An Ethics of Self-Consciousness in Modern Japanese Literary Writing

by

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Abstract

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In my dissertation, “An Ethics of Self-Consciousness: Modern Japanese Writing about Literature,” I argue that for one line of modern Japanese critical and literary writers, investigations into the form of the novel as a genre took on ethical dimensions that impelled dramatic changes in their writing styles. Drawing broadly on the literary theories of Kamei Hideo, Suzuki Sadami, Michel Foucault, and Paul de Man, I suggest that reflexive narrative acts constituted ethical practice for these writers because such acts revealed the norms of recognition (which include politico-historical situations as well as the grammar of the language through which subjects identify one another) that determined what counted as legitimate subject positions. They experimented with self-conscious literary and critical writing to expose the limits of such norms, which they found inscribed in the language and form of the novel.

The ethical reflexivity these writers came to value required an increasingly self-conscious theoretical language to account for it. Accordingly, these writers also experimented with multivalent critical languages that would not reinscribe the language of the novel into the very social structures the novel attempted to critique. By examining their arguments about literature in relation to transformations in the structure, style, and rhetoric of their criticism, and by paying attention to the interplay between their criticism and their novels, I link for the first time transformations in the language and forms of their writing with developments in their theoretical approaches to the ethical responsibility of the novelistic form itself.

In the first two chapters I examine the work of one of the progenitors of both modern Japanese criticism and fiction, Mori Ōgai (1868-1922). I argue that Ōgai discovered in self-conscious novelistic writing a means of critiquing the novel’s social and ethical commitments to representing subjects “authentically” in ways that the rational, philosophical language of his early criticism could not accomplish. Drawing on theories of the novel by Mikhail Bakthin and René Girard, I show that Ōgai adopted a dialogic writing style that put competing voices in tension to expose the conventions of novelistic representation that legitimize the perspectives of his narrators at the expense of the authority and autonomy of other characters, and, even, his readers.

My third chapter focuses on Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), whose compelling, carefully wrought and highly intellectual prose style symbolized the heights of Japanese modernism for many contemporaries as well as future generations. I draw on theories of aesthetics and ethics by Paul de Man and Geoffrey Harpham, among others, to suggest that for
Akutagawa literary representation bore an ethical responsibility to reflect on its potentially determinant constructions of the self and others. In his late (1925-27) critical and literary writing, Akutagawa adopted an increasingly reflexive, fragmented style that created what Judith Butler calls an “ethical opacity,” deliberate narrative obfuscation that vexes the transparency with which discursive norms constitute the subject as such, in order to expose what he saw as the terrifying solipsism of modern literary constructions of the self.

By putting these writers together for the first time through the concept of an “ethics of self-consciousness,” I provide a new means of organizing the history of modern Japanese theories of the novel. At the same time, I help clarify the reciprocal relationship between transformations in the forms of the novel and literary criticism. Finally, this research paves the way to construct a genealogy of the development of modern critical writing into something like we call “literary theory.”
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Introduction

Two of modern Japan’s most famous and influential novelists, Mori Ōgai (1868-1922) and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), drastically transformed the styles and genres of their writing in the last phases of their careers. Each moved from more conventional works of novelistic fiction toward forms of novel writing that made complex claims toward authenticity. Ōgai turned to historical fiction, and Akutagawa to quasi-autobiographical works that play upon the conventions of the I-novel.\(^1\) Although the temperaments and styles of these writers stood in stark contrast to each other—Ōgai displayed a rational, scientific mindset, and wrote tightly controlled, elegant, and often rather formal prose, while Akutagawa openly displayed a more volatile temperament, given to extremes of hope and despair that he expressed in prose at turns affecting and ironic—both of their late shifts in focus have been cast in subsequent scholarship as the result of disillusionment with modern approaches to truth and representation.

In Ōgai’s case, his “abandonment” of fiction has been understood as the result of his lifelong pursuit of truth and objectivity in writing; Dennis Washburn suggests that he could not rid himself of an essentially Confucian sense that fiction amounted to no more than “lies.” In Akutagawa’s case, his turn to quasi-autobiographical writing has been understood as the end of a desperate search for salvation in art; Makoto Ueda explains the move as precipitated by a breakdown in mental health and the realization that artistic representation could not even confer coherence on the harsh realities of daily life. In the minds of many socially-minded critics, these shifts signal the authors’ realizations of a resonant ethical failure in their writing—the failure to ground literary representations in social reality.

Early in their careers, both Ōgai and Akutagawa argued vehemently against any ethical imperative in the novel, and made strong cases for its status as an aesthetic work of art. Yet in this dissertation I will argue that their formal investigations into the genre of novel took on ethical dimensions that impelled dramatic changes in their writing styles, leading to a kind of social formalism—an understanding that the novel bore an ethical responsibility not for the ethical relationships it represented, but for the ethical sensibilities naturalized by its narrative form, in its language and the interpretive stances it invites. Over the course of their individual careers, and as a general historical trend, their writing became increasingly self-conscious, reflexively calling attention to the ethics of its own formal structures and the relationships it sought to establish with readers. Through this self-consciousness, both writers endeavored to create multivalent narrative perspectives that would not merely reproduce the social structures whose ethics the modern novel, in their view, attempted to critique. In this light, the shifts at the end of their careers might not seem a clear break from a former, ethically insufficient mode of writing, but rather a culmination of what I call an “ethics of self-consciousness,” an inward turn through which they attempted to reveal the ethics of the very literary conventions their writing inevitably employed.

The concept of an ethics of self-consciousness can help us link transformations in the language and forms of Ōgai’s and Akutagawa’s critical and literary writing to their

\(^1\)The term I-novel loosely signified a form of supposedly autobiographical writing in which the author recounted certain experiences in his life, particularly tales of his engagement in the bundan (literary world) and his struggles to find meaning in his life and work. The form was something of a cross between “confessional literature,” modeled on Rousseau, and zuihitsu, a traditional form of Japanese essay-like writing in which the author simply “followed his pen,” and worried little about having a closed plot structure. In essence, it was a form of “writing the self” influenced by Western literature that could nevertheless claim its roots in traditional Japanese literature.
understandings of the ethical responsibility of the modern novel. By focusing primarily on reflexivity as a mode of literary ethics in modern Japanese narrative form and genre, we may revise a number of critical assumptions not only about the trajectories of these writers’ careers, but also about the relationship between modern Japanese experimental writing and social ethics in general. Experimental modern writing famous for both its absorption with the concept of the self (as expressed through theoretical obsession with the concepts of *jiga* and *jibun*, or their repeated invocations of the conventions of what would come to be called the *I*-novel) and its self-absorption, such as that of Iwano Hōmei or many of the White Birch Society (*shirakaba-ha*) writers, may turn out not to ignore ethics and social concerns (as such writing itself often declares). On the contrary, the imbricated and self-referential aspects of works subsequently criticized for their hermetic self-obsession and their failure to represent much beyond the horizon of the “literary world” (*bundan*) may in fact engage ethics directly and deliberately at the level of the narrative form, rendering ethics as a matter of the representation of point of view in novelistic writing itself. Borrowing from diverse contemporary theories of literary ethics, including those of Kamei Hideo, Paul de Man, and Judith Butler, I argue that Ōgai and Akutagawa represent strong versions of an “ethics of self-consciousness” that may prove characteristic of much modern Japanese experimental writing.

No one has ever claimed that Akutagawa takes up the mantle of Ōgai’s literary ethics, probably because few think of either writer as mainly concerned with ethics, because their styles and approaches to the novel and the substance of their writing are so paradigmatically contrastive as to be taken as representative of distinct periods and movements within modernity, and because Akutagawa consciously distinguished himself from his predecessor. The concept of an ethics of self-consciousness will allow us to discover affinities among writers not often linked, and frequently understood in opposition to one another in sensibility, style, and philosophy. The parallels between the way Ōgai and Akutagawa both use narrative reflexivity to create jarring literary effects that confront readers directly with the problematic relationship between *ethos* and *pathos* in their work are distinctive and transcend the particular subjects they treat and the modes of writing they employ. Although for Ōgai novelistic ethics turns out to consist in conscious recognition of the effects of narrative aesthetics, and for Akutagawa it is instead the affective encounter with literary aesthetics that produces the reflexive ethical moment, both writers clearly experiment with the representation of narrative perspective to generate increasingly self-conscious literary texts that link ethics to the form of novelistic writing.

Few writers were as influential as Ōgai in shaping the future of literary criticism. His early critical work, which included translations and interpolations of German and European criticism, quickly established him as an authority in the burgeoning genre. Yet he hardly ever applied his critical principles to any particular literary work; rather, he generally wrote what could be termed self-conscious criticism about criticism (“*hyōron no hyōron*,” in Yoshida Seiichi’s words (xi)). His essays on literature tended to center on the roles of subjectivity and objectivity in critical approaches to the novel, and on the methodology appropriate to the field of aesthetics itself.

One finds a telling correspondence between the topics and rhetorical modes of Ōgai’s critical and literary writings. His earliest essays aim at establishing an objective, dispassionate, rational method of argument that appeals to universal structures of logic to make a case for the aesthetics of the novel and the role of subjectivity and objectivity in both artistic production and critical assessment. His criticism in the early 1890s deliberately masks its subjective qualities to
present itself as objective, disinterested reason. Over the course of his career, however, his criticism gradually sheds its universalizing pretences to bring a more personal voice to his writing about literature. His essays after 1900 take on a far more relaxed, anecdotal quality, and draw on distinctly literary devices and conventions, rather than logic and scientific method, to achieve their effects. In the later 1900s, he comments more frequently on individual texts and specific trends or goings-on in the literary world, while making few if any forays into setting abstract standards for criticism in general.

While his writing about literature over the course of his career increasingly manifests distinctly “literary” qualities that highlight the subjective quality of a perspective once deliberately framed as detached and disinterested, his literary writing appears to move in the opposite direction. His earliest literary works downplay what I will argue is a systematic and rigorous interrogation, in all of his creative writing, of the way literary devices and genre conventions operate to solicit complicity with narrative perspectives. They present themselves as more or less straightforward and exemplary “novels” in the European tradition of romantic tales such as Hans Christian Anderson’s 1835 Improvisatore, which Ōgai famously translated (1892 to 1901). After a twelve-year hiatus from creative writing, however, his novels after 1909 begin to foreground the positions of their narrators and their motives and methods of writing. The result is often jarringly reflexive. Vita Sexualis, for example, features two authoring “I’s, both ostensibly persona of the author himself, and both of whom discuss the act of writing the text in which they appear. And his last work of pure fiction before turning to historical novels, “The Wild Geese” (Gan, 1911), so deliberately challenges the convention of narrative representation, blatantly destroying the illusion of first-person eyewitness narration on which it seems to depend for its effects (by suddenly shifting into inexplicable moments of third-person omniscience), that questions about the narrator’s point of view and the tendentious qualities of the narrative itself are forced into the foreground. Finally, his historical writings openly discuss their representation of truth and reality, juxtaposing the subjective commentary of an intrusive author against “objective” narration that remains resolutely exterior to the events it describes.

Despite his initial efforts to keep the genres rigidly defined, Ōgai’s critical and novelistic writings become infected by each other. Over the course of his career, his criticism takes on distinctly literary qualities, while his literature becomes more openly self-theorizing, foregrounding its narrative form and the claims it makes to represent reality authentically or truthfully. The boundaries between the forms seem to have been blurred by his self-conscious efforts to achieve “authenticity” in the relationship between literary representation and social reality.

Akutagawa, by contrast, wrote criticism in a variety of forms and with such versatile prose throughout his career that such a clear-cut pattern does not seem to present itself. Yet his final major essay on literature, “Literary, All-too Literary” (bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na, 1927), with its sometimes subtle and sometimes jarring shifts from anecdotal, “fictionalized” storytelling to direct readerly address to theoretical commentary to musings on life and then back again, breaks almost as clearly from his earlier writing on literature as his last two stories, “A Fool’s Life” (Aru ahō no isshō, 1927) and “Cogwheels” (Haguruma, 1927) do from his earlier fiction. For Akutagawa, like Ōgai, the boundaries between critical and creative writing become increasingly blurred as his work becomes more self-consciously reflexive. It seems that both writers increasingly experiment with meta-literary modes of writing that sought to illuminate the nature of both the novel and criticism from within.
This dissertation chiefly confines itself to discovering and considering the role that an “ethics of self-consciousness” plays in the fiction of Ōgai and Akutagawa. However, examining the development of the genre of literary criticism in modern Japan in light of this concept should also illuminate the degree to which Japanese criticism and the novel, which developed in tandem and went through numerous concomitant transformations, share a constitutive, self-conscious concern with the ethical valence of their own language and formal structures. By attending to the reflexive concerns with the relation of literary genre, narrative form, and ethics in the literary and critical writing of the foremost modern Japanese critical writers, we can begin to trace a “genealogy” of the development of the genre of literary criticism into something like “literary theory.”

An ethics of self-consciousness may help us to link modern critical and creative writers as diverse (and often mutually antagonistic) as Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935), Mori Ōgai, Shimamura Hōgetsu (1871-1918), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Yokomitsu Riichi (1898-1947), and Kobayashi Hideo (1902-1983), and may even prove constitutive of the genres of literary criticism and prose fiction in modern Japan. At the very least, the concept will shed new light on much of the cross-influence and inter-related transformations in language, form, and substance that occurred simultaneously in the genres of Japanese literary criticism and the novel itself.


When the twenty-six year old doctor and dabbler in literary arts Mori Ōgai returned to Japan in September of 1888, after roughly four years of medical research in Germany, he came back to a literary scene substantially transformed from the one he had left. He travelled as part of a broad program of national expansion through the exploration of foreign cultures, technologies, and ideas ushered in by the opening of Japan’s borders in the Meiji Restoration in 1868. During his absence, articles on how Japanese writers should respond to the sudden influx of European literature began to proliferate in the many new journals which sprung up, such as the Hanseikai zasshi (first published in 1887 and then renamed in Chūokōron in 1899, after which it became one of Japan’s most popular publications) and Nihon no jogaku zasshi (a journal devoted to addressing cultural issues related to women, published 1887-1889). The “state of literature” itself had in fact become a topic of considerable public debate among men of letters, most of whom were borrowing new philosophical and critical vocabularies from European nations. Even the form and grammar of the language of literary writing itself had changed drastically, with more and more literary texts appearing not in kobun (classical Japanese) or kanbun (the Japanese way of writing in Chinese), but rather a variety of amalgamate forms of Japanese more closely approximating everyday speech. The change in language resulted from what would come to be known as a movement aimed in part at modernizing the written language, called genbun ‘itchi, which had picked up considerable momentum during Ōgai’s years abroad.

2 What we call genbun ‘itchi was actually a complex conglomerate of several movements that gathered momentum in mid-Meiji. The common goal was to make literary language more commensurate with spoken Japanese. This involved not only transforming literary writing itself, but also consolidating the various provincial dialects into a standardized form of Japanese that would become the national norm. See Nanette Twine’s 1991 book Language and the Modern State - The Reform of Written Japanese for more on this phenomenon.
An equally dramatic change occurred in the status of prose fiction itself. As Japanese literary scholar Yanagita Izumi points out in his 1965 study Ideas of Literature in early Meiji, Japanese prose literature had reached a low ebb by the start of the Meiji period. Yanagita attributes this state to both an absence of outstanding writers at the time and the fact that the court, clergy, and educated samurai had, in the previous century, come to view prose fiction as suitable only for entertainment, in contrast with the refinement of kanshi (Chinese poetry) or the aesthetic beauty of Nō drama, which required far more technical learning and virtuosity (35). According to Yanagita, these men contended that the highest function of prose writing, and the only justification for indulging in it, lay in its capacity to deliver a moral message in a way that would reach a wide audience (a view modeled perhaps on the setsuwa, often parabolic tales illustrating Buddhist principles). Yet as Japanese writers and thinkers began to process the weighty tradition of Western (and particularly European) literature and literary discourse made available by the opening of Japan’s borders with the Meiji Restoration, they began to question these views of the value and gravitas of prose writing.

