupations less connected to his social and economic context.

As seen in the examples I have analyzed above, Satō may take as his starting point the autotelic understanding of art from the European Aestheticist tradition (ie. Art’s objective cannot but be Art itself, never the mere transmission of a didactic or moral content), but develops it further into an integral understanding of art and artist through the experience of artistic creative labor. Art, thus, becomes at the same time both the space in which the artist’s “highest self” can be created (as described in the essay “The Art, That Is the Person”), and the catalyst for a fundamental change in the relationship between humans and their own labor (once “every occupation has become an art,” as “The Joy of the Artist” calls for). Satō proposes that art should achieve that by short-circuiting the logic of the “useful” and the “productive” on which the modern commodity market is built, in the same way that the impossible plan of the “Beautiful Town” is able to create the space to nurture E’s artistic creativity by subverting all the rules of economic investment and value creation. Following these threads, the early works of Satō Haruo bring out the image of an author that, far from being solely absorbed in escapist reverie, had a deep interest in the contemporary reality of human industrial labor, and the potential of his own artistic work to affect an essential change upon it.