

Remembering

Tom Tatsuo Tashiro, former tutor in and director of the College of Letters, taught at Wesleyan for only four years. In that short time, however, the impact of his teaching was indelible on some of the students who worked with him.

Philip Hallie, professor of philosophy, remembers Tashiro as a quiet and reserved man of great charm. "He had exceptional teaching ability, and he was absolutely dedicated to his students," says Hallie. "He devoted hours of time to them and they were like his family, but he was not an easy person. In some ways he was possessive, almost territorial, about the undergraduates he taught."

William Hunt '65, professor of history at St. Lawrence University, recalls: "Tashiro's teaching was not the kind that makes a professor popular at the time, but that makes him popular 10 years later. That is great teaching."

After Tashiro left the University (he did not complete his doctoral dissertation and was not granted tenure), he taught at the City College of New York. He returned to Middletown for the first time in June of 1985, when he was invited to speak at the 20th reunion of the



In everyone's college career, one special professor stands out from the rest. For some, Tom Tashiro was that teacher.

Class of 1965 (his career at Wesleyan coincided with the undergraduate years of that group). It was also his last visit. In 1986, at the age of 62, he died of liver disease in a Manhattan hospital.

A few months after his death, four members of the Class of '65—William Blakemore, William Hunt, Robin McAllister and James Welch, all COL graduates—met in an informal "Tashiro colloquium," at which they spoke about their former tutor's palpable and permanent effect on their lives. Under the influence of their recollections, and in true COL spirit, they set themselves an assignment: to commit to paper their thoughts and impressions of what this brilliant, eloquent, complex, often disturbing but always provocative man had meant to them.

"We all had lost touch with him for many years," said Blakemore. "We thought perhaps he was dead. When we rediscovered him almost 20 years later, it was—as it always was with Tashiro—actually a new discovery of ourselves."

Excerpts from the four papers, suggesting something of that rediscovery, follow.

WILLIAM B. BLAKEMORE '65

A Kindly Terrorism of the Truth

"My life's work is my teaching," Mr. Tashiro said to me in the small, book-lined study of his Manhattan apartment. I had finally located him, 15 years after I'd graduated, and found this very private man still genial, smiling, polite, intense and infinitely

aware. I learned he had spent every vacation traveling the world, learning new languages. And this first of renewed conversations went, as when I was a student, until dawn—with my finally leaving, head full and swimming, suffering wonderful brain surgery, having had vistas of lateral-thinking perspectives opened, connections made in the global schemes of things that I'd not only never seen

before, but wouldn't have thought to look for.

His conversation was full of the same bright mind-opening wide-ness, challenges, unobvious observation and piercing phrases: "The agony of globalization." "There's nothing quite as corrupting as sudden wealth." "We all live in a post-terrestrial world now."

After his death, a small group of his former students got together to

Tom Tashiro

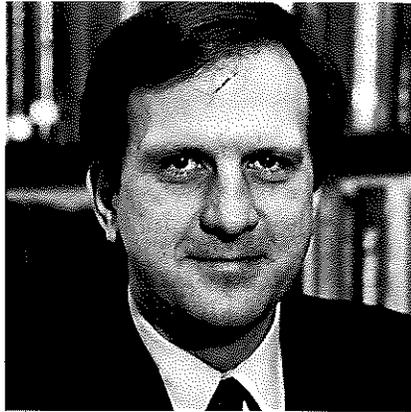
talk and remember. When we were undergraduates, when one or two of us would drop by in the evenings, he'd sit and talk about ideas, the world, life; there was nothing that couldn't be discussed if you were high-minded and showed honest respect for the subject.

But he always deflected questions away from himself. He lived alone, and we learned little about him at Wesleyan. He was training us to deal with the world, not with him. We never knew until later about his older brother who had died of a football injury, of his family's internment in concentration camps for five years during the war, from which he was allowed respite by attending college. We learned of his tour of military duty in postwar shattered Japan; of two attempts at marriage, both thwarted by racial fears.

His sister told us how delighted he was to have been asked to speak at the COL/CSS banquet, but that he recalled, smiling: "They often hated me when they were students, when I was being rough on them. I was trying to bash their brains in, to open their minds to the world. I loved every minute of it."