Two revolutionary “novels” published between Ogai’s departure and his return greatly accelerated this process of critical transformation: Tsubouchi Shōyō’s The Temperment of Today’s Students (Tōsei shōsei katagi, 1885) and his friend Futabatei Shimeı’s (1864-1909) Floating Clouds (Ukigumo, 1887-1889).3 The latter achieved wide popularity, and incited many critical debates for its predominantly “modernized” version of genbun’itchi language and its experimental narrative perspective. As contemporary Japanese scholar Kamei Hideo points out in his 1983 book, Transformations of Sensibility: The Phenomenology of Meiji Literature, Futabatei’s narrative persona gradually moves from a storyteller-like position found in preexisting Japanese prose forms, such as yomihon (entertaining “reading books” of fiction that drew heavily on Chinese and classical Japanese precedents) or kokkeibon (“books of humor”), to the perspective of what Kamei calls a “non-person narrator,” an invisible subjective narrative presence that sympathizes with the protagonist, producing something like the free indirect style narrative practiced in Europe at the time.

These experiments in “Westernizing” prose fiction, and the sudden acceleration of interest in the genre of the novel, owed much to the theory of the novel put forth in the 1885 publication of Shōyō’s critical essay “The Essence of the Novel.” In that essay, Shōyō deplores the current state of Japanese prose fiction and challenges Japanese writers to surpass their European counterparts by writing according to the artistic standards they have made visible. He defines several genres for prose fiction, and lays out rules and methods for writing artistic novels he hopes will take hold in Japan. The rhetorical force of the essay, however, is directed toward arguing that the novel should be treated as a work of “art” rather than a venue for entertainment or moral instruction, and that as such it should be judged by purely aesthetic standards, which he endeavors to elucidate. The essay famously heralded significant transformations in Japanese thought about the novel. But it also created a niche for critical writing about the value of prose writing, and the evaluative frameworks through which it may be apprehended, and so marks the beginning of modern Japanese literary criticism as well.

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3 The Japanese “novel” emerged in the Meiji period as a polymorphous genre in the process of being both interpolated and invented by works such as Shōyō’s and Futabatei’s. Before the Meiji period, although the word we now translate from Japanese as “novel” (shōsetsu) existed, it was used to designate various styles of writing that differ considerably from what we consider novels, including fables, tales of romance, and classics imported from neighboring nations, especially China.
Late Edo period (1603-1867) and early Meiji criticism of prose writing before Shōyō tended work in evaluative or prescriptive registers, consisting largely of impressionistic judgments about the nature and quality of texts. Such criticism often condemned or praised the works based on the degree to which their plots accorded with moral sensibilities first, and aesthetic sensibilities second. Although as Tanizawa Eiichi notes, in his “The Conception of Modern Japanese Literary History,” most writers no longer believed in the moral principle of kanzenchōaku, it subsisted in criticism because no better system for valuing prose had developed (23-24). In “The Essence of the Novel” Shōyō positions himself against the lingering influence of this value system and offers his own aesthetic theory to replace its moralizing one.

The acrobatics of Shōyō’s stand against moralvaluations of the novel in this essay reveals a complex and, in the end, mutually dependent relationship of moral and aesthetic principles in his conception of the novel as a form. He contends that in the Japanese “didactic” novel, characters and story serve only as means to this moral end, and therefore fail to achieve the vividness and lifelike quality of their counterparts in artistic European literature. In contrast, the “true artistic novel” should present as accurately and faithfully as possible the author’s experience of the real world (as refined by his imagination): “The novel attempts to describe human nature and social conditions. It should reveal what is obscure, and give a realistic portrayal of the mysteries of destiny in man’s life by spinning the thread of an original idea into a skillful web of emotions...” (8). The resonance of the novelistic representation with one’s experience of the world constitutes the power of the novel’s “art.” By suggesting that the novel should be judged by its capacity to render mimetically the truth of human nature and experience, rather than for its illustration of prescribed moral principles, Shōyō shifts the locus of the Japanese critical vocabulary from the predominantly religious domain of morality to more abstract and philosophical terms of “truth” and “reality,” the definition and apprehension of which become central to literary discussion in the decades that follow.

For all of his insistence to the contrary, Shōyō’s theory of the novel proves as firmly rooted in morality as the conception of kanzenchōaku he critiques. When it comes to defending the “benefits” of the artistic novel, he argues that it “ennobles character,” “stimulates finer feelings” and models real human behavior in a way the “discerning reader,” who “usually learns from someone else’s example” can grasp (37). He claims that the novel makes its readers better people, more sensitive to the problems that arise in the world they experience. If an artistic novel tells a morally ambiguous story, he suggests, this is all the more valuable to discerning readers who can untangle its complex moral cues, because it mirrors the kinds of difficult dilemmas they face in the real world. Even in his attempt to make aesthetics rather than morality the proper sphere of critical discussion, he finds himself grounding his aesthetic values in more or less moral concerns about how people live their lives.

The originality of his position stems from the fact that while he remains fundamentally committed to the moral value of the novel, he no longer situates the responsibility for this morality in the intentions of the author. The author does not have to make any kind of readily apparent moral statement through his story, the efficacy and expression of which it becomes the province of the critic to judge. The morality of Shōyō’s artistic novel emerges, rather, from the interpretative interaction of the reader with the prismatic realism of the successful work, rather than through any effort on the part of the novelist to “teach” a particular moral lesson. When she

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4 It is precisely this “realism” at which Shōyō argues the artistic novel aims through its fictional devices: “it attempts to handle its imaginary characters and their imaginary setting in as realistic a fashion as possible” (32).
reads a truly “artistic” novel, the perspicacious reader gains insight into the complexity of moral dynamics and human relations in the real world that the author has helped make visible, and can therefore make better decisions based on her “finer feelings” and “cultivated sensibilities.”

Shōyō does not do away with morality as a critical standard, but only relocates moral effects from the content of the story to its frame, privileging aesthetics as the domain in which morality becomes effective. The value of the novel becomes the province of the critic rather than the novelist to reveal. That is, the moral is no longer manifest in the content of the story, plainly displayed for critical judgment, but rather internalized as part of the aesthetic effect of the novel as a work of art that needs to be unearthed by critical analysis. On Shōyō’s view, if the critic is to appreciate the moral and aesthetic effects of the novel, he must take the phenomenological experience of reading into account. He must reflect on the relationship of the novel’s representation of reality with his own experience of the world. In the end, critical engagement with a truly artistic novel in fact leads to reflection on the self and one’s experiences: “The novel reveals what is hidden, defines what is indistinct, and brings together all man’s innumerable passions within the covers of a book, thereby naturally stimulating the reader to introspection” (29). The implicit argument is that the artistic novel brings about a self-consciousness directly tied to the ennobling benefits of reading; it is the task of the critic to reflect on this interpretive phenomenon itself.

Criticism for Shōyō must not only analyze and reveal the moral value of the stories represented by novels, but also investigate the self-reflective processes of interpretation the novel makes possible. That is, for Shōyō, the successful artistic novel engages readers in a self-conscious and morally productive introspection. Criticism must therefore work through a further self-conscious turn, insofar as it reflects on the novel’s intrinsic self-reflection in order to apprehend the structures and effects of that representation. In the process of putting forward his vision of the novel, then, Shōyō winds up putting forth a new vision of criticism to accommodate and explain that view—one in which morality, self-consciousness, and aesthetics prove definitive of critical and novelistic value. Both critic and novelist must reflect and reveal aspects of the (fictional and real) worlds they explore, both “define what is indistinct” about our experience of those worlds, and both imbue with significance the worlds they uncover for the benefit of their readers. Even the tone and perspective he himself adopts in “The Essence of the Novel,” which postwar critic Yoshida Seiichi characterizes as “an effort to make critical argument a more objective enterprise” (43), resonates with what Shōyō describes as the appropriate stance of the novelist:

If a novelist wants to explore the depths of human nature and paint society as it is, then he must write as if describing a chess game he is watching other people play. Should he, as an onlooker, offer even the smallest piece of advice, the game becomes his instead of the players’! It is only when he resists the temptations to change those things he thinks he could improve on and confines himself to the facts that his work can be called a novel. (26)

The success of both the novelist and the critic for Shōyō turns out to depend on their adopting the same perspectival mode. Each must describe their object from an objective vantage point that allows him to observe and render perceptible the dynamics of engagement in which the “players” actively participate. And just as Shōyō suggests that the subjective opinion of novelists would destroy the objective purchase needed for a successful novel, so too does he imply, through the grounds he sets for discussion and his method of argument, that the critic, as well, must appeal to objective, rational standards rather than personal experience, taste, or expertise, the profession of which would destroy his objective neutrality and “make the game his own.”
Although the particulars of Shōyō’s argument would come under much scrutiny and incite many debates in subsequent years, his recasting of the role of criticism in light of his vision of the novel as an aesthetic form became definitive for both genres. The implicit analogy in his argument between the function of the novel and that of criticism becomes an explicit theory in subsequent attempts to define both genres. He invites such a development through the parallel in his justification for the novel—that it refines and ennobles the reader, and that in turn an “improved” novel would better the nation as a whole and prove that Japan was not culturally inferior to the West, for example—and his argument for the value of his and others’ critical work. Shōyō argues that

If the novel really possesses such possibilities as these, then, would it not be seriously remiss of us not to overhaul and improve our crude Japanese novels, to make them flawless, better than those in the West, to produce a great art form fit to be called the flower of our nation? To do it, we must work out a plan for writing the perfect novel by first understanding the reasons for past successes and failures.... Without a campaign of this nature, the Oriental novel will probably always remain at the level of the old romance, with no chance to develop.

He envisions his critical work as the “plans” for a “campaign” to produce a Japanese art form superior to those of the West. If the novel has the power to improve the individual reader, then it seems the critic has the power to organize and direct this power for the good of the nation. Novels may be commanders in this campaign, but critics act as generals.

Nationalist arguments for the value of literary criticism such as this turn up again and again in mid-Meiji criticism. The year before the first publication of “The Essence of the Novel,” an editorial published in the newspaper Meiji Nippō declared that “We believe there is a necessity for critical arguments about literature,” arguing that such critical writing promoted cultural sophistication, as evidenced in the superiority of European literature. Several years later Hokubō Sanji, in “The Responsibility of the Novelist” (1889), argued that it befalls the novelist to “observe life” and “pierce through to the truth of its myriad states” in order to “reveal to society its real purpose,” “reform it,” and “teach it what it should aim at in terms of progress” (KNBHT I: 84).

In the midst of his promotion of literature as a catalyst for the “progress” of Japanese society, Hokubō tellingly compares the novelist to the critic, saying that the novelist’s real responsibility amounts to “criticism (hihyō) of society.” Moreover Hokubō’s own critical work clearly parallels the same goals he assigns to the novel (discovering truth, revealing purpose, and setting standards that will guide its progress), only with the novel itself rather than “life” as its object. The slippage here between the theorized roles and responsibilities of the novelist and those of the critic attests to the degree to which the image of the literary critic emerges specifically in this period from attempts to theorize the novel.

The strong connection in mid-Meiji thought on the role of criticism and that of the novel also dominates Nishinodō Koji’s 1889 essay “On Criticism,” the earliest essay entirely devoted to defining the role of the critic. Nishinodō begins by arguing that creative and critical writing engage in a dialectic in which each impels the other to achieve greater insight. In the course of his argument, however, he frames the supposedly antithetical terms in much the same way: both need to be based on careful and objective observation and both aim at bringing to light hidden truths and thereby improving society. The key difference, in his opinion, is that the critic aims at bringing to light the logic behind what the novelist instinctively grasps and reproduces. The object of their analyses differs, but once again the parallel in their activity is pronounced even in
the grammar of Nishinodō’s formula: “The novelist interprets the natural world, and the critic interprets the novelist.”\(^5\) (KNBHT I: 77)

Hokubō argues in “The Responsibility of the Novelist” that the novelist really functions as a “critic” of society. Nishinodō argues the inverse: that the critic really functions as a novelist. He suggests that “the critic in fact must place himself in the position of the novelist, think for himself those same thoughts, feel the same feelings, be in total sympathy with him – in other words, he must become the novelist.” Only after he accomplishes this can he “raise himself from that position [of the novelist]” and “illuminate the highest standards” that allow him to produce the best criticism of that author’s work (78). The ideal critic thus “becomes” the novelist and then surpasses him, if not in terms of the aesthetic beauty of his representation than at least in terms of his understanding of the means and standards through which that representation acquires significance.

In Nishinodō’s conception the critic must transcend his own subjectivity and acquire a bird’s eye view not only of what the novelist himself sees, but of the novelist’s relation to that world itself. He echoes Shōyō’s claim that the critic’s work with respect to the novel requires the same sort of “objectivity” the novel ostensibly manifests in its representation of the world. Nishinodō, however, directly suggests that the critical perspective does not merely parallel, but also includes and supplements that of the novelist, providing interpretations of his interpretations that contextualize the former through an understanding of their larger significance in the context of Japanese society as a whole. In the end, the “objectivity” both novelist and critic must seek to achieve serves the greater good of society by allowing them and their readers to reflect on and frame the “truth” of Japanese life, revealing wrongs and areas that need improvement in their respective objects. The difference is that the critic makes it his job to be conscious of these dynamics, whereas the novelist immerses himself in his work.

Nishinodō’s argument, like Shōyō’s, is couched in nationalist terms that seek to define Japanese literature against that of the West, invoking ideas like “progress” and “improvement.” But whereas Shōyō purports to free the novel from all but aesthetic concerns, Nishinodō’s essay makes a more direct case for the connection between nationalism, ethics, and self-consciousness in novels and criticism. At the end of “On Criticism,” he writes that the novel reflects reality in a stylized way that provides self-knowledge. The modern critic, he then concludes, in order to obtain the “objectivity” he necessary for this self-understanding, must turn to Western aesthetics and critical ideas about literature for vantage points on national identity. Once he has absorbed them thoroughly, he can then criticize those ideas and reflect on the present situation of literature in Japan, leading it to greater heights and distinguishing its uniqueness in the process. The task of criticism, in these views, is to capitalize on its self-conscious understanding of the novel to guide the genre toward promoting on the national level the kinds of improvements it can engender in individual character at the personal one.

II. An Ethics of Self-Consciousness: The Literary Inheritance of Ōgai and Akutagawa

Ōgai made his debut on the literary scene the same year that Nishinodō wrote “The Responsibility of the Novelist,” with his own critical argument about Japanese literature “On the

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\(^5\) For Nishinodō this “interpretation” is in no way a merely secondary, after-the-fact phenomenon. For him, the critic has the power to “bring about reformation in the Japanese culture and determine the pace and direction of literary development” through his interpretations. (77)
Novel‖ (Shōsetsu-ron). Ōgai appealed to European philosophical, rhetorical, and aesthetic standards in his contention that Japan must not adopt the kind of naturalism advocated by Emile Zola (whom Ōgai introduced to most of his audience in the process of denouncing him). He held that the scientific discipline of objective observation was incompatible with the artistic discipline of novel writing, which necessarily transformed the object of observation. The implicit argument that becomes clearer in his later work is that it is the critic who must work with his feet in both disciplines, manifesting the sensibilities of the artist with a scientific capacity for detached observation.

