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## Special Feature Article

### I am Just a Body: Project Itoh as a Cancer Patient and His Creativity

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#### Abstract

Project Itoh was a science fiction writer who debuted with "Genocide Organ" in June 2007, and died at the age of 34 due to cancer in March 2009. His activity period was less than two years and he only wrote two original novels, but the influence of his work on the Japanese SF scene was great.

In all of his works, he treats himself as the subject who has developed an illness and expresses it as science fiction. He received asthma treatment from a young age, and repeatedly underwent surgery and anticancer drug treatment after the onset of cancer. He referred to himself as one of the "children of technology".

The despair and fear he experienced when his cancer was discovered, and the disappearance of these emotions due to the chemistry of the administered stabilizer greatly influenced his work.

**Keywords** : pathography, Project Itoh, Salutogenesis

#### Introduction.

Project Itoh was a science fiction writer who made his debut in June 2007 with

the long story "Genocide Organ" and died of cancer in March 2009 at the age of 34. From his debut in 2007 until his

death from cancer, he was active for less than two years and wrote only two original full-length novels, but his works had an impact on the Japanese SF world and continue to have a great influence on subsequent authors. Because of his influence, the term "Post-Project Itoh" has even been coined in the SF world. For example, the July 2011 issue of SF Magazine, two years after his death, featured "Post-Project Itoh" as its theme, and a collection of critiques on "Post-Project Itoh's Science Fiction", *Posthumanities*, has also been published.

Itoh wrote this in his profile in his mixi diary 7) that he published on the web.

Occupation: Patient

Side business: Writer

Closed: WEB Designer

Weekend: Vomiting

He has often referred to himself as an "illness professional", though of course in a self-deprecating manner. In fact, long before he made his debut as a writer, he had been in and out of hospitals and had repeated surgeries as a sick person. The identity of "Occupation: Patient, Side business: Writer" is not only his original way of concealing his talent, but also an honest realization.

In this paper, I examine the relationship between his works and his life with illness from the perspective of pathology.

## I. Medical History of Project Itoh

First of all, I would like to introduce you to the career of Project Itoh.

Itoh was born in Tokyo in October 1974. His real name is Satoshi Itoh. He moved to Yachiyo City, Chiba Prefecture, when he was three years old to receive treatment for asthma. As he writes, "I have always had asthma, and an Sartanol inhaler was a must-have item" 6). Disease and drugs have been with him since childhood and these experiences are thought to have influenced his views on people and life.

Itoh grew up to be a boy who loved books and was more interested in drawing manga than studying.

He entered the Department of Visual Arts at Musashino Art University in April 1995, where he joined the Manga Research Group. In the same year, he began to suffer from unexplained sciatica.

In 1998, he met Hideo Kojima, the creator of the Metal Gear Solid video game series, of whom he was a passionate fan. Initially, their relationship was that of creator and fan, but after his debut as a writer, they became friends on equal terms, respecting each other's work, and their friendship lasted until his death.

After graduating in 1999, he got a job as a web director. By this time, he was "sweating profusely from mysterious

neuralgia that hurt so much that I would clench my teeth and scream when I lay down" 6).

In the summer of 2001, he was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, and in September, he was hospitalized and the nerves and muscles of his left thigh were removed.

In the meantime, he was watching more than 400 movies a year, and his personal website focusing on movie reviews was gaining popularity.

In July 2005, he was diagnosed with lung metastasis and underwent surgery and anticancer drug treatment. While fighting the disease, he wrote a full-length novel, "Genocide Organ", and submitted it for the Komatsu Sakyo Award in May 2006, but was not selected in the final selection. At the same time, Toh Enjoe, who would later become an Akutagawa Award-winning author, was unsuccessful in the Komatsu Sakyo Award, and invited Itoh to bring their works to Hayakawa Shobo, which led to his debut.

In September 2006, he underwent another surgery, and in October he experienced severe depression (more on this later).

In May 2007, he suffered a recurrence of lung metastasis and had half of his left lung removed. In June, his debut novel, "Genocide Organ", was published by Hayakawa Shobo, and was selected as the best SF domestic novel of the

following year.

Itoh was then repeatedly admitted and discharged from the hospital for chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

In June 2008, at the request of Hideo Kojima, he published a long novelization of the game, "Metal Gear Solid Guns of the Patriots".

In September, morphine administration was started. At the same time, anticancer drugs and radiotherapy were also started. By this time, the number of metastases had increased to six.

In December, his second original full-length work, "Harmony", was published. After the author's death, this work won numerous awards, including first place in the Best SF Domestic Section, the Seiun Award in the Japanese Novel Division, and the Japan SF Grand Prize.

On March 20, 2009, He passed away at the age of 34.

His book "Harmony", translated into English and published in the United States in April 2011, won the Philip K. Dick Award for Special Achievement.