So did we.

Tashiro assaulted us, it seemed, with every idea under the sun, connections and layers of knowledge and history and debate of which we never would have dreamed. The sheer volume and weight of what he was laying on us was part of his technique—a kind of kindly terrorism of the truth. Our tutor was impassioned in a most controlled way about every book, idea or event mentioned, in class, or at 7 p.m., or at 2 a.m. To him, we could see, these weren't just books or ideas, but a



Bill Blakemore

suffering part of the real world. He showed us there was a visceral connection between books and life. He was our monk.

When we got together with him after 20 years, we saw in each other the proof of his power as a teacher. Though each had pursued his own line, many had turned to fields involving the intercultural perspective.

He was a remarkable combination of humility and power. Tough on us, impatient with silly questions, rejecting foolishness, he demanded excellence of thought and expression, but, as Jim Welch said: "He gave and he gave and he gave." We had each, as students, felt Tashiro's provoking criticisms and analyses. He told us, "When an operation is needed, a sharp knife is always best." We were young idiots, and must have seemed a hopeless lot to him, but we know now, though we couldn't know it at the time, that he believed in us. But that is the point. He gave us belief in ourselves by spending time with us, talking with us. He gave and he gave and he gave.

Shakespeare was deeply important to him. In a world threatened with chaos, he loved the lines "When to the sessions of sweet si-

lent thought..." In later years, when he considered Shakespeare's greatness, he identified it as "Shakespeare's great equilibrium."

When we spoke about him after his death, Bill Hunt pointed out the uniqueness of every great teacher: "Each is unique in irreplaceability," he said, adding that in our society there must be space for crankiness, that institutions have to be able to contain spikiness.

As his tutees we knew that, while it was wonderful to be his student, it probably was not wonderful to be his colleague. He was uncompromising. Or rather, he worked by a strict professional ideal. It was partly the sublimated samurai in him.

Tashiro spoke at the banquet of the ever-present danger of "a barbarian invasion from within"—recalling what he'd told us as students, that "every younger generation threatens all of civilization." Even a reunion banquet he would not allow to be too easy, but real, an occasion to investigate deeply, to see farther, to teach.

Bill Blakemore is a journalist and correspondent with ABC News. At present he is serving as an alumni-elected member of Wesleyan's Board of Trustees.

WILLIAM A. HUNT '65

Mr. Tashiro and the City

Mr. Tashiro (as I shall always address him) published little. But his beautiful, elliptical essay on "Three Passages in Homer" (*Anti-och Review*, spring 1965) contains the gist of what he taught us. It helps me recall his voice, since these were matters he had dis-

cussed with us not only in class, but into the long hours of the dawn. And it helps me to define his enduring influence, that which remains to us now that we have forgotten those thrilling lectures, those astounding blackboard diagrams.

As Tashiro taught us, "The history of civilizations, as the word implies, is primarily the history of cities. And the origin of the city is the necropolis. Civilization is what man has built upon the foundation of the dead."

He also taught us (and this was during the time of the Bay of Pigs crisis, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the beginnings of the Vietnam War) that civilizations are themselves mortal, like the cities from which they spring. As he put it, apropos the *Odyssey*, "the history of cities is a catalogue of ruin: Knossos, Pylos, Mycenae, Troy..."

Tashiro was an American of Japanese extraction. During his youth his relatives, though loyal American citizens, were placed in American concentration camps, while whole cities in the land of his ancestors were obliterated by American bombs. He rarely spoke of these things. But when he cited that "catalogue of ruin: Knossos, Pylos, Mycenae, Troy," it is hard to believe that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were far from his mind.

"The fall of a city is terrible," Tashiro wrote, "for the city is the material expression of a civilization, built with man's hands and mind. To destroy a man's city, or to expel him from it, is to destroy his humanity." He taught us to read the *Odyssey* as a "postwar novel, the epic of the displaced person," depicting a shattered world in which "neither law nor custom can protect the house against the predatory bands that invade to take possession of one's stores, to spoil and to waste."