In the 1880s and early 1890s, Ōgai’s chief goal as a critic appeared to be establishing aesthetic standards that would give criticism the objective purchase it needed to form a coherent discipline that transcended the personal preferences of its practitioners. Like Shōyō, he explicitly denied systems of moral thought any role in the critical evaluation of novels, eschewing the relativity of such notions for the more universally accessible science of aesthetics as he understood it. Yet as a novelist his work almost exclusively dealt with ethical dilemmas, not only in the stories they told but as a matter of narrative framing as well. In this dissertation I will argue that Ōgai became interested in the degree to which the novel instantiated social life in its form, through the points of view and subject positions it made available. That is, Ōgai came to believe that the novel bore ethical responsibility not because it dramatized ethical scenes (he expresslydeclaimed naïve ethical criticism that looked to the plot of novels for moral messages), but because it crystallized the discursive norms through which the self was produced as a social subject.

Social concerns dominate the plots of his creative work in the 1890s, as for example in stories of Japanese men abroad who face different value systems or social structures that force them to become self-conscious of their status as foreign Japanese nationals who must interact with others in light of the demands their status places upon them. Such early stories have recently been read as efforts to produce a national identity against the threatening alterity of European cosmopolitan culture. Attention to the carefully wrought structures of these works in light of his writing on and experimentation with literary form and genre itself, however, reveals a deep suspicion of such efforts. In those works, self-conscious narrators reflect on the act of writing and its implications almost to the point of distraction, rendering opaque the very conventions supposedly at work in this nationalist agenda. Ōgai does not borrow Western forms of literary writing in service of Japanese nationalist projects so much as he critiques the very literary conventions his work imports—much the same as when, in his criticism, he launches a devastating critique of Zola even in the process of introducing him to Japanese readers.

In part through his work in translating European novels and philosophical discourse on the arts into the substantially different Japanese tradition of literary writing, Ōgai became particularly attentive to the ethos established by narrative representation. His translations have earned considerable fame for their ability to render compelling narrative perspectives that were both faithful to the feel of the original work and nevertheless elegant in Japanese. His creative writing, however, has invited a fair amount of criticism in this very same dimension—for “weak” perspectives that seem ambivalent or even inconsistent about their position vis-à-vis the stories told, and which often lapse into discourses on the state of literature, “telling” what they should “show.” I argue that these apparent weaknesses are in intentional effects of his creative work, consequences of the self-conscious critique I see at work in his “stereoscopic” view of literature. That is, I contend that Ōgai writes from a deliberately ambivalent position as both immersed

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6 See chapter one, pp. 19-34.
author and detached, reflective critic, working through literary effects to engage readers in ethical reflection on the very interpretive processes those effects invite.

The image of the “stereoscope” is one Ōgai uses to describe his own writing in his last work of pure fiction, the 1911 “The Wild Geese” (Gan). The stereoscope is a viewing device that makes two slightly skewed photographs of the same scene appear to create a three dimensional representation. The image in “The Wild Geese” describes the efforts of the narrator to create a vividly realistic tale from the juxtaposition of those parts of the story in which he was personally involved, and those he has heard secondhand, refracted through other consciousnesses. Nearly all of his fiction works, at some level, in this stereoscopic fashion, engaging readers in its mimetic representation through both compelling plots and the slightly “skewed” perspectives of his narrative and authorial personae, whose self-conscious awareness of their literary tasks call attention to the artifice of the works even while those works depend on the realistic effect that artifice produces.

The self-conscious mode of critique immanent in Ōgai’s work continues the critical trend begun with Shōyō’s writing, which suggested that the task of the critic consisted in revealing the structures of the novel that produced its aesthetic and ethical effects. What distinguishes Ōgai is that he incorporates this reflexive critical operation in his creative writing itself. By making the ethos his narrative produces an object of immanent literary self-reflection, Ōgai foregrounds the tendencies of novelistic writing to naturalize the sensibilities and perspectives of its authors, and invites readers to reflect on the ethics of those narrative and even their own reading practices. In “The Dancing Girl” (Maihimé, 1890) he frames his narrator’s use of the récit form of literary writing to confer a telos on ethically questionable decisions; in “Vita Sexualis” (1907) he exposes the parallel between his protagonist’s writing practices and his sexual ones; and in the 1911 “The Wild Geese” he frames the relation that his narrator establishes with readers on the same terms as the desirous relations through which the characters, including the narrator, struggle to establish their authority over one another.

Over the course of his career Ōgai’s writing becomes increasingly reflexive and clearly willing to break the spell of its mimesis through formal innovation (in “Vita Sexualis” the presence of two narrators, one ostensibly Ōgai and the other an Ōgai-like persona, calls attention to the fictionality of the pretense of authentic self-representation; in “The Wild Geese,” the narrator’s own comments on the writing of the story, as well as its jarring switch from first-person to third-person registers and then back again make its formal structure as much an object of reflection as the events in the tale itself). Although it is beyond the scope of this study to make a detailed case for his last phase of work, my findings here suggest that his ultimate turn to historical fiction does not represent a radical break from his former writing, as most critics assert. Rather, his late work represents a culmination of a pattern of increasingly self-conscious (and stereoscopic) reflexivity vis-à-vis the narrative establishment of “reality” incipient even in his earliest writing. In the historical fiction this manifests itself in the direct split in the narrative perspective between the apparently unmediated presentation of historical figures and the intrusive remarks of narrators, who thoroughly detail the textual history of the research that produced those accounts in ways that directly dispel the illusion of mimesis and call attention to the textual production of reality the writing enacts. The stereoscopic effect of this bifurcated representation ironically achieves a strong version of the “authenticity” Ōgai sought throughout his career.

Ōgai’s effort to work through the dual perspectives of involved writer and detached critic, and his insistence on foregrounding problems of truth and representation, perhaps account for
what Akutagawa found as the chief fault in his creative work: its lack of a “poetic spirit.” Ōgai’s emphasis on the reflexive power of the intellect to apprehend and frame the ethics of its narrative representation produces a distancing effect even in his efforts to represent deep human passions. Through its tightly controlled prose and generally circumspect, intensely self-conscious representations of subjects and relationships, his writing risks reducing the very feelings and desires that motivate it to mere objects of intellection. For Ōgai, the major, inseparable ends of the novel, ethics and aesthetics, belonged to the realm of cognition, and this led to a flattening out of what would become one of Akutagawa’s chief concerns with novel writing: literary affect.

Akutagawa may seem an unlikely “successor” for any endeavor of Ōgai’s, let alone his “literary ethics.” Whereas Ōgai typically wrote in careful, reserved, and elegant prose, Akutagawa’s writing ranged from the effusive to the cryptic, from wry, tongue-in-cheek commentary to passionate insistence, often within the same work. Whereas Ōgai generally set his fiction in the contemporary scene, drawing largely on autobiographical material (until his historical phase), Akutagawa purged direct, realist autobiographical reference from the majority of all but his late fiction, with a few important exceptions. Whereas Ōgai established himself as an authority in medicine and public fields, participating actively in national forums and maintaining his post in the army for much of his life, Akutagawa ensconced himself so completely in the world of literature that many felt he lost touch with reality. Perhaps one of the only dimensions in which the two authors saw eye-to-eye on the relation of life and literature consisted in their mutual refusal to hold the novel to ethical standards. Yet it is precisely a passionate commitment to literary ethics that I argue links their self-conscious writing.

Like Ōgai, Akutagawa emerged on the literary scene during a time of major transition in thinking about the novel. By the 1910s the Japanese literary world was experiencing something of a crisis in prose fiction. Heralded by the enthusiasm of those who followed Shōyō and then writers such as Tayama Katai (1872-1930), Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943), and Kunikida Doppo (1871-1908), Japanese literary naturalism (shizenshugi) enjoyed two decades of rising popularity before dissatisfaction with the limitations its emphasis on the unfiltered representation of reality imposed on stylistic and formal innovation led to its decline. Several new literary schools rose in its place, including the “White Birch Society,” the “new romanticism,” and the “new naturalism” movements. These schools posited starkly contrasting conceptions of what a novel should be, with some emphasizing the representation of the self, others privileging language and stylization as means of representing human emotion, and still others insisting that the novel be grounded in reconceived understandings of the “truth” of human experience. With Ōgai grown relatively quiet, absorbed with his historical fiction, and the major novelist Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) rarely intruding on these public literary wrangles, the future of Japanese prose seemed once again uncertain.

Against the backdrop of this upheaval, Akutagawa began his literary career, just after the publication of Mori Ōgai’s famous historical novel Sansho the Steward (Sanshō Dayū, 1915). Like Ōgai’s work at the time, Akutagawa’s early writing draws on historical documents for the kernels of its stories, and in a number of those tales his narrators reflexively comment on the source material and fact of its transformation into the present literary work. This self-consciousness produces nearly the opposite effect in Akutagawa’s work, however. Ōgai’s late texts oscillate between apparently unmediated mimetic representation and reflexive commentary by authorial personae, aiming at a version of authenticity produced by the stereoscopic effect of these points of view. Akutagawa’s self-conscious narration, however, infuses his entire stories, making itself felt in the carefully wrought and often highly stylized rhetorical structure of the
language itself. His stories do not aim at producing engrossing mimetic representations of reality so much as they present themselves as self-consciously aesthetic objects, playing on neo-classical registers of language and genre conventions to achieve distinctly “literary” effects.

Akutagawa’s masterful stylization seems to aim at anything but ethical critique. Scholars even argue that Akutagawa takes a powerful anti-ethical stance in his work, valorizing a kind of art-for-art’s sake aestheticism over the strictures of ethical thinking. The prevailing reading of his 1915 “Rashōmon,” for example, suggests that Akutagawa finds ethics a deadening, deconstructive force against which human vitality must assert itself for the sake of survival. His late short story “Kappa” (1927) also parodies moral maxims and social ethics by reversing them in the world of the mythic creatures inhabited by the narrator, further contributing to the anti-ethical image of Akutagawa’s aestheticism. In this dissertation, however, I argue that the carefully controlled irony of Akutagawa’s self-conscious narration manifests an increasingly reflexive ethics of self-consciousness. This literary ethics appears as a kind of immanent self-critique that lays bare the social, literary, and political effects of the aesthetic form of the novel itself.

Akutagawa appears more interested in formal and technical problems than social or ethical ones. Yet formal problems of literary writing in his work prove intimately connected to the social and ethical dimensions of real life, as perhaps his only means of grappling with epistemic and interpersonal questions of identity. It is almost exclusively through aesthetics in Akutagawa’s writing that literary subjects can engage in ethical self-construction. He repeatedly portrays characters who confront the limits of their capacities to project the self into the social world and to sustain intersubjective relationships with others, not as a result of conscious reflection, but because of their physiological responses to the appearance of others or the stories or art that others produce. The servant of Rashōmon finds himself giving up forever his former ethical sense of himself to become a thief as a result of listening to the story of a hideous old crone; in “The Handkerchief” (Hankechi, 1916) a professor of Japanese colonial studies finds his entire system of ethics and aesthetics thrown into doubt through a combination of his responses to a woman’s physical handling of a grief and his reading about the representation of grief in theatrical gesture; and the late authorial personae of “Cogwheels” (Haguruema, 1927) and “A Fool’s Life” (Aru ahō no isshō, 1927) find the very coherence of their selfhoods threatened by a radical alterity that inhabits words and objects they encounter.

These confrontations with alterity, often represented in Akutagawa as a nani mono ka, or “something,” produce an instability that potentially allows Akutagawa’s literary subjects to transcend or at least confront an intrinsic solipsism, often at the cost of their own identities. These encounters with alterity are not normatively “ethical”—they do not result in the ethical enlightenment of characters nor punishment for unethical behavior. The ethical effect of Akutagawa’s writing consists rather in the dual valence of the affective responses these encounters both represent and reproduce in readers. Akutagawa deliberately creates a dissonance between the ethos of his narration and the pathos of the stories he tells, putting the values implied by his narrative stances in irresolvable tension with the affects manifest in and through the stories themselves. This tension situates readers, tasked with producing unity or coherence from the dissonances they encounter, in states similar to those the dramatic agents experience in their encounters with alterity, with resonant ethical stakes: the capacity to create cohesive ethical identities from ambivalent aesthetic and affective experiences.
For Ōgai, self-consciousness was a necessary condition for real and literary ethics, insofar as ethics demanded reflection on the self-other relations implied by narrative modes of communication and representation. Because these modes could be crystallized in the language of the modern novel, self-conscious literary writing represented a unique and even exemplary field for bringing about an ethical self-consciousness. In his novels, Ōgai dramatized the effects of narrative manipulation by characters and then revealed the extent to which the narratives of his novels themselves, and the kinds of interpretive practices they invited, might be complicit with them. In other words, he illustrated ethical problems and then forced readers to confront their own unwitting participation in the very kinds of practices he invited them to condemn.

For Akutagawa, however, self-consciousness was a condition not of ethical thinking per se but of modern subjectivity itself. He saw the modern subject as the product of a divorce between the cognitive act of self-consciousness through which it apprehended itself as a coherent being, and the physical body through which it acted and reacted to the world. Ethics, for Akutagawa, consisted first and foremost in harmonizing these dimensions of selfhood to overcome a solipsistic tyranny of individual consciousness that refused to recognize any kind of meaningful relation, let alone responsibilities or concern, with others. He sought ethical direction not by making readers self-conscious of ethical truths (of which category he was deeply suspicious), but rather by working through self-conscious literary aesthetics to produce affective intensities that could bridge the epistemic gulf between mind and body, allowing the self to project itself beyond the limits of its own self-understandings and apprehend itself as part of a corporate, social world.

For Akutagawa such affective intensities were made uniquely available by artistic and literary aesthetics. His writing explores whether or not the conditional experience that literature makes available, the “as if” quality of engagement with fiction, could produce a unifying force, one capable of bridging the gulf between first person experiences of the self in terms of sensation and desire, and third person identities as ethical agents situated in relationships and narratives beyond the self’s control. In short, he explored whether or not the experience of literary affect could make it possible to assume ethical identities we have no epistemic grounds for occupying – if there is any truth to the critical commonplace that for Akutagawa, “art was religion,” it lies in this leap of faith. He sought in what Kant had called the “purposiveness” of aesthetic objects, the quality of intentional design-for-its-own-sake which translates particular encounters with art objects into universalizable responses, a means of making the leap from the individual to the social. By approaching Akutagawa’s ethical project in terms of the affective intensity his novels makes possible, we can discover over the course of his career a trajectory in which he consistently strove, through self-conscious reflection, to disrupt the structural and temporal demands of the modern novel to “narrativize,” and instead to create moments of lyrical intensity that could free the self from the solipsistic subjectivity imposed by modern narratives of selfhood.

Through direct readerly address, the thematization of the conflict between ethical and aesthetic sensibilities, and reflexive authorial irony, Akutagawa’s earliest stories challenge expectations and invite readers to attend to processes of ethical self-construction in which his writing engages them. His early work pits pathos against ethos to produce what I call a “felt self-consciousness” that brings together both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the literary experience of alterity. In his later work, however, the boundary between pathos and ethos collapses as his narrators find themselves unable to distinguish themselves from the literary personae they write. Whereas in his earlier works Akutagawa uses self-conscious narrative frames to present more traditionally conceived literary stories, his final writings internalize that
self-consciousness as both substance of the stories and crises of the narrating consciousness. The narrated personae of “Cogwheels” and “A Fool’s Life” appear aware of their own fictionality in ways that earlier characters and narrators do not, and this precipitates an epistemic crises that emerges even in the language and formal structure of the works themselves.