In 2012, his posthumous novel "The Empire of the Corpse", of which only the first 30 pages had been completed, was published in collaboration with Toh Enjoe. It won the 31st Japan SF Award Special Prize and the 44th Seiun Award in the Japanese Novel Division, and his reputation continues to grow even after his death.

## II. Depressive Symptoms and the "Stabilizer Experience"

Here, I would like to mention "posthuman SF", which is an essential part of the story of Project Itoh.

"Posthuman" is one of the important themes of modern science fiction, and according to Makoto Yamagishi, it is "a story about humanity transformed by technology, and a world in which ethics, values, and even the meaning of humanity and the definition of humanity have changed drastically along with it" 9). This is a theme that has been taken up by many writers, from cyberpunk writers, such as John Varley in the 1970s, Sterling and Gibson in the 1980s, to G. Egan and C. Stross.

Project Itoh's works are also included in this trend of posthuman SF. Indeed, a collection of critiques on the theme of "post-Itohuman SF" entitled *Posthumanities* has been published. The theme of "posthuman" was not just a subject of science fiction, but it had an important meaning for him.

In 2002, before he became a writer, Itoh wrote, "A body that is maintained by science and technology. A body that would disappear without technology. What this means, in essence, is that I am a cyborg. ...I am one of the children of technology. I am one of those people who have demonstrated with their bodies that the reality in which they live

is already and always cyberpunk" 6).

Having been treated for asthma since childhood, and having already undergone cancer surgery, Itoh knew from first-hand experience that he himself could not live without technology. In other words, "posthuman" was reality itself for him.

Itoh experienced depression several times during his cancer treatment. He was given stabilizers as palliative care for these depressions and feelings of hopelessness, and this is what he said about them.

"Of course I feel scared and want to cry. However, when the doctor gave me medicine because such feelings are not good for treatment, I became very calm and all my feelings were resolved. I wonder what human emotions are all about" 8).

These are Itoh's words quoted in a text written by Rokuro Shinofusa, a manga artist who was his junior at university, on the first anniversary of Itoh's death.

In his blog, he writes as follows.

"I think about many things. The time when the doctor told me that there was something nesting in my thigh. The despair I felt at that time. The stabilizer that blew away my despair, fear, and sadness so easily. The strange anger I felt when my emotions were blown away by its chemical effects" 6).

Itoh has repeatedly talked about this "stabilizer experience". This experience

also greatly influenced his major works such as "Genocide Organ" and "Harmony". In a sense, it is no exaggeration to say that this experience created the writer Project Itoh.

He realizes that emotions can be altered by technology and chemicals. But instead of accepting it, he feels frustrated and angry about it. This is an existential anger at the fact that emotions that should belong to him can be destroyed by a mere drug.

In addition, I would like to quote what he said about his depression.

"In the evening, I always feel faint and begin to tremble with fear. Not metaphorically, but if it metastasizes any further, there will be no lungs left to shave. That's the end of it. This is my brain talking, so thinking, "Oh, this is just the way my brain functions are inclined to generate these feelings", doesn't solve anything. The cycle is clear, so it's obviously a physical, inexplicably physical (well, consciousness is a physical phenomenon, too) problem" 6).

Itoh naturally thought that depression was a physical problem caused by the functioning of the brain. He also recognized that consciousness is a physical phenomenon.

However, even though he knew this, he also felt that "it doesn't solve anything".

The fact that one's emotions and even one's identity can be altered by drugs and technology is the very thesis of the

"posthuman SF" depicted by Greg Egan and others. For example, Egan's short story "Reasons for Happiness" 2) is about a young man who has become severely depressed due to an extreme decrease in the secretion of narcotic substances in his brain. As a treatment, he receives a so-called "happiness synthesizer" that allows him to freely control the release of narcotic-like substances in his brain, but this leads him to feel only "controlled happiness", no matter how happy he is. The reality in which Project Itoh has lived is exactly like the one in this novel. In Egan's novel, the protagonist accepts himself as such, but in Itoh's case, he feels a "strange anger" toward it.

He writes about his very earnest recognition in his blog, "I am afraid to die, knowing that I am only a body, knowing that I cannot escape from it".

Although he understands and accepts from actual experience that emotions and even consciousness are physical phenomena, there is a "fear" and "anger" that pushes him beyond this understanding. This is the driving force behind Itoh's creations.

### III. Examination of the work

With these points in mind, I would like to look at two of his major works. "Genocide Organ" 4), his debut feature, is a story as follows.

In the near future, a controlled society

has been established to fight terrorism, and massacres have suddenly begun in many countries where there had been no spark before. In the shadows, there is John Paul. In the process of tracking him down, the protagonist, a member of the U.S. Special Forces, learns that humans have organs that control genocide, and that there is a "Genocide Grammar" that activates these organs.