Mr. Tashiro was haunted by the death of civilizations. He feared that nuclear war might inflict on all humanity the fate of Hiroshima and Troy. We all remember the chilling brilliance with which he interpreted Shakespeare's *King*



William Hunt

Lear. I believe he found in that play the parable of his own worst nightmare: man's willful descent from *civilitas*, through savagery, to extinction.

But his message was not despair, still less self-pity. It was survival — survival and regeneration through human fellowship. "Survival," he said (still teaching us the *Odyssey*), "can build new cities upon the ashes of the old, or move to new places for the plantation of colonies. History is a sequence of cities." Yet he reminded us insistently that "culture — whatever it is — is not possible without the help of the dead."

He never spoke abstractly of the goals of education, but I believe that his central aim was to instill civic loyalty in his students, loyalty to the endlessly plundered and reconstructed city. He hoped to enlist them in the defense and, if need be, the resurrection of that city that transcends all tribal and disciplinary frontiers — the Cosmopolis of shared humanity.

I last saw Mr. Tashiro at the 20th reunion banquet of the College of Letters Class of 1965. As usual, he surprised and disconcerted us. He did not, in his after-dinner address, reminisce or indulge in sentimental platitudes. Instead he spoke of China's "cultural revolution." He described the destruction of temples and libraries. It was the same old story: another plundered city.

But his point was not to condemn or lament. He explained that among the casualties of this new barbarism had been most of

the English-language books in China. Chinese scholars and educators were appealing to their American colleagues for books of all sorts, all genres and disciplines. Mr. Tashiro urged us to contribute any books we could spare to help replenish the libraries of China. To rebuild the City.

As I learned later, Mr. Tashiro already knew himself to be seriously ill. He could not have expected to see many of us again. His appeal for the Chinese libraries was his last legacy to us: a last lesson in citizenship.

William A. Hunt is a professor of history, specializing in Tudor and Stuart England, at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. For the 1987-88 academic year, he has been named a Davis Center Fellow at Princeton University.

ROBIN MCALLISTER '65

An Unfinished Lecture

When I thought of writing a memorial for Mr. Tashiro, I turned to my still-vivid memories of working on Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* for my senior thesis, of talking about Gombrich and Popper far into the night, hoping I would be able to evoke Mr. Tashiro's presence and say something about how he changed my life and shaped my thinking in ways that carried me through arid periods of graduate school and doubtful moments of teaching.

I tried to imagine what he might say about these attempts to write about him, and I remembered his words to us at the 1985 reunion: "Nostalgia as idealization of the past is unacceptable." I could almost hear his voice saying, "McAllister, if you wish to find me again, don't look to the past; look to the future."

I had before me a lecture "tailor-made according to the instructions of my former student, Robin McAllister," that he had been working on at the time of his death, a lecture addressed not only to me but, by extension, to all of us whose lives he had touched.

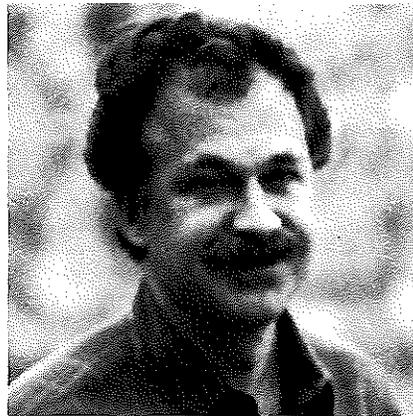
The lecture consists of several unnumbered pages of rough draft, notes, diagrams, a few heavily crossed-out, rewritten paragraphs. It thus resembles, at least for the Tashiro student, one of the long, brilliant absorbing conversations many of us remember in his apartment over sherry far into the night.

Ideas are suggested, daring perspectives are disclosed, but it is left to us to complete the thoughts, work out details and confirm or reject the assumptions after further thought or research—again, very characteristic of his teaching strategy, one designed to force us to make our own discoveries and learn to make connections for ourselves among what might otherwise appear to be very disparate phenomena.

The focus of the lecture was to have been how contemporary American and Latin-American literatures “reflect the new realities of the post-modern world.” One of the most complete sections is a discussion of Shakespeare.