The solipsism legislated by their status as authors of the worlds they inhabit -- the fact that real others do not and cannot exist in the worlds they create – dominates their views of themselves and others, even as their encounters in that world provoke strong and disturbing sensations of forces beyond their control. Rather than working as a potentially unifying force, however, such affective experiences (for the late, hyper self-conscious narrators) breaks the self down into nervous sensations they cannot marshal into coherent identities, even through the (increasingly suspect) telos provided by literary plot. The very self-consciousness that produced ethical effects in Akutagawa’s earlier works prevents his late narrators from assuming any kind of ethical relationship with others at all. The narrators’ failures here do not indicate failures of the works themselves, as has often been argued, however. Rather, these works forcefully confront readers with a portrait of ethical failure, and in doing so occasion the very kinds of affective intensities that overwhelm the narrative personae. The work of literature that for them is a hall of mirrors that can never get beyond the boundaries of the self, for the reader provides a potentially genuine experience of alterity insofar as it composes and comprises the life story of another.

The relationship between readers, writers, and narrators proves essential to both Ōgai’s and Akutagawa’s vision of novelistic ethics. In the fiction of both authors, characters never amount to more than illusions under the thumb of an authorial presence, as their last works of fiction expose with jarring, if not quite metafictional, self-consciousness. Ethics is worthless as a standard for judging the plots of novels, in their views, because the novel has no existence save as an aesthetic object, and its representations, however realistic, can make no claims to genuine human subjectivity. Yet the novel nevertheless has ethical valence for them insofar as it is the product of a real authorial mind, the materialization of the real language of social relations, and a mode of communication between authors and those other individuals, readers.

Despite their very different styles, sensibilities, and approaches to the genre of the novel itself, Ōgai and Akutagawa both work through reflexive, self-referential narrative dissonances to aim at real world ethical engagement through what they openly expose as the ineluctably fictional representations of their novels. Both evince sharp skepticism concerning the potential for the novel to represent the social world in any kind of authentic way, and yet they leverage their ethical inquiry through the very conventions that produce the illusion of falsehood. The “ethics of self-consciousness” at work in their writing is thus irreducibly “theoretical” insofar as it performs an inquiry into the very modes of interpretation it invites, and requires readers to become cognizant of the (ethical) implications of their very activity as readers. Thus I think we might justifiably place Ōgai and Akutagawa in a lineage of modern ethical theorists of the novel.
For critical writers in mid-Meiji period (1868-1912) Japan, literary criticism and the novel aimed at nearly identical goals. In his groundbreaking 1885 essay “The Essence of the Novel” (Shōsetsu Shinzui), seminal critic Tsubouchi Shōyō suggests that both genres “render visible what normally remained indistinct,” explore the “complex human emotions” that constituted or imbued one’s experience of the world, and offer a framework for evaluating what they revealed (17). In other words, on his view both the novel and criticism brought about an ethical self-consciousness through which the reader could gain insight into his own involvement in the complex moral and emotional network of human relations that the novel (originally, and criticism secondarily) made visible.

What distinguished the genres for Shōyō was that criticism performed explicitly what the novel did implicitly. In essays about the function of literary criticism immediately following the publication of “The Essence of the Novel,” the ideal critic appears as a perceptive, self-conscious creative writer, familiar enough with the workings of his texts to be able to step back and explain them the way a magician might reveal his secrets. Writer and critic Nishinodō Kōji explicitly stated as much in 1887, when he argued that the critic of a novel must identify completely with its author (literally “become the author”) and then “surpass” him, reflecting on the values implied by the author’s writing from a “higher perspective” (75-76).

The Meiji writers most attuned to their age worked from a standpoint of acute self-consciousness about the complex and perhaps symbiotic relationship of the novel and criticism. Mori Ōgai (1868-1922), one of the progenitors of modern Japanese literary criticism and novelistic fiction, struggled throughout his career to attain the kind of self-reflective perspective on his literary work that Nishinodō describes. Through increasingly explicit meta-narratives referring to the composition of his texts, and through direct thematization of the constitutive role of writing in the formation of his narrators’ identities and relationships with others, Ōgai foregrounded the subjective and self-authorizing tendencies of his work as part of a theoretical exploration of the ethics of narrative form.

This flies in the face of critical consensus, which sees Ōgai continually moving away from literary-critical inquiries, and indeed from an interest in fiction in general, toward the “objective” perspective of his historical novels. It may seem especially counter-intuitive to

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7 See Introduction, 8.
8 The concept of a “professional critic” who wrote criticism without also writing literature did not exist until at least the end of the Meiji period. Shimamura Hōgetsu (1871-1918) may have been the first successful critic who did not also write creatively, although Ishibashi Ningetsu (1865-1926) also achieved moderate critical success around the same time.
9 His essays and critical writing employed “narrators” as well; Ōgai even put a response to one of his critics in the voice of one of his fictional characters in his response to Ishibashi.
10 Almost as soon as Ōgai established the authority of his “objective,” scientific brand of criticism, silencing opponents and drawing praise for his intellectual rigor, he shockingly abandoned that kind of critical writing. After 1894, his (increasingly infrequent) critical essays tended to comment on literature from an informal, personal perspective without much reference to aesthetics, philosophy, or the abstract concepts like “ideality” so characteristic of his earlier criticism. His creative writing changed even more dramatically. After publishing the few stories that earned him fame as a writer in the late 1880s and early 1890s, he spent the next dozen or so years focused mostly almost exclusively on translations of European literature (and his duties as a medical doctor for the army). He took up creative writing in earnest again in 1909, with a burst of short mostly autobiographical fiction and some essays more or less informally commenting on literature and the state of the literary field. Finally, after 1912 he turned almost exclusively to writing historical “fiction” in the years until his death in 1922.
discuss in terms of “ethics” and “self-consciousness” a writer whose criticism rigidly denied the role of ethical considerations in discussions of literary value, and whose insistence on objective

Literary scholars and historians have faced the challenge of accounting for the dramatic changes in Ōgai’s rhetoric and writing over the course of his career. Few risk the naiveté implied by considering his career in terms of “continuity,” no doubt hesitant to impose a retrospective “unity” on such obviously diverse and potentially contradictory projects. As a result, critical accounts of the transformations in Ōgai’s work frequently devolve into narratives of the “breaks” and failures that led him to reverse many of his earlier positions and, finally, to turn away from fiction. Masao Miyoshifor example, dismisses Ōgai’s 1889 novella “The Dancing Girl” (Maihime) as “juvenilia” that stops short of the “serious work” his later writings, and particularly his historical fiction, would undertake. Richard Bowring and Karatani Kōjin both discuss Ōgai’s turn to historical fiction as a partial failure of creativity, implying that his temperament and writing style were better suited to scholarly historical research than fiction. Stephen Snyder recognizes Ōgai’s success as a literary writer, but argues that he ultimately rejected the artifice (or “lies”) of fiction in favor of the “truth” of historical narratives. And Hasegawa Izumi notes that his youthful enthusiasm for the ideality represented by fiction came to be replaced by a desire for the “truth” and “reality” of history.

My work in this and the following chapter, however, suggests that these critics fail to see how the transformations in the style and substance of his writing develop from his consistent interest in the relation of literary form and narrative perspective to ethical questions about the responsibilities of the self to others. His writing changes so dramatically because he continually steps back from his former efforts in order to interrogate their own complicity in the human dramas they represent, so that the act of writing itself (and its ethical implications) increasingly becomes an explicit focus of his work. In the next chapter, I explain the apparent “break” toward historical fiction as the natural extension of his method of putting competing narrative perspectives in tension (in his historical fiction, the “objective” description of events and the subjective, self-referential intrusions of the narrator commenting on the process of composition) in order to avoid a monologic, self-authorizing perspective without sacrificing the “realism” afforded by pretenses toward authenticity. Ōgai was arguing against critics who were judging works based on the morality of their content. In this respect, he went even farther than his contemporary Tsubouchi Shōyō in arguing against the restrictive and outdated norms of kanzenchōaku, the chiefly Confucian principle often brandished as a standard for judging the value of prose fiction in the preceding Edo period (1603-1868), that bad must be punished and good rewarded. Yet despite Ōgai’s insistence on the exclusion of ethics from the province of literature, ethical concerns would present themselves again and again in both his literary and critical writing. Many of his stories, from his early “The Dancing Girl” to his late historical fiction, center on ethical dilemmas created by conflicts between desires and duties, or between personal and public responsibilities, with the protagonists struggling to achieve some kind of balance between them. While this certainly does not contradict the logic of Ōgai’s claim that the novel need not demonstrate ethical principles, it does betray his intuitive perception of a connection between ethics and literary representation, or at the very least his sense that literature provided an appropriate field for working through such concerns.

In his critical writing, too, Ōgai continued to raise questions of ethics even after he argued for their divorce from literary valuations. In his 1890 article “On Reaching a Definition of Pornography through a Discussion of the Limits of Lyric Poetry” (Jōshi no genkai wo ronjite wa isetsu no teigi wo oyobu), which tries to distinguish “pornography” from literature, Ōgai argues that the “moral intentions” of the author (which for him do not manifest themselves in choice of content so much as in the degree to which the work frames itself as “art” and aims at profound ideas) determine the literary “value” of the work. His 1910 satire, Chinmoku no tō (“The Tower of Silence”), even more explicitly takes up the relation of art and ethicality. It argues that “art” and “learning” have parallel functions insofar as both “destroy convention,” which Ōgai then discusses as the outward (and transient) manifestations of morality that must be sloughed off for new morality to emerge. According to his argument here, and the one he obliquely expresses in his novella Seinen (“Youth,” 1910), art and learning both have the power to break the chains of convention and ideology, restraints society inevitably imposes on itself for its own good. These conventions quickly become burdens preventing “progress,” so they must be destroyed to make room for new conventions (those inspired by “new ideas” expressed in art, for example) that will permit new modes of social and political interaction. Thus literature infuses morality with new relevance in an endless but productive cycle of construction and destruction, modernizing the cultural institutions and social conventions underwritten by moral codes.

This seems to contradict his earlier arguments denying the novel any intrinsic moral function. Indeed, it has almost become a commonplace for critics to point out Ōgai’s reversal on this issue (Richard Bowring, Isogai
“ideas” and rational argument seems anything but self-conscious about his subjective agency in the construction of literary genres. Yet I suggest that even his earliest, most rigorously “scientific” critical essays reflected self-consciously on their own rhetorical presentation of ideas. By examining the relationship between the style and substance of his 1890s aesthetic criticism, I will point to Ōgai’s awareness of the degree to which language, even the rational rhetoric of his criticism itself, was implicated in the very problems of perspective he attempted to elucidate.

Over the course of Ōgai’s career, this self-conscious inquiry into the formal structure of the novel led him to increasingly explicit reflection on the ethics of novelistic representation. To show his increasing attention to the ethics of narrative form, I will turn to his fiction and non-critical essays. In my analysis of his first major novella, “The Dancing Girl” (Maihime, 1889), I will explore how the dissonance between the narrator’s agenda in writing and Ōgai’s framing of that act exposes how the narrator manipulates the retrospective, first-person memoir form in order to justify his actions. Then, in an analysis of his quasi-critical, quasi-autobiographical 1900 essay, “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi?” (Ōgai Kyoshi to wa dare zo”), I will discuss how he approaches once more the issues of narrative “perspective” his early criticism investigated, but no longer through direct argument that hides its own rhetorical structures. Instead, Ōgai self-consciousness reflects on the way his writing establishes critical authority, and on the ethics of his past critical engagements, in a genre-crossing effort to find a language and point of view from which he might discuss literature and his ethical commitments as critic and writer more “objectively” and “honestly.” Finally, I will examine the first major work of fiction after his twelve-year hiatus from creative writing, “Vita Sexualis” (Ita seksuarisu, 1909), to show how his literary writing explicitly took up the theoretical inquiry begun by his early critical investigations. In my analysis, I will suggest that the novella foregrounds and thematizes directly the dissonance that “The Dancing Girl” more subtly created through the interaction of its narrative frames, in order to expose the relation between the form of its narrator’s account and the ethics of his worldview.12

Drawing on the work of literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, I conclude that Ōgai attends to the heteroglossic potential of the novel as a means of both achieving an aesthetically powerful “novelistic” effect and underscoring the ethical commitments of the genre. His works deliberately put competing perspectives in tension, as if at once to underscore their illusory or relative nature and yet to produce, by their overlapping, a composite perspective that achieves a

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12My next chapter takes up his later fiction, in particular his stories “Youth” (Seinen, 1910) and “The Wild Geese” (Gan, 1911), in light of Dennis Washburn’s arguments about the ethics of identity in the former and Stephen Snyder’s argument about the rhetorical construction (and Ōgai’s doubts about the genre of fiction) of the latter. I conclude with an analysis of his historical fiction informed by Shion Kōno’s work on its annotations.
realistic vitality and seeks to transcend its own fictionality to arrive at something like “truth.” This “stereoscopic” effect works in fact works much the way (as we will see) Ōgai theorized, in his critical debates with Tsubouchi Shōyō and Sotoyama Shōichi in the early 1890s, art as bringing together subjectivity and objectivity through the interpretive processes it incited.¹³

For Ōgai, however, this was no “merely” aesthetic matter; at stake in his stereoscopic vision was the capacity of fictional narrative to articulate the real ideological premises governing the way we interpret and interact with others as subjects. That is, I suggest that years of experience writing in multiple genres and critically considering literature led him, by 1909, to think about literary form itself as an engagement with the social and ethical. His interest in the capacity of literature to create or reflect on the self and its relations with others, his self-conscious consideration of the way novels frame their relation to “truth” and “reality,” and his scrupulous attention to literary language and style taught him to understand the novel in terms of what Bakhtin would later formulate as its heteroglossic potential: the capacity of language to represent the material of social and historical reality in a concrete and literal way. Ōgai’s critical interest in aesthetics, which David Pollack, in Reading Against Culture: Ideology and Narrative in the Japanese Novel, reminds us is “one of the metadiscourses by means of which ideology is articulated at the human level and made knowable, speakable, palpable,” led him to an interest in the capacity of the novel to interrogate from within the ideological narratives constituting the individual as a political and ethical subject (94).

In the last decade or so of the nineteenth century, Ōgai made a name for himself through his penchant for intellectual argument. Few writers who said anything about literature interesting enough to catch his attention escaped the cutting strokes of his pen, a situation famously lampooned in writer Uchida Roan’s 1895 satire How to Become a Literati (Bungakusha to naru hō):

Ōgai is the Hartman of Japan, its number one aesthetic philosopher and critic. He’s a figure so big that to wax eloquent on Wadachi [referring to Ōgai’s 1894 essay Kantetsuroku] he uses four pages and two hundred lines, and to take care of Shiba No Sono [referring to his 1892 essay “On the style of Yoshiba no Sono”] he wasted around twenty pages. If you make one mistake and incur his displeasure, he may fill twenty or thirty pages on you so be careful and stay away from this danger…. (83)

At the time he earned this reputation, Ōgai tended to brandish a critical rhetoric that appealed to abstract Western philosophy and rational logic in ways unfamiliar to most Japanese writers. Through his innovative, authoritative declamations he often argued other critics into silence whether or not they had valid points to make. Recent scholarship tends to point out that Ōgai’s early criticism served more to secure his position in the literary world than to make legible any original ideas about literature. His early theories themselves, particularly his efforts to define literature in terms of objectivity and subjectivity, and to establish an “objective” system of aesthetic criticism, have been considered naïve, ideologically suspect, and ultimately untenable.

¹³ In my next chapter I will discuss the “dissonance” between narrative perspectives, which becomes far more pronounced in his later fiction, as part of Ōgai’s “stereoscopic” vision of literary representation. He himself uses the term “stereoscopic” to describe the effect achieved by the narrative perspective of his last major work of pure fiction, “Wild Geese” (Gan, 1911), in which the narrator juxtaposed information learned retrospectively with his own personal experience in order to construct his story.
Some contemporary critics even accuse his fiction of the same kind of rhetorical self-authorization they find in his criticism, accusing both of gross egotism and possible complicity in Japanese nationalist movements to establish the authority of the state as the determinant of subjectivity.  