This work is both a first-class entertainment and a very personal story. It is also an image of the artist's own body. In the story, the world changes with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and a chain of massacres spreads around the world. This can be read as a superimposition of the image of cancer, which started at the same time and spread through his own body.

"When the plane hit the WTC, I was in the hospital watching the footage. I had just joined the ranks of the crippled. I had just lost my right sciatic nerve and the main muscle of my right thigh, and had said goodbye forever to all control and sensation below the knee" 6). As he writes in his essay, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which are described in "Genocide Organ" as a turning point that changed the world, are inextricably linked to the onset of his cancer. That is exactly when his world changed. Although it was his own body, he could not feel anything when he touched it, nor could he move it freely. It was at this

moment that he was made aware of the fact that he was nothing more than matter.

The human being in this work is deprived of free will by a software switch called "Genocide Grammar". In addition, the protagonist is subjected to psychological and surgical procedures to remove psychological obstacles on the battlefield. As mentioned earlier, these depictions were not science fiction speculation for him, but reality itself. These descriptions clearly reflect the author's own drug-induced emotional loss experience.

Next, we examine "Harmony" 5).

Due to a worldwide catastrophe, the traditional government has collapsed. The new governing body, the "Seihu", considers people themselves to be a public resource, and has built an advanced medical welfare society where the body system constantly monitors health. In such a society, a series of suicides occur, and Tuan, a woman who works as a WHO inspector, sees the shadow of Mia Ha, a woman who once tried to commit suicide in defiance of a healthy society.

This work has a trick in the style itself: it is written directly in html-like tags that are used to describe websites. This is a fictional markup language called etml, which is used to describe emotions, and this style of writing itself has a great deal to do with the foundation of

the story. The story is written for a being who cannot experience emotions without using these tags.

"Harmony" depicts a world in which all disease has been eradicated by a monitoring system that constantly monitors the body and tailor-made medical molecules. It is a depiction of the human desire to eliminate nature and turn reality into virtual reality, as well as a caricature of the medical field as seen by the author himself. However, the artist is also fully aware that he is kept alive by such medical technology.

At the conclusion of the story, the end of such desires is depicted as the "annihilation of consciousness = self". This is the birth of a perfect posthuman utopia in which all human beings live as so-called "philosophical zombies" with their consciousness and emotions erased.

To quote a passage from "Harmony".

"For humans, who are social animals, if we have long since passed the point in time when we need the functions of emotion and consciousness, what hesitation do we have in "curing" emotion and consciousness from our brain functions, just as we cure diabetes?" 5).

The reason for the comparison with diabetes is that some people believe that diabetes is a function needed to cope with the cold climate. In other words, the fundamental idea of this story is

that the consciousness that humans have acquired is just a function that is temporarily needed in the process of evolution, and should be "treated" when it is no longer needed. Itoh, who has experienced emotional transformation through drugs and technology, has always felt uncomfortable with discourses that privilege human consciousness and emotions. Here, too, we can see the influence of the author's own experience of emotional loss due to palliative care, as I mentioned earlier. In other words, "Harmony" is also a kind of personal novel, and can be read as a critique of one's own situation.

### Conclusion

To bring this back to the theme of this symposium, "Health Generation", the question arises as to why he was able to maintain his mental health and produce excellent works of art despite the harsh environment of his battle with cancer.

His comrade, Toh Enjoe, who made his debut at about the same time as Project Itoh and completed his unfinished posthumous work "The Empire of the Corpse" after his death, wrote about him as follows. "He was always calmly observing his own illness and never wavered in his view of himself as material and substance" 3).

Perhaps this was an attitude that he acquired as he suffered from asthma from an early age. This view of

humanity has an affinity with the genre of science fiction, which depicts people from the perspective of science, and it is inevitable that he became attracted to science fiction.

It is also important to note the effect that writing had on Itoh's health.

In the first place, up until his university days, Itoh was never a writer. At art school, he was a member of the manga club, and the other members submitted manga and novels to the club magazine, but Itoh never published a full-length work, even though he sometimes posted previews of his works. After graduation, in 2000, he won the Afternoon Four Seasons Award for Winter Honorable Mention for his short manga "Naked", and began to work with an editor, but he never continued.

It was only after he was diagnosed with cancer that he began to blog vigorously and write novels in earnest. I'm not going to say that he was able to write because he had cancer; but, at least I can say that if he had not had cancer, his works would have been completely different.

He distanced himself from the raw emotions of anxiety and fear of death, as well as his own situation, and calmly looked at them, and played the consistent character of a movie geek on his blog, and further outputted them as science fiction works set in a fictional world. This process may have brought a

sense of "meaningfulness" (Antonovsky 1) to his illness and contributed to his mental stability. At least, this is what I think.

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