“...We begin our talk...with the terms ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern.’ On the terrestrial level, where and with whom does one begin scrutiny of the end of traditional empires, the obsolescence of the nation-state, the disappearance of the middle-class, the shift of commercial traffic from the Atlantic to the Pacific Basin and the first war over Antarctica?”

“On the cosmic level, planet Earth is no longer the sole habitat of the human species. Daily dispatches from both manned and unmanned space probes revise our grasp on the universe. The new astrophysics has shaken notions of the heavens, of time, energy, cohesion and duration; while on Earth post-industrial society suffers the exploding “Culture of Poverty” throughout both hemispheres. Despite these assaults on the human consciousness, the quest for a new mind-set built on new beliefs and hopes remains perennial. Thus the hourly proliferation of facts taxes the attention and challenges the heuristic skills of Thinking Man. Where, indeed, to begin?



Robin McAllister

With Shakespeare? The answer is always Shakespeare.”

On another page I find: “To concretize the term ‘modern’ I return to Shakespeare. That subsequent generations dubbed him ‘the bard of Avon’ would have surprised the author of *Hamlet*. The hard-working son of a bankrupt, provincial, middle-class family had to migrate to the city to find employment. London overnight had become a world city, teeming with foreign immigrants. Crime in the form of street violence and youth gangs was rampant. Overcrowding, due to housing shortages, unemployment and the absence of public sanitation, resulted in regular outbreaks of epidemic diseases. The analogies between the beginning and the end of the modern age are obvious. Shakespeare learned quickly his survival skills, but as dramatist and performing artist, he developed an extraordinary heuristic skill not only to communicate his insights into a post-feudal modern reality, but also to create in the audience the emotions that responded and corresponded to a Renaissance version of futurology. Action, reaction, thought and revaluation. *Hamlet* the play is an epistemological tragedy; life for Hamlet the character is a series of soliloquies or meditations. Meanwhile, in the world of actuality (give or take a few years in this elastic presentation), the *viva activa* of the Tudor dynasty that invented England by way of centralized government and the nation-state was now in entropy. The brilliance of late Elizabethan

culture is that of a ‘nova,’ or dying star.”

Among the fragmentary notes that follow, I find definitions of heuristics and hermeneutics from *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles*, to which Tashiro adds: “The best short exposition of heuristics is that of Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*; the best literary use is Elizabeth Sewell’s *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History*.” I see him refer to George Herbert’s “attempts to harmonize—at least to reconcile—the fragmented reality and to heal the injured Western mind,” a recurring theme in the notes. And, tantalizingly, a blank space awaiting later citation just after the intriguing sentence: “In the only poem technically influenced by Donne, the mental and moral elegance of Herbert foresees the histories of the Americas.” Will I be able to discover the poem Tashiro had in mind? At least I shall read my Herbert with a fresh eye and discover unanticipated implications in his poetry.

I recognize Mr. Tashiro’s own carefully preserved mental and emotional distance that gave his perspective on events, books and people an all-embracing, *sub specie aeternitatis* quality that we would now call global or cosmic. It is a perspective he earned by wide travel, fluency in many languages, intellectual originality and genius, a perspective none of us can duplicate, though it influences and forms our own mental outlook forever.

I like to think that his last uncompleted lecture, written out as a last will and testament for his students, helps us define our roles as post-modern men and women. Mr. Tashiro would wish us to look forward, and insofar as we seek to reconcile our fragmented reality and heal our wounded minds, a part of him lives on in each of us.

Robin McAllister is an associate professor of English at Sacred Heart University, Trumbull, Conn., where he teaches general humanities courses, specializing in literary criticism and Medieval literature. He also has a particular interest in the literature of contemporary Latin America.

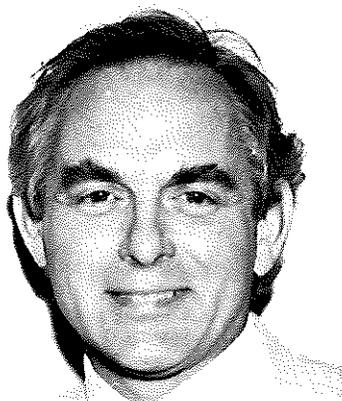
Tatami Mats and Chartres Cathedral

It was the first meeting of the Sophomore Colloquium. Tom Tashiro stood at the podium in the seminar room on the ground floor of Clark Hall. The argument of his lecture was that in order to understand literature, it was necessary to know everything. I remember how disconcerted I was by this assertion, but Tashiro had hooked me, and he kept me hooked.