One problem with such emphases is that they tend to treat the language, rhetoric, and narrative structure of his writing as transparent means of persuasively communicating his ideas. Yet Ōgai was keenly aware that no such transparency of language was possible. The very process of self-authorization his writing supposedly enacted, and which critics have eagerly exposed, was itself always a conscious concern of his work in both genres.

In “On the Novel” (Shōsetsuron), his critical debut published in Yomiuri Shimbun on January 3rd of 1889, Ōgai discusses the incompatibility of scientific and literary approaches to interpretation. He contends that whereas in science one dissects and analyzes with the intent of revealing the true nature of the object under analysis “as it is,” in literature one cannot be satisfied with the same approach. The novelist must “transform and bring to life” his observations of reality through the creative faculty of his imagination. While the doctor strives for objectivity, the artist must intentionally work through his subjective perspective to give his work its artistic quality.

Ōgai ostensibly mobilizes these claims about subjectivity and objectivity to attack the naturalism of Zola through his unique vantage point as both doctor and, by implication, literary scholar. But despite Ōgai’s presentation of the essay as a critique of Zolasim, Kabe Yoshitaka, in his detailed 1980 study Mori Ōgai – the Theory and Methods of his Early Art Criticism (Mori Ōgai – shoki bungei hyōron no riron to hōhō) convincingly suggests that Ōgai’s real concern was to establish himself as a critic. Kabe’s analysis makes it clear that Ōgai edited and republished several of his essays with the sole purpose of changing the way his expression of the same ideas established an authoritative

14 See arguments by Christopher Hill and Yōda Toshiko, below (20-31), for more on Ōgai’s fiction and nationalism.

15 Kabe points out that Ōgai reprinted the article twice. Each time, he made considerable revision to the way article frames his perspective and authorizes his argument, without revising at all the ideas it actually put forward (ideas which Kabe shows he had developed in considerably different directions by the time of the final reprinting). A glance at the particular kinds of changes Ōgai made shows how his self-consciousness with respect to the language of the article and the way it establishes his perspective as a critic outweighs its theoretical concern with Zola.

In the first printing of the article, Ōgai emphasized the authority of the philosophers on whom his theory was based, as evident in his subsequent omission of the subtitle “Cfr. Rudolph von Gottschall, Studien” and his frequent reference to European theories and thinkers. Kabe suggests this was a means of lending authority to claims about literature by a doctor then unknown to the literary world. By the time of the article’s second printing (1892), however, Ōgai had already established himself as a critic through the literary journal (Shigarami-zōshi) he founded and his numerous articles and critical debates. Consequently, he lessened his emphasis on the role of other thinkers and instead emphasized the value of his unique perspective as both doctor and literary scholar. Ōgai changed the title to “On the novel from a medical perspective” and altered passages to ground his claims more on personal expertise in the two fields. For the third publication in 1896, however, he omitted nearly all of these rhetorical attempts to justify his perspective. Kabe persuasively correlates this maneuver to Ōgai’s then high status in the literary world and to his desire to present his ideas more as objective truths than as based on experience.

As further evidence, I would point out that the “scientific” perspective advanced by the naturalism of Zola against which Ōgai argues in “On the Novel,” had not even reached Japan by the time he published his article declaiming it, so an urgent defense of his ideas was hardly needed. Ōgai clearly chose this topic because it allowed him to distinguish the “objectivity” of the critic and scientist from the “subjectivity” of the writer, and then to locate himself in a unique position (as medical doctor, critic, and literary writer) that gave him authoritative firsthand knowledge of both approaches.
critical perspective. In other words, despite Ōgai’s reputation for being almost exclusively interested in the substance of “ideas,” he was at least equally interested in the rhetoric through which he presented those ideas, and the capacity of language to create “perspectives” on their represented subjects—which happened to be the explicit topic of one of his central arguments about literature. In the manifesto for the inaugural issue of his literary journal, *Shigarami-zōshi*, published in October of 1889, nine months after “On the Novel,” Ōgai writes:

> When Western learning first came to the East, the substance but not the spirit was absorbed…. Now the world of Meiji has become the world of the novel. …Yet we already have many elements in our literature that come from outside…. Indeed, some of our men of letters compose Japanese poetry and others compose Chinese… some who are good at the classical style and some who specialize in the colloquial. Literature draws haphazardly on elements from Japanese, Chinese, and Western aesthetics. This state of confusion cannot last for long. We know that it is time for a purification that only criticism can accomplish. (MŌS 1:23)

Here Ōgai presents of a vision of criticism as a discipline to guide the development of Japanese literary writing to the artistic heights defined by European aesthetic philosophy. But in this proclamation he does not specify any particular critical principle that would help “purify” Japanese literature; he only discusses the role of criticism in general. To borrow Yoshida Seiichi’s characterization of his critical corpus, Ōgai engages in *hyōron* (criticism as a sustained argument, a term only beginning to be used regularly in Ōgai’s time) about *hyōron*, rather than in straightforward *hihyō* (criticism as a critique or review, far more commonly practiced) of any actual work. Elsewhere in the first issue of *Shigarami-zōshi*, Ōgai writes:

> If you take the view that everything in the world changes, then it is changing unceasingly. If, however, you take the view that there is no change, then you have eternal immutability. Recently, words such as “shackled,” and “liberated” have become fashionable, but strictly speaking isn’t it a shackled notion to insist that one should write literary prose about certain things in a certain way? I, with my ‘thoughts in the night,’ have concluded that what we call literary prose may be written about anything and in any style. (Rimer 66)

Here his rumination on the capacity of language acts to affect one’s subjective experience of reality runs quickly into reflection on the restrictive potential of hegemonic discourse (in this case, the dictates of literary fashion) and literary style. He is concerned with the potential complicity of literary writing in such discourse, and offers his own genre-defying “thoughts in the night” as a means of exposing and thereby refusing its demands.

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16 It has become a common cliché of Japanese criticism to discuss Mori Ōgai in terms of stages in the development or transformation of his ideas -- the authors of the two longest works on Ōgai in English, Marvin Marcus and Richard Bowring, in fact concur that Ōgai’s writing in its entirety should be characterized as a “literature of ideas.”
17 Ōgai explicitly reflects on the power of language to establish perspective, then and connects this to literary form, in his later, quasi-fictional 1909 essay “Exorcising Demons” (*Tsuina*). He writes:

> If you take the view that everything in the world changes, then it is changing unceasingly. If, however, you take the view that there is no change, then you have eternal immutability. Recently, words such as “shackled,” and “liberated” have become fashionable, but strictly speaking isn’t it a shackled notion to insist that one should write literary prose about certain things in a certain way? I, with my ‘thoughts in the night,’ have concluded that what we call literary prose may be written about anything and in any style. (Rimer 66)

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18 Yoshida makes this assertion in the introduction to the Meiji edition of the anthology *The History Modern Japanese Literary Criticism* (Yoshida Seiichi. *Kindai bungei hyōronshī*. Tokyo: Shibundō, 1971). As all critics in mid-Meiji, Ōgai more frequently used the term *hihyō* to refer to criticism (though his later writing uses *hyōron* sometimes, without clear discrepancy). But when referring to his own critical essays in the preface to a collection entitled *Tsukikusa*, Ōgai realized the term *hihyō* by itself did not quite apply, and instead called them *hihyō* about *hihyō*. Ōgai thus demonstrates a characteristic self-consciousness about the self-reflective tendencies of his own writing.
We must not rely only on Chinese perspectives on poetry and literature. We need to take up the poetic study [shigaku] (I deliberately avoid saying “rhetoric” [retorikku]) that Western men of letters have built on aesthetic philosophy to create standards…. (Yoshida 271)

Ōgai’s reflection on his own purposeful avoidance of the term “rhetoric” here is telling. Although in his critical practice Ōgai was keenly aware of the definitive role of rhetoric (indeed, the parenthetical remark explaining his decision to avoid the term is itself a deliberate rhetorical move), he nevertheless presents a vision of criticism based on an objective, scientific foundation. His argument implies that criticism should be a systematic, rational approach to “truth,” one that transcends the subjectivity implied by rhetoric, and could therefore impose order on the chaos of the contemporary literary scene in Japan. As Isogai Hideo argues in his seminal 1979 book Mori Ōgai: The Meiji Twenties (Mori Ōgai-Meiji nijūnendai o chūshin ni), for the early Ōgai, criticism represented a kind of “ideality” whose standards, once fixed, could function as guiding stars in the constellation of Japanese literature.

In order to fix such standards in place, however, Ōgai had to repress his awareness of the degree to which language itself transformed or even constituted the “ideas” it expressed. As I will demonstrate in my analysis of his debate with Tsubouchi Shōyō, in his arguments about criticism in general he insisted on the objectivity of his aesthetic criticism even as his writing style belied an awareness of the constitutive role of subjective rhetoric in critical argument. Because Ōgai cared almost exclusively about shifting the center of Japanese novel criticism from predominantly evaluative or prescriptive appraisals toward an “objective” methodology based on abstract aesthetic and philosophical standards, he was willing to overlook the contradiction between his methods and his aims. That is, even if his propensity for skepticism and self-consciousness led him to question the possibility of the “objectivity” on which he based this critical system, and eventually to see such self-questioning as perhaps more essential to both criticism and the novel than any particular aesthetic system (as I suggest), in the mid-Meiji period he was too deeply committed to establishing a scientific method of criticism to question openly its very possibility.  

Even through the end of his career, although Ōgai did clearly acknowledge the impossibility of a truly objective framework for literary analysis (as I will show), he never fully dispensed with gestures toward such objectivity. This was not mere stubbornness or blindness on his part – on the contrary, he consistently showed himself capable of (and in fact inclined toward) reflection on his own point of view and the tenability of his own literary and philosophical premises. Rather, I suggest that throughout his career Ōgai continued writing “as if” objectivity were possible in much the way his 1912 story “As if,” (Ka no yō ni) points to the necessity of operating under the auspices of known fictions as if they were true. That is, I believe he saw himself as one of the educated men shouldering the responsibility of national “progress” in Ka no yō ni, who must live as if the myths they once believed (and which the masses still need to believe for the sake of order) were true, because without them, civilization would devolve into chaos. He saw the illusion of objectivity as necessary for keeping criticism from devolving again into subjective impressionism.

As he continued to reflect on the relationship between his writing and his ideas, he increasingly made the “as if” quality of his work both theme and structuring feature of his fiction. In this way he could expose as myth the pursuit of illusory objectivity even while working through that myth to create his literary worlds. His ironic and self-conscious attention to the way his narrative enacted this pursuit is what I argue enabled Ōgai to produce innovative, compelling fictions that productively interrogated the interpretive conventions by which we separate “fiction” from “truth,” and at the same time demanded reflection on the way narrative form itself constituted a kind of ethical engagement.
The specific values embodied by the Western philosophy and aesthetic theories he imported, and which he so famously defended, were not nearly as important to him as the fact that they offered a systematic structure for criticism (they do not even rate mention in his essay in the first issue of *Shigarami-zōshi*). He even declared his willingness to revise his aesthetic and critical positions, should sufficient reason ever present itself. In his 1896 preface to a collection of earlier articles on literature (*Tsukikusa no jo*) he writes:

When I tried art criticism in Japan, I chose the aesthetics of Hartmann… and based my ideas on him… The reason why more emphasis has been placed on aesthetics, and that lectures on aesthetics take place in schools… is partly due to my promotion in the somewhat naïve articles published in *Shigarami-zōshi*, the journal that I and a few like-minded friends published between 1889 and 1894. Do I believe in him absolutely? Are his aesthetics my hobby horse, and would I fall if the horse were shot down? The facts give ample evidence to the contrary…. [If there is cause] I will gladly expand my present view of the arts… and even go so far as to change my perspective fundamentally.\(^{20}\)

Ōgai’s view here expresses an understanding of criticism as a dialectic process in which the clash of ideas would allow new, more progressive ones to emerge. In order for this vision to be realized, however, critical discussions had to be grounded in a common, objective language—such as the one provided by Hartmann’s aesthetic theories. Yet while he insisted on his willingness to abandon Hartmann’s philosophy, should a better system of thought arise, in practice Ōgai was generally inflexible and unyielding in his claims. He not only ignored, but often willfully misinterpreted the ideas of others. This discrepancy between his theory and practice emerges, I suggest, because his vision of himself as a pioneer of rational literary criticism resulted in two critical blindnesses. First, Ōgai saw critical dialogue as an opportunity to elaborate a system and method of criticism that transcended the particulars of the actual discussion involved. He often wound up elaborating the philosophical concepts that could constitute such a system without offering any suggestion of how it might be concretized in critical practice. His criticism only modeled how to criticize other criticism. Indeed, scholars like Kabe have shown the irrelevance of many of his arguments to the actual review of texts, and even Ōgai’s own failure to apply those arguments the few times he did evaluate specific works.\(^{21}\)

Second, Ōgai’s faith in the “objectivity” of the aesthetic system whose ideas he elaborated led him to critique anything that challenged it as mere subjectivism.

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\(^{20}\) After checking it against the original, I have decided to use Richard Bowring’s more than adequate translation (Bowring, 85-86)

\(^{21}\) This particular blindness functions in the way Paul de Man theorizes critical blindness to accompany the greatest insight of the literary critic. He writes in his 1967 “Criticism and Crisis” that “literature, in its essence, is self-conscious -- and this self-consciousness anticipates the desire of the critic, who, think[ing] they are demystifying literature, are in fact being demystified by it…. [though] they are blind to what takes place within themselves.” (17) Ōgai’s astute perception of the need for critical reflection on the principles of criticism, and his intuitive awareness of the crucial role critical language plays in establishing literary value, ironically lead him to reveal more about the essential problematic of his own metacritical enterprise than about the value of any particular literary texts themselves. The argument of this and the following chapter is that Ōgai underwent a gradual “demystification” with respect to his own critical investments, and that his increasing self-consciousness arose precisely out of the progressive dynamic of critical self-reflection that de Man outlines in several of the essays complied in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 
These two blind spots can be seen perhaps most clearly in what has since become known as the “submerged ideas” (botsu risō) debate with Tsubouchi Shōyō. In an 1891 article, “Explanations of Shakespeare’s Texts” (Shākusupia no kyakuhon hyōchū), Shōyō had made the claim that within Shakespeare’s works an endless variety of “submerged ideas” lay hidden, and that the job of the critic was to investigate the work in such a way that would allow readers to discover those that best corresponded with his own. For Ōgai, this smacked of impressionism (which Shōyō clearly did not advocate), and he responded with several harsh critiques that virtually ignored Shōyō’s point about the existence of submerged ideas. Instead, Ōgai laid out an interpretation of German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann’s (1842–1906) aesthetic philosophy that he hoped would define the work of art in terms of its expression of both subjective and objective perspectives.

Ōgai’s argument against Shōyō, as much as it missed the mark as an intellectual response, nevertheless revealed his desire to marshal both criticism and literature under the banner of aesthetics through the analysis of perspective and the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity. In his first essay attacking Shōyō, “Shōyō and Uyū” (Shōyō shi to Uyū sensei to, 1892), Ōgai argued that “beauty” was the standard by which literature must be judged. He then defined beauty as “neither subjective nor objective, but a process by which the Idea in matter, where it lies by virtue of the creator, becomes detached from objective reality and merges with the subjective consciousness of the observer” (Bowring 74). Ōgai focused on the way the work of art existed in relation to the interpretative frameworks of artist and audience. In his view, the art object existed “ideally” in objective reality, but could only be experienced through the subjective interaction of perspectives mediated by the work.

His view of art differed very little from his actual approach to criticism: he aimed at an objective ideality his criticism expressed through the subjective rhetoric of its language. His theory of art also differed very little from Shōyō’s conjecture that many ideas lay submerged in Shakespeare’s texts to be activated by the interpretive engagement of the critic. In fact, in his book The Conception of Modern Japanese Literary History, critic Tanizawa Eiichi shows that Ōgai’s argument in this debate did not only fail to contradict, but essentially confirmed many of Shōyō’s actual claims about “submerged ideas.” The real subject of Ōgai’s contention with Shōyō, Tanizawa concludes, was not his approach to interpreting literature but his attitude toward the role of the critic and of criticism.

Ōgai reacted against Shōyō’s acknowledgement of subjective elements in criticism, as well as the talkative, practical manner in which Shōyō expressed his ideas (because it made those ideas seem to depend on the authority of the speaker rather than a rational logic). Although he surely would have agreed that different critical perspectives might emphasize different aspects of the work in their interpretations, expressing such a view as Shōyō did would do nothing to bring objective standards to criticism or to advocate a dialectic process of critical debate. By turning his presentation of Hartmann’s theory into a debate with Shōyō, however, Ōgai could both make an appeal to objective standards and model the kind of dialectic argument he thought necessary for Japanese criticism to progress.22

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22 This was not the first time Ōgai ignored Shōyō’s ideas to focus on the form of his criticism, either. Even in the manifesto to Shigarami-Zōshi, years before the debate, Ōgai brought up Shōyō’s arguments about literature but explicitly declined to comment on their content. Referring to Shōyō’s 1885 critical essay “The Essence of the Novel,” Ōgai said that he “would not evaluate its merits or problems,” but merely invoked it as one of the only examples of the type of criticism needed in Japan.
In some sense Ōgai accomplished his goals; his method of “arguing” through a “literary debate” (ronsō) became a regular critical practice over the next two decades. But in order to model this critical practice, Ōgai had to reinvent his opponent, translating Shōyō’s arguments into terms his own criticism could then overcome. The irony, of course, is that this move dislocated his criticism from the very critical discourse it wanted to transform.

Many critics point to this disjunction between Ōgai’s theories of literature and the actual state of Japanese literature and literary discourse as the reason he had to abandon the “failed” ideas put forward in his early criticism. They also emphasize an internal contradiction in his approach. Richard Bowring typifies this view, insisting that Ōgai ultimately abandoned his emphasis on an objective critical system because of a “fundamental contradiction between the method and the idealism that lay behind the theories. Ōgai was applying logic, that tool that was so essential to the rational scientific method, to the sphere of literature where it was inappropriate. The resultant breakdown was inevitable” (84). Yet while he did indeed completely change his approach to critical and literary writing, Ōgai did not have to “abandon” his former, “incompatible” ideas. On the contrary, we shall see that his continued theoretical interest in the extent to which literature and criticism could provide “objective” perspectives, in conjunction with the self-consciousness incipient in his earliest critical practices (and even more palpable in his early literary writing), are what led to the transformations in his writing. In fact, the view Ōgai presents of the art object as an amalgam of subjective and objective elements became increasingly central to what I will show to be the “stereoscopic” vision of his literature and his sense of its ethical responsibilities.23

Ōgai’s commitment to establishing objective literary standards in his early criticism led him to refer to “ideas” as though they were transcendental signifieds that existed independent of their linguistic expression, despite his great self-consciousness with respect to the capacity of his own critical language to transform the substance of those ideas. His sense of the subjective “chaos” of contemporaneous literary criticism (and of Japan as lagging behind the Western world in terms of its understanding and production of the novel as art), along with his appreciation of scientific methodology, made it seem necessary to have some kind of detached vantage point from which critics could observe, evaluate, and direct literary developments.24 Thus he refused to recognize that the media of “observation” in literary criticism, language itself, was inseparable from the novelistic phenomena he attempted to observe “objectively.” Ōgai’s insistence on a “scientific” approach to literary engagement, and in particular his emphasis on observing as a “bystander” (a phrase he used frequently to describe his perspective on both the literary and...

23 The “divide” between Ōgai’s early focus on aesthetics and his later interest in ethics disappears completely when we trace his growing attention to what literary theorist Paul Ricoeur defines as the metaphoric function of narrative structure in Time and Narrative. After first affirming that aesthetic engagement can be an ethical activity (“Might it be said that the literary narrative, on the level of narrative configuration properly speaking, loses its ethical determinations in exchange for purely aesthetic determinations? This would be to misunderstand aesthetics itself.”), Ricoeur suggests that the moment of aesthetic engagement makes possible an ensuing moment of ethical understanding (and, significantly for Ōgai’s later historical fiction one that demands reflection on the cultural and historical contexts through which our interpretive predispositions – or “pre-understanding” orient us toward others) (165). For Ricoeur, the configuration of the story, or its structural “emplotment,” refigures human action in a way that, precisely by virtue of its transformation into an aesthetic experience, allows readers to make ethical judgments about the narrative approach to representing others (and to reflect on their own interpretive approaches) in a manner analogous to the way that a story itself might metaphorize particular human actions in illustration of an ethical principle.

24 See pages 40-43 for more on his invocation of the term “onlooker” (bōkansha)
medical worlds), has been said by many critics to have prevented him from achieving virtuosity as a writer.\(^\text{22}\)  It has also been used to explain the lack of literary elements such as characterization and dramatization in his later historical works, which seem deliberately to avoid artistic arrangement in preference of an objective recording of facts. But critics who characterize his work in this way miss the powerful and innovative “experimental” qualities of the form of his literary work, and the literary use to which he put his critical interest in perspective.

Ôgai’s inability to rid himself of his self-consciousness -- that is, his awareness of and critical reflection on his perspective as a writer -- perhaps did prevent him from immersing himself wholly in the creative act. But it also prompted him to experiment constantly with new literary forms, languages, and points of view. I suggest, in fact, that Ôgai turned his self-consciousness into the very theoretical focus of his writing. His narrators tend either to reflect on how the stories they tell came to be written, the degree of their own involvement in those stories, or their own identities as literati much like the real “Ôgai.” In Ôgai’s work, the form of novelistic writing itself often becomes a structuring, definitive, and even thematic concern.

This self-consciousness can make straightforward attempts to read his literature for the “stories” they tell extremely dissatisfying. The events described in his fiction (and particularly his fiction after the early 1890s) often feel distanced, separated from readers by a self-analyzing prose that interferes with readers’ capacity to sympathize with the dilemmas his characters face or the choices they make in the face of them. But the plots of his fiction (in Peter Brooks’s sense of the “plot” as the intention of the narrative manifest by the relationship between the story told and its narrative frame) engage readers directly by bringing up the very problems of perspective and distance that they experience in the course of reading, and which, upon reflection, turn out to have clear thematic relation to the “story” told by the work. In this way Ôgai’s writing brings thematic concerns with issues of modern identity, subjectivity, and ethics together with formal concerns about the genre of the novel.

Ôgai’s first major success as a literary writer, “The Dancing Girl” (Maihime, 1890), explores the intersection of precisely these concerns. The novella tells the story of government worker Ôta Toyotarō’s experience abroad in Germany, where his relationship with the dancing girl of the title causes him to fall from favor and lose the government support that made his trip possible. He takes a job as a journalist and moves in with the woman, Elise. They struggle through poverty until Ôta’s friend, Aizawa, offers him a means of regaining favor with the Japanese officials in Germany. Soon he must choose between returning to Japan and remaining with a pregnant Elise. Upon agreeing to return he falls ill, consumed with disgust at himself for his choice, and when he finally recovers from his illness he learns that Aizawa informed Elise of his decision, and that she went mad. The story ends with an ambivalent expression of gratitude and resentful lament for having such a “good friend” as Aizawa.

The tale is told by Ôta, written in his diaries on his way back to Japan. The form of the narrative as a retrospective memoir corresponds with Ôta’s stated goal of coming to terms with himself and the remorse he feels at the way events have unfolded; his narrative act attempts to confer a destiny upon the self (the ultimate unification of past and present selves in the close of the narrative) that will reconcile the division he feels between the ethicality of his actions and his

\(^{22}\) Kabe Yoshitaka in Japanese and Richard Bowring in English typify this common view.
image of himself and his values.26 Viewed in this light, it seems easy to conclude that the narrative form is complicit in the story apparently told by its plot: that of the subject’s disorienting, divisive experience of the modern world and his need for reintegration as a Japanese subject.

In his 2001 article “Mori Ōgai's Resentful Narrator: Trauma and the National Subject in ‘The Dancing Girl,’” Christopher Hill makes just such a case, arguing that the narrative structure of the story manifests its ethical commitments to “an articulation of Meiji national identity” (383). That is, for Hill “The Dancing Girl” tells the story of an individual’s realization that his duty to his state outweighs his responsibility toward, and perhaps even his love for, another individual. The narrative form complexly underwrites and legitimizes Ōta’s actions because its “narrowly focused, first-person retrospection naturalizes what I will call the protagonist’s accession to nationality by presenting his embrace of an identity as Japanese as the inevitable realization of qualities latent since his youth” (384).

Hill charges that the narrative form of “The Dancing Girl” is complicit in nationalist ideology by virtue of its teleology. He quotes Prasenjit Duara to argue that “The nationalist understanding of history is based upon a conception of history that is linear and progressive, in which the nation as the subject of history gathers self-awareness. The complete unfolding of the self-consciousness of the selfsame people must, however, await the nation-state, which alone can guarantee this transparency” (376). According to Hill, Ōta’s narrative act represents an attempt to rewrite his life in terms of a nationalist understanding of history, because the “unfolding of self-consciousness” enacted by the récit form of the narrative already implies the re-inscription into the nation-state with which the story ends. Hill concludes from this that Ōgai is participating in the construction of mid-Meiji nationalist narratives that seek to co-opt the identity of individuals and reframe their ethical responsibilities on nationalist political terms (384).

Hill does not address the ambivalence and open-endedness that characterizes Ōgai’s use of the récit form because he approaches the narrative on terms that presuppose its closure. His analysis effectively cuts the tale from its frame, failing to account for the fact that Ōta does not write from a metaphorical point of completion but literally en route to Japan, at sea and motionless in a foreign port. Ōta’s resentment at the end of the story in fact reminds the reader that the narrative process has not conferred a “necessity” on the subject’s reintegration into the nation-state, and highlights the incompletion of the process of the self’s subjectification. In other words, Ōta has failed to come to satisfactory terms with the fundamental moral ambivalence that motivated the quest for the self in the first place.

The closure supposedly implied by the form of the memoir finds itself challenged by yet another “remainder” left out of the equation of the récit’s narrative with nationalism: Ōta’s unborn child, which Hill writes off as “the fruit of a missown seed” (382). With Elise mad, Ōta has abandoned his own progeny to a parentless, impoverished existence. Perhaps Hill feels justified in glossing over this fact because Ōta himself does; however, the lack of a moral compass that would allow Ōta to orient himself ethically with respect to his actions is precisely

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26 My sense of the assumed function of autobiography here is informed by James Olney’s 1972 Metaphors of Self and Philippe Lejeune’s 1988 On Autobiography. More recent critiques, and even older ones such as Georges Poulet’s “criticism of consciousness” (in his publications from 1969-1977), problematize their notions of the coherence and linearity autobiographical writing can bestow – but I argue that Ōgai is specifically interrogating conventional expectations of genre, and that “The Dancing Girl” is the story of Ōta’s invocation of autobiography in the service of precisely such aims.
the problem the narrative is supposed to be addressing in the first place. By its very absence from the story, and its unforgettable presence as a loose thread in the mind of the reader (especially readers who might have wondered about the autobiographically accuracy of the story), the unborn child represents an abandoned alternative future whose mere existence challenges the capacity of the narrative to confer a legitimizing “necessity” upon his actions.

This very problem, the disjunction between the promise of the narrative form and the ethical values implied by the protagonist’s decisions, bothered a number of Ōgai’s contemporaries as well. Perhaps most famously, critic Ishibashi Ningetsu condemned Ōta’s choice to return to Japan as contradictory in light of the expectations set up by the title, descriptions of character, and the development of the story, which all seemed to demand some kind of moral growth.27 But this “disjunction” only appears as a problem when readers or critics consider the narrative to operate “transparently,” conferring necessity on the plot by virtue of a structure and perspective meant to be accepted as unquestionable “givens.” However, such readings ignore the way the story intentionally calls attention to the ethical implications of the very narrative act Hill accuses of complicity with nationalist aims.

Ōgai’s story is not Ōta’s – it exceeds and frames his narrator’s. “The Dancing Girl” is not only the story of Ōta's experience in Europe; it is the story of his efforts to account for himself ethically through the form of a narrative that he deliberately employs to affirm the necessity of his actions, just as Hill suggests. The act of writing, its motivation, and its ethical relation to Ōta’s “quest,” however, are themselves as much the subjects of inquiry of Ōgai’s writing as is Ōta’s autobiographical quest for identity itself.

This becomes apparent when we consider the emphasis Ōgai has placed on Ōta’s own self-conscious attention to the way his writing constructs an image of himself. Ōgai has Ōta write the story of his experience in diaries in which he had formerly recorded thoughts about his trip to Europe. He left many of these blank because, on subsequent re-reading, he discovered that the descriptions of the environments he encountered turned out to reveal more about himself and his romanticizing state of mind than about the environments he described. Ōta projects readers’ responses, informing his present reader that “I shudder to think how any sensitive person must have reacted to my childish ideas and presumptuous rhetoric” (Ōgai MOS 1:40). By underscoreing Ōta’s attention to the way his writing presents himself in advance of giving his account, Ōgai makes it clear that his narrator invokes the memoir form as part of a deliberate, self-conscious strategy, one that presents itself as a straightforward effort to work through a troubled past.

Ōta can no more achieve “truthfulness” in his memoir than he could in the “diary” that memoir replaces; he can only hide its tendentiousness behind the veil of confession. His self-

27 Ningetsu’s “‘The Dancing Girl’” is the article that sparked the “‘Dancing Girl’ Debate.” Ōgai rather disingenuously sidestepped the real point of Ningetsu’s criticism, which contemporary critic Koizumi Kōichirō finds still one of the most relevant critiques of the story, by answering in the form of a response by Aizawa himself. This decision to write from the perspective of a fictional character naturally allowed Ōgai to take all of Ōta’s actions to be “real” and therefore “necessitated” or at least adequately motivated by circumstances. Even in this rhetorical move, Ōgai once again deliberately invokes the power of narrative perspective (in this case, that of criticism as voiced by a fictional character) to transform the “truth” of its representations. At the same time, he brings fictional and critical perspectives together while still maintaining an illusion of objective, rational argument. In this way, his critical strategy in this debate reveals itself as a kind of “prelude” to the way he will put competing perspectives in tension in the “stereoscopic” vision of his later work.

It is also in the course of his response that Ōgai “dismisses the question of the content of the author’s ideas, on which Ningetsu had focused his argument, and instead turns his attention to their form as expressed in the novel.” (Isogai 127)
consciousness makes him aware enough to omit those elements of his account that could lay bare the subjective, self-authorizing frame on which his narrative depends if it is to accomplish its goal: to “rid himself of remorse.” In this light, his use of first-person retrospective narrative is hardly transparent. To the contrary, Ōgai deliberately calls attention both to its self-serving aims and to Ōta’s self-consciousness with respect to the way his writing defines him as an ethical subject. This self-consciousness turns out to be fundamental to Ōgai’s interrogation of the capacities and limits of the memoir form to accomplish Ōta’s aims.