His strong orientation toward the history of ideas ensured that the curriculum gave us a thorough grounding in Western literature, history and philosophy.

I am glad I was able to talk with him before his death, to gain a sense of the manner in which his thinking had evolved in the last 20 years. His vision had become much less Eurocentric—just as the realities of contemporary history have forced this recognition on all of us. I had the impression he now wanted to teach a truly global literature. If he were designing a three-year COL curriculum now, I am sure he would find more space for Eastern, Latin and African literatures.

King Lear, he pointed out to us, is Shakespeare's tragedy of being, the story of a man who wishes to retire from the heroic life and live in the assurance of love. It doesn't work, and the whole universal fabric collapses. The play is about a world ruled by a *deus absconditus*, a God who has withdrawn, and where both spiritual and actual authority are helplessly caught in a vortex of destructive force. It was Tashiro who pointed out that the best contemporary Shakespeare is being performed by the Japanese, and I think he would have welcomed the brilliant interpretation of *Lear* by Kurosawa in his film *Ran*. The concluding image is of a blind man tapping his cane at the edge of the abyss, which may well serve as the image of the human condition in the nuclear age.



James Welch

In one of our last conversations, he pointed out that it is possible for whole civilizations, such as that of the West, to be based on dialectic, so that everything is resolved into opposites—problems and solutions. Ambiguity can save the evidence, can allow the investigation to continue, for contemplation to touch all the poles.

What ambiguity and the refusal to make commitments also allows for is friendship, personal loyalties. Tashiro was a very self-conscious cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world. In his wanderings he made friends and he left them behind. That too is part of the Zen master. When he is with you, he is totally with you, and when he is not, he is gone.

Tashiro suffered because he was Japanese-American. His family was interned during the Second World War. He attended college, but not necessarily the institution of his choice (Cornell College, in Iowa). His service in army intelligence in Japan after the war no doubt added confusion to an already complex sense of identity.

Tashiro's mode of thinking was a kind of lifelong play of metaphysical wit. The subject of discussion would be Chartres cathedral, and suddenly he would be talking about the tatami mat as a module for the development of Japanese domestic architecture. Then slowly he would build the bridge—or pieces of the bridge—backwards, until you could see the connection or connections.

The excitement was in trying to meet the challenge, to see how

quickly you could jump the epistemological gap between tatami mats and Chartres cathedral, between A, B, C and Q. He was our Socrates, but also our Zen master, who might answer a question by throwing his shoe at you.

I think part of Tashiro's greatness was that none of his students really wanted to be like him. You couldn't be like him and, in any case, he was not looking for disciples, he was looking for *you*.

I talked with Tashiro again a few months before our 20th class reunion in the spring of 1985. We met at the home of friends of his, in a house on Chesapeake Bay. After lunch, we sat on the back porch, and I poured out my soul to him.

It was the same old magic. The good teacher writes on paper and is called scholar; the great teacher writes on the soul and is called beloved.

Part of Tashiro's relationship with the College of Letters and his students has to do with Wesleyan as an institution. What happened between Tom and the Class of '65 was made possible by Wesleyan's commitment to great teaching.

Tashiro was also a pain in the ass and neurotic in 10 ways. He was not able to take the straight path to academic success and honors; he had difficulty with colleagues and superiors. His dissertation ran into trouble, and he was apparently unable to make the compromises required for him to complete it.

He was a very private person. I don't know what prevented him from being more productive. His legacy is not as great as it might have been had he been able to confront some of his demons more honestly. He was no saint (or perhaps he was, a lot of saints having a full complement of character defects), but he gave all that he had to give. That is all the gods allow, or require. ■

James D. Welch, a former English professor, is a foreign-service officer with the United States Information Agency. He has served in both Mexico City and Bogota, Colombia, and today works with the USIA's Spanish book translation program.