The critical tendency to conflate Ōgai’s perspective with that of his narrator has been a common problem in Ōgai criticism, especially since Ōgai deliberately plays with perspective and the relationship of narrative fiction to “real life.” Many draw on this and other quasi-autobiographical stories to discuss Ōgai’s life, or on his life to supplement readings of his stories, but few tease out and almost none oppose the perspectives of the author and his narrators. And while a handful of critics have suggested that Ōgai may be attempting to distance himself, through fictionalized narrative, from decisions whose ethics he legitimately questions, none have suggested that Ōgai might be critiquing the ethics of Ōta’s narrative project itself. This critical trend stems from one of the problems of perspective in first-person narrative Ōgai addresses continually, in his criticism and fiction, throughout his career: at the point where the narrator’s “writing” begins, his speaking “I” blends into the written “I” in a way that naturalizes the same conflation between authorial and narrative perspectives, especially in works that deliberately draw on autobiographical materials.

This is not strictly a problem of genre, but also one of literary language and perspective. Tomiko Yōda, in “First-Person Voice and Citizen-Subject: The Modernity of Ōgai’s Maihime,” notes that Ōgai uses language to deliberately portray an authoritative speaking “I” that differentiates itself from a represented “self.” She invokes Emile Benveniste’s linguistic theory to argue that

the “person” {as a technical aspect of narrative} is not only structural but structuring. The subject and its enunciatory context constitute a unique and primordial locus from which the linguistic referentiality is exercised. It is an Archimedean point that cannot be referred to in itself, yet it makes possible all references to chronological time, relative space, and differentiated identity. (283)

Yōda associates Ōta’s assumption of the speaking voice “I,” represented in Ōgai’s Japanese by the pronoun yo, with his attempts to authorize himself as a subject through his tale — when he speaks as a narrator to comment on his circumstances, she points out, he uses yo. As a subject of narration (the represented self in the world of the story), however, Ōta refers to himself largely through the pronoun ware, even when he is the grammatical subject of the sentence. In Yōda’s view, the yo acts as an authorizing agent precisely because it locates the writing subject in a sovereign position outside the field of representation:

The novelistic first-person narration is an apparatus that forges a fictional field of representation that weave these two separate discursive planes together [the world of the story and the speaker’s plane]. Correlatively, even though the pronoun I itself may be an empty, formal signifier that has no objective meaning, it becomes sutured to an empirical identity. (283)

28 Yōda shows that the pronoun exists only as a rhetorical feature of written discourse, indicating the narrating self, and is not a part of spoken Japanese tradition.
The way novelistic first-person narration of “The Dancing Girl” brings together the abstract, self-authorizing subject-position of the speaking I and the “reality” of the world it represents has, for Yōda, clear ethical implications. She accuses it of conferring the illusory sovereignty of the authorizing yo, whose transcendental position she suggests is underwritten by the sovereignty of the nation-state, on the empirical subject (represented in the text as ware) by means of the “suturing” effect the narrative accomplishes. She then goes on to problematize this sovereignty, pointing to places in the text where its illusoriness shows through:

We also see that the hero’s self-transcendence as the first-person subject does not provide any resolution to the conflicts that catalyzed the quest for self-identity in the first place. Toyotarô in Berlin began perceiving his sense of self as well as his associations with others as an untenable antimony: recognizing himself as a free, autonomous and ethical individual while at the same time finding it impossible to establish a stable social identity and relations without submitting himself to arbitrary commands of authority. …By asking the question “Who am I?” he abstracts himself from the world (and himself in the world) to better grasp it. Yet, if what prompted the question was his experience as an embodied social agent, this move is fraught with contradictions. (299)

According to Yōda, these “contradictions” include the way that Ōta’s “process of self-investigation” leads to an increasing awareness of his inability to realize in practice the theoretical freedom and autonomy supposedly guaranteed by the narrative of emerging selfhood in which he casts himself. Despite the fact that Ōgai has Ōta himself become aware of the disjunction between the promise of the narrative form and its actual effects, however, Yōda claims that it is her analysis reveals “the failure of the redemptive power invested on the first-person subject,” as though Ōgai himself, and not Ōta, were attempting to wield that power. (298) Yet Ōgai’s story deliberately showcases this failure, in part by leaving Ōta adrift in his own ambivalence and resentment.

Yōda is right, and insightful, in her analysis of the way Ōta’s account aims to confer necessity upon his actions by situating them in a narrative of his own self-transcendence. She is also particularly astute to see the deliberate divide between the linguistic representation of speaking and spoken “selves” in relation to thematic concerns with the ethical gulf separating past and present selves. But Yōda exhibits a strange critical blindness in her assumption that Ōgai uses the first-person retrospective narrative form unreflectively to the same purpose as Ōta. Like Hill, Yōda does not distinguish between Ōta’s desire to achieve the sovereign perspective of an authorizing “I,” and Ōgai’s aims in critiquing that desire by writing the story of Ōta’s quest to achieve identity through writing. Her awareness of the significance of the frame of the story seems to drop out of her treatment of its language as “retrospective first-person narrative.”

“The Dancing Girl” could do little more to highlight its own attention to the relation of narrative form and the ethical questions raised by the emergence of the subject constituted through that form. As we have seen, Ōta writes with the explicitly self-serving aim of coming to terms with the ethicality of his choices. He has also, just within the timeframe of his account, written both professionally and nonprofessionally in a variety of forms defined by claims about their relation to “truth” (his travel diary, newspapers, academic papers, official documents, and, of course, his memoir), and he has proved a self-conscious reader of his own (professional) writing. Yōda, however, examines only the act of self-representation, and not the self-consciousness that structures the act.
Like Hill, Yōda recognizes that the story somehow resists the narrative of complicity her criticism constructs. And she, too, finds that the closing lines of the novel present a “contradictory moment” in the text, one that runs counter to its apparent investment in authorizing the self through its narrative form. For Yōda, however, it is not the resentment itself but its ambivalent situation in the chronology of the story that is problematic. The final line of the story reads: “Yet, even to this day, in my mind a single point of hatred toward him remains” (Ōgai, MŌS 61). Because the timing implied by the phrase “to this day” may be attributed either to the writing or the represented Ōta, “we cannot be certain whether the passage represents the realization arrived at by the narrating yo after he has finished reconstructing his past or the narrating yo still projecting himself in the biographical time of the past.” Yōda understands this to be a radical and “disorderly” moment of indeterminacy that “hangs in midair,” “weakens the unifying function of the text,” and through which the “yo seems to lose its coherence” (62).

I suggest that the ending becomes problematic in both Yōda’s and Hill’s accounts because it reminds us that the entire story is framed by the narrator’s reflexive awareness of his purpose in writing. Yōda has to exaggerate the way the potential ambivalence of the last moment bifurcates the reader’s experience of the story (are we reading retrospective projection of a subject successfully assimilated into the state, or the lament of a divided self whose narrative act failed to underwrite his self-transcendence?) to account for the odd dissonance between its first-person retrospective form and the challenges the ending presents to the narrative of self-realization that form implies. Yet even if the final lament were a retrospective “projection back into the biographical time of the past” (which seems difficult to imagine because “to this day” implies the specific time provided by the narrative frame, and not the continuum of relational “past time”), there is no indication anywhere that Ōta’s decision, or his writing, has helped him come to terms with himself as anything but an inextricably bifurcated subject, sutured to a past he can neither sanction nor write off by “objectifying” as necessary trauma in a narrative of progress toward unified subjectivity.

That the past remains as a problem and has not been cauterized from the subject could not be better emphasized by the final word of the story: “remains” (nokorekeri). At a thematic level, the woman, child, and future abandoned by Ōta, his sense of himself as caught between opposing configurations of the self and its ethical commitments, his resentment, and his memoir itself all remain as testaments to the failure of his quest and of nationalism to underwrite and justify it. At the level of the narrative, what remains is an odd dissonance between the romanticizing elements of the story, the promise of a single subjective perspective whose unifying effect will redeem the fractured individual’s sense of self, and the self-conscious frame that refuses to allow the kind of totalizing effect (complete absorption and sympathetic identification with the narrative perspective) on which that promise depends. As readers we are left with a narrative that reminds us what remains beyond the purview of its (bifurcated) vision.

“The Dancing Girl” not only refuses to resolve Ōta’s ethical dilemma, but also reframes that dilemma as a problem intrinsic to the act of narration itself. Ōta’s desire to “rid himself of

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29 Even the grammatical form of the word works in tandem with Ōgai’s self-conscious attention to Ōta’s narrative as such. The “-keri” ending is a classical form of verb conjugation that signals a “storytelling past” – that is, a tense that signals a past action narrated in the present. A translation could conceivably read “it is that it remained,” or “it is written that it remained,” although these overemphasize the largely implicit and naturalized function of the verb ending. What is relevant is that it calls attention to the fact of narration and to the story’s concern with the relation of the present narrative perspective on the past.
"remorse" and gain self-possession through the writing of his memoir is the same desire that motivated his choice to abandon Elise in favor of the guarantee of subjectivity promised by his submission to the state. This desire structures his entire account, and might indeed invisibly legitimize his decisions were it not for the self-conscious frame in which Ōgai places it. In “The Dancing Girl” Ōgai’s own self-consciousness works to the opposite ethical end of his narrator, revealing the implications of the point of view, sensibilities, and desires that his narration seeks to naturalize.

This self-conscious divide between narrative and authorial perspectives, and the tension we have seen between the promise of literary form and its actual effects, becomes considerably more pronounced in Ōgai’s writing after the turn of the century. Even his non-literary essays after that time begin to foreground their narrative elements. This is strikingly evident in his 1900 essay “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi,” which was dismissed by Bowring and most other critics as a self-indulgent complaint about his severance from the literary and cultural world of Tokyo through an 1899 “demotion” to a medical post in the distant region of Kokura. The essay does represent a jarring break from Ōgai’s former modes of writing, but this does not mark it as a failure. Rather, “Who is Ōgai Gyōshi” skillfully ties its own self-consciousness to problems of genre, narrative perspective (considered in terms of subjectivity and objectivity, as well as in terms of identity), and, implicitly, what he frames in the essay as an ethics of literary criticism.

The essay begins with an act of self-reading. Ōgai relates his recent surprise at seeing the name “Ōgai Gyoshi,” the pen name he used in a number of his literary debates of the early 1890s, and which he stopped using after 1894, appended to an article he recently wrote. The uncanny experience of seeing himself represented this way leads to his reflection on the critical world of the past, which he then interrupts to reflect on the circumstances that led to the writing of the present essay itself: the editor of the paper asked him to write a critical article about the contemporary literary world. Ōgai tells us that he could not comply, because he himself no longer participates in that world, and that he decided instead to “to write about the literary world of the past, that is to say, about Ōgai Gyoshi” (MŌS 45). The essay thus frames itself as a kind of (auto)biography of his past critical persona, which substitutes for a critical perspective on the literary world -- in much the same way Ōta’s subjective memoir replaced his ostensibly objective observations about the environments he encountered, and with no less self-consciousness.

Ōgai recounts the “story” of Ōgai Gyoshi’s critical activity in martial terms. He portrays Gyoshi as a “veteran warrior” who finally succumbed to a barrage of enemy fire and sank into the confusion and anonymity of the battlefield into which he had thrown so many other opponents. Ōgai thus openly thematizes the combative mode of his former critical methodology, and points to its violent consequences. At the same time, he distances his present narrating self from his past persona -- most obviously by pronouncing latter dead, but also by commenting theoretically on the rift between his writing and written selves. He notes that Ōgai Gyoshi was “an abstract and artificial creation,” and declares that he, the narrating Ōgai, “chose no longer to sign his name as Ōgai Gyoshi,” as that persona “had become the target of a fusillade of arrows” (45). Although Ōgai’s “alter ego” “died” (Ōgai later imagines himself attending the funeral), he himself “continued to study and learn,” progressing beyond the ideas advocated in his earlier critical skirmishes. Ōgai thus enacts the “evolution” of his writing self in the essay by framing it against the “I” of his past writing, exposing the limits of the methods by which that “I” sought to authorize and identify itself from an enlightened and self-reflective perspective.
The split between his identity as Ōgai Gyoshi and his present writing “I” forces us to recognize an essentially fictive element in even his baldest autobiographical statements. If the “I” who wrote as Ōgai Gyoshi can never coincide with the real Mori Ōgai, how can we expect the critical “I” of the present narration to be anything but another fiction? Wayne Booth’s concept of the “Implied Author” is useful for parsing the rhetorical structure of the text: Booth argues in The Rhetoric of Fiction that artifice is inevitable in narrative representations of identity, and that narrative perspective is always mediated by what Booth calls the implied author, or the author’s “second self.” The implied author is the name he gives to the inferred creator of the text, a figure who stands somewhere between the text’s narrative voice and the “real author,” and whose perspective gives the novel its coherence and significance.30 Ōgai’s representations of himself here and in other quasi-autobiographical writing deliberately play on the distinction between fictional self-representation and the real selves of authors, so that he attributes to his speaking “I” the same partly fictional and partly real status as Booth’s “implied author.” “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi” thus forces us to think, as Booth does, about the relationship between fiction, autobiography, and essay—specifically, about the relationship the text proposes between its representations of writers and critics and the “real” literary world. It becomes more difficult to take Ōgai’s comments about various writers and literary groups as straightforward literary criticism when he deliberately points to the “artificiality” of his past critical perspectives (implying the same of his present essay), and moreover invokes anecdotes, memoir forms, and elements from other narrative genres that would seem to have no rightful place in critical argument. In short, he infuses his critical essay with “literary” elements of narrative fiction. Ōgai even specifically uses the term “confession” (zange) to describe “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi’s” commentary on the literary world, playing on the current vogue of naturalism’s emphasis on the “truth” of confessional literature. His use of the genre term is ironic in light of the fact that the “confession” of the essay largely concerns events in the critical activity of what Ōgai insists we recognize as a fictional creation of the self. That is, modern Japanese confessional literature ostensibly took material from life experiences, particularly experiences of dubious moral or ethical value, and turned them into narrative. But here the “life experiences” and ethical engagements (represented thematically as the violence done to other critics through combative criticism) are themselves already textual, as is the subject of the confession (literally a “pen name”). The essay thus deliberately problematizes the concepts of “genre” that structure it by exposing the fictiveness of those genre conventions and the essay’s own pretensions toward “objectivity” and “truth.” “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi” represents a clear break from Ōgai’s former mode of critical commentary. Unlike his earlier essays, which disguised their rhetorical authorizing, the essay holds elements of both narrative fiction and literary criticism in tension to foreground the relation of that narrative form to the perspective of the narrating “I.”31 He still claims authority for

30 Ōgai’s experimentation with authorial and narrative perspectives in the novel also accords with Wayne Booth’s sense that the “double vision” accomplished by novelistic representation—the direct view of the characters, and the indirect view of the author—constitutes the distinctiveness of the novel as a genre, and inasmuch highlights one of the most significant points of agreement between Booth’s and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the novel.

31 In this sense, Ōgai’s deliberate emphasis on the subjectivity of his point of view stands in contrast to the appeal to objectivity typical of his former critical articles. It also stands apart from the kind of subjective, personal opinions often offered by many other critics. The simple fact that Ōgai continually invokes his own circumstances (as an exile, a kind of outsider to both the literary and medical worlds, an older, more “experienced” critic, etc.) while writing what was originally supposed to be a “critical” article about the literary world was not in itself unique; most Meiji critical writers freely made reference to themselves in the course of espousing their opinions about literature,
himself, such as when he comments that he is proud to proclaim that in time, Kōda Rohan will come to be recognized as one of Japan’s best writers, or when he declares that there is nothing redeeming and not a shred of originality in the new generation of university graduates. But here his pronouncements do not appeal to universal logic or philosophy. Instead, he frames them with self-conscious analysis of the contingency of past critical engagements, and anecdotal observation about his own relationship to the literary world, making the essay read less like an objective assessment and more like his later literary works, whose quasi-fictional narrators often comment from within the work of fiction on the state of the literary world in a voice much like Ōgai’s own.

Ironically, it is precisely through this retrospective, self-conscious unveiling of the contingency of his own critical practice that Ōgai authorizes his present perspective on the literary world in “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi.” His portrayal of Ōgai Gyoshi’s “defeat” on the battlefield of literary criticism implicitly projects Ōgai’s present narrating self beyond his former incarnation (Ōgai explicitly invokes the karmic cycle to discuss his relation to his past self at one point), to a perspective from which he can reflect on his past involvement. By emphasizing the change wrought in his perspective by the passage of time, and also by choosing to address events that take place within Tokyo’s cultural world from a minor newspaper in a far province, Ōgai emphasizes his detachment from the literary world, and hence his more “objective” view.

At the same time, however, Ōgai relentlessly reminds us of his subjective position as a marginalized figure. He makes sure his reader shares the “shock” he felt when he read an article associating him with his former critical persona, the chagrin he felt at being unable to comply with the editors’ request because of his marginalization from the literary world, and his self-pity at the way his reputation has ruined his chances in the medical profession. This theme of his vacillation between worldviews (objective and aloof or subjective and personal, medical or literary, etc.) emerges not only in the story told by the essay (through his portrayal of himself as intensely involved warrior or resigned, detached outsider, doctor or writer, etc.), but also through the play between its narrative framing of his perspective and the real conditions of his life outside the text. That is, the intentional ambivalence of the article’s genre (does it fictionalize the self or “confess” the truth of Ōgai’s literary activity, and is it critical commentary on the literary world disguised as autobiography or undisguised memoir?) embodies Ōgai’s sense of straddling incommensurable professions that propose very different relations to “truth,” just as the fact of the essay’s publication in a marginal newspaper materially reproduces its thematic and formal representation of Ōgai’s marginalized perspective from the sidelines as an “onlooker” (bōkansha), a term he often repeated in self-reference and used to title several of his publications.

The narrative form, and even the venue of publication of “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi,” prove intimately related to its content -- the story it tells of Ōgai’s dislocation from the literary and

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32 Ōgai also deliberately plays with time to achieve this effect in his fiction, most similarly in “Daydreams” (Mōsō) and perhaps most drastically in his historical fiction, as we shall see in the final section of this paper.
medical worlds. In other words, the essay exhibits signs of very careful “plotting” and “framing” that call attention to its narrative construction. This is a fitting means of putting to rest the critic Ōgai Gyoshi (indeed, Ōgai would no longer write general arguments about critical principles), who took pains to hide the carefully constructed rhetoric of his criticism. No longer satisfied with the pretense of objectivity that he displayed in his former critical essays, and yet equally skeptical of the naturalist tendency to see subjective, personal confession as an expression of “truth,” in “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi” Ōgai sets each perspective against the other in order to achieve a point of view that emerges from the tension between them, and then calls attention to the artifice of that very process.

For the reader taking the essay either as straightforward critical commentary, or as genuine, artless “confession” from the “real” Ōgai, this tension proves uncomfortably dissonant, making the experience of the text at once overly focused on the personal and yet oddly detached. It seems almost as though Ōgai tries too hard to make the reader sympathize through his complicated confessional framing and portrayal of his own resilient detachment. But while the essay surely seeks to solicit sympathy from readers, it also deliberately raises questions about the way our reading practices condition our sympathies and hence have ethical consequences:

There were novel writers known as Rohan, Kōyō… and in the realm of literary criticism, Shōyō, Ōgai, and others. These were the names commonly discussed by those who took up the way of the brush as a profession. …I thus found myself in the position of seeing Ōgai Gyoshi appear mistakenly and repeatedly among the luminaries of the literary world…. This inflated reputation began circulating in the general public, and the distinction between my critical and creative works became hopelessly blurred. People outside literary circles began to refer to me as “a novelist.”

…I cannot help feeling that my undeserved fame works as a liability…. In truth, I am a man whose fortunes have not been advanced by having become famous in this manner. My true face has yet to be understood by the world. That is why I have chosen to distance myself from the name Ōgai Gyoshi. (138)

Ōgai here asserts that the public, unfamiliar with “literature,” failed to distinguish it from literary criticism, leading to his false reputation as a “writer.” In other words, people’s misunderstandings of genre conventions led to misinterpretations of his work, and this contributed to his eventual marginalization from the literary world. He then reinforces this theme of his estrangement by positioning himself “in the margins” of the medical community as well, which he suggests illogically dismissed his medical work on the grounds of his reputation as a writer. All of these gestures imply that his ideas and his work (medical and literary) have been critically misread, and that those misreadings had real consequences for both his literary involvement and his personal life, which in this essay prove inextricably related.

The devastating effects misreadings had on Mori Ōgai proved fatal to the critical persona Ōgai Gyoshi he eulogizes in this essay, who was “killed off by the Tokyo literary establishment” with metaphorical arrows. The essay highlights the violence of which acts of reading are capable by using warlike terms to discuss the literary world on several other occasions as well: it labels recent graduates of college “samurai warriors of student journals,” compares two critics to “guardians at a temple gate… poised to challenge Hakubunkan’s (the publishing company responsible for the eminent literary journal “The Sun” (Taiyō)) rule,” (9) and discusses another literary coterie (Imperial Literature, or Teikoku bungaku) as “a perpetual succession of hot-blooded warriors stepping in after one another to demonstrate their skills” (15).
Ōgai’s emphasis on the damaging effects of critical reading practices transcends the metaphorical when he laments the “real” consequences of such misreadings – his “exile” from the cultural center of Tokyo and from the center of the literary and medical worlds. Ōgai implies that because of the degree to which authors and their writing personae tend to be conflated in the minds of readers, critical engagement can have “real” ethical consequences above and beyond the damage it can do to the (implied) author whose work it interprets, even if that “I” is always in some sense fictionalized.

Ōgai is no less devastating in his declamation of other critics or writers as a result of this insight into literary ethics; he does not give up the sword for some ostensibly more peaceful, ethical alternative. Rather, the key difference between his attitude here and his position in earlier essays is that he no longer couches his judgments in a logical language that seeks to frame itself as universal argument. Instead, Ōgai self-consciously reveals his own investment in the critical self-representation through which he judges others, and is more honest about the self-authorizing his writing enacts. The essay expertly destabilizes the conventions of criticism and confession through which it operates. But it fails to achieve a satisfactory stance to resolve the tensions between its impulse to authorize Ōgai’s perspective and its efforts to frame that impulse through self-conscious analysis in a meaningful way. Awkwardly poised between critical commentary and fictionalized confession, and ambivalent about the relationship it paints between Ōgai himself and the literary world, the essay understandably lends itself to the same kind of misreadings it laments.

In part for these reasons, the essay has been dismissed by critics, deemed unworthy of consideration. And yet “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi?” is indeed important in the context of Ōgai’s efforts to establish a perspective from which he could speak about himself and his relation to the literary world, and especially important in terms of his invocation of self-consciousness to reflect on his involvement in (or detachment from) the literary world. Through this reflection he demonstrates his awareness that literary interpretation, especially in the form of critical attacks, engages others in real and potentially damaging ways, a point we shall see he elaborates in “Vita Sexualis.” The essay also marks a point of transition between his earlier desire to maintain a sharp division between the languages of criticism and literature, and his later adoption of literary language to conduct the same kind of theoretical inquires into questions of narrative perspective and interpretation that motivated his earliest criticism.

Ōgai’s next major work of fiction, his 1909 “Vita Sexualis,” became considerably more explicit about its theoretical and ethical functions. The novella plays with authorial and narrative perspective through parodic invocations of the conventions of naturalist confession, making an explicit inquiry into the capacity of literature to represent the “truth” of the hidden desires motivating human interaction (and motivating literary writing and interpretation). The

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33 Richard Bowring completely missed the mark in his assessment that “The eventual abandonment of this theorizing in 1901-02 was because he realized that theory tended to cramp artistic expression...” (100). To think this is to conflate the “scientific” approach of Ōgai’s earlier critical arguments with “theory,” and to fail to see the self-conscious analysis and critique his later literary writing enacts as increasingly theoretical in its reflection on narrative strategies and investments. Ōgai did not abandon, but rather interiorized his theoretical inquiry in the narrative structure of his “fiction” (his literary writing, like “Who is Ōgai Gyoshi”, often deliberately blurred the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction), finding “immanent critique” a much more appropriate mode of revealing the narrative structures through which literature establishes and authorizes various perspectives (see next chapter).
first person account of the protagonist and main narrator, Kanai, begins and ends with commentary, ostensibly by Ōgai, who introduces the narrator as a reader:

He reads a great deal of novels without consideration for the critical discussions. But if the authors knew what he thought while reading, they would be furious. He does not look at them as works of art. He has particularly high demands, and the kinds of works being published these days do not meet them. What he enjoys is musing about the psychological states of the authors in writing their stories. When an author thinks he has written something sad or tragic, Kanai tends to find it extremely funny; when an author thinks he has written something comic, Kanai, on the other hand, often finds it sad. (M(OS) 211)

Kanai is first introduced as a reader who believes he can penetrate the veil of fiction to arrive at an understanding of the “psychological states” motivating the authors’ writing. His “reading against the grain” gives him a sense of superiority that allows him to enjoy the contrast between these writers’ desire to be read in certain ways and the actual effects of their narrative – or, in Booth’s terms, the gulf between the sensibilities of the implied authors of the texts and his own. It is ironic, then, that he notes the naiveté of the naturalists who believe they can write the “truth of life,” confessing all of their personal (and ultimately sexual) secrets, since he himself conflates implied and real authors, believing himself possessed of authoritative interpretive faculties that give him insight into the authors’ “real” intentions.

Kanai does not read texts for their artistic qualities, but rather for the way they represent their authors’ desires, the detached analysis of which apparently gives him pleasure. In the case of naturalist literature, for example, he finds himself unaffected by the sexually charged scenes in their literature, but stimulated by the question “why the author had deliberately taken the trouble to depict it… He wondered if the author’s focusing on sexual desire itself was not abnormal” (Vita Sexualis 24). Because literary texts for him reflect real life desires (although not always in the manner intended by the author), he is particularly troubled by the fact that literary criticism, as the discipline that supposedly critiques the value of literature and its relation or relevance to real life, affirmed the naturalist view that “human life involved sex.” This makes him wonder -- more mockingly than seriously, but perhaps seriously nonetheless -- whether his own relative lack of interest in sex might not be abnormal, and leads to his decision to write the narrative of his own sexual desire so that he might gain the self-knowledge required to legitimize his perspective. “He wondered if this was not exactly the right moment to attempt a history of his own sexuality… Might he not probe those desires and write about them? If he set them down clearly in black and white, he might understand them himself.” (Vita Sexualis, 30) The irony of his frowning at the naivety of these writers and critics is thus further emphasized by the fact that Kanai embarks on precisely such a project himself.

Kanai’s sexual desire, prefaced as it is by this account of his unusual interest in literature and other writers, appears as a thematic incarnation of the desire for literary authority (that is, his desire to determine authoritatively the “real” significance of the literary texts he encounters, thereby authorizing himself and his views in the process) that frames his narrative project. His supposedly detached interest in writing a “clear” and “frank” account of his sexual

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34The introduction alone elsewhere emphasizes the connection between sexuality and textuality through its direct reference to the narrator’s need to translate the Chinese word for sexuality into Japanese using the character for “desire” (yoku), and by its mention of how the last name of the perpetrator of an act of sexual aberrance (the rape of a woman) became a slang term referring to that act.
“history” merely for the purpose of self-analysis is rendered suspect by Ōgai’s earlier mention that “Sometimes he thought that he would like to write something himself…. perhaps a novel or a play” (212). Ōgai furthermore asserts that Kanai felt “stimulated” by his earlier reading of Sōseki, in whom he sensed a potential literary rival he could best, but then felt disgusted by the failed Sōseki imitations published by other writers, and rather than end up one of those decided to not write anything himself. In other words, Kanai wants to distinguish himself from other would-be authors whose works fail to bring readers into sympathy with their projects, making them objects of derision instead.

“Vita Sexualis” is at least as much an account of the (literary) desire that motivates Kanai’s narrative quest as it as a genuine inquiry into human sexuality and its role in literature. Like “The Dancing Girl,” the novella relates its narrator-hero’s efforts to represent himself, and thereby achieve self-knowledge, through an authorial irony that emphasizes the divide between Ōgai’s and Kanai’s investments in the narrative that constitutes the main text – even as the text invites readers to conflate the transparently fictionalized persona through unmistakable parallels in their life experiences (it is in fact this push and pull of contrary perspectives, sympathetic identification and narrative distance between author and narrator, that creates the compelling half-parodic effect that nevertheless makes Kanai’s often pedantic account involving in its own right). This foregrounds the way that authorial irony “calls attention to what is inevitably true of all works of fiction, namely that there is an implied author mediating our relation to its ‘substance,’” and that there is “no such thing as objective truth,” since we only ever have access to the “artifice of the work.” (Booth 47) In “Vita Sexualis,” this irony further underscores the contrast between Kanai’s attempt to reveal the “truth” about his own sexual desire through an objective “history,” on the one hand, and the subjective complicity of his language in the literary desire that motivates and is represented by that narrative on the other.

“Vita Sexualis” makes the capacity of literature -- especially the confessional literature whose conventions the text itself borrows (and parodies) -- to represent the “truth of human life” an overt topic of discussion. At the same time, it deliberately puts the “real” voice of Mori Ōgai in tension with the “fictionalized” narrative of Dr. Kanai. Through this tension, and by paralleling its narrator’s repressed desire to write with the history of sexual repression he chronicles, the novella enacts precisely the kind of interrogation of its own capacity to represent real human subjects and desires that it discusses. In this sense, its self-conscious framing of its own narrative investments is far more explicit than that of “The Dancing Girl.”

Kanai’s aims are at once both literary and personal: he wants to expose the abnormality of naturalists’ “obsession” with sex (thereby justifying his own “frigidity”) through an inquiry into his own sexual history. This history will at the same time presumably authorize himself as an original writer capable of penetrating the “truth” of that history through “confession,” without the sensationalism or naivety of the naturalists. By reflecting openly on these aims, and by deliberately splitting its implied author and its narrator (creating two distinct speaking “I”s), the narration of “Vita Sexualis” makes the dissonance between Ōgai’s and Kanai’s perspectives itself an object of reflection, rather than causing its readers to reflect critically on the self-authorizing aspects of Kanai’s act of writing through that dissonance. In other words, what “The Dancing Girl” accomplished through its subtle relation of story and narrative frame itself becomes the overt modus operandi and theme of “Vita Sexualis.”

While the interrogation of narrative form and the desire it conceals becomes more explicit than in “The Dancing Girl,” the ethical implications of that interrogation become more implicit. The substance of Kanai’s story seems to have less to do with his actions and
responsibilities toward others than with his attitudes toward himself and his own sexuality and desire. But the desire the novella highlights (both sexual and literary) in fact prove to condition his attitudes and actions toward others. His cool detachment from those who act passionately, or who clumsily display their desire (for example his “triumvir” of friends who disdain almost all of their classmates for reasons as varied as their behavior or mode of dress), and his view of himself as an accurate, objective observer of the desires of others, mirrors his attitude toward literature and his belief that he can observe, apprehend, and reveal a truth that other writers fail to realize.35

Kanai’s attitude, in the experiences he describes and in the writing that describes them, reduces others to the status of objects of observation. He even admits the self-serving nature of his writing when he retrospectively anticipates the way his first published article might be read by critics at the time of his writing:

What I wrote attracted some attention…. It was part lyrical, part novelette, part historical investigation. If I had written it now, people would have called it a novel. And after arbitrarily deciding that, they would have called it worse than a miscellany. Though the word “passionate” was not in circulation then, but if it had been, they would have said it lacked passion…. In addition, the expression “self-vindication,” in defense of criminals, had not been coined. But I don’t believe any work of art can avoid being a “self-vindication.” Life itself is an attempt at vindicating the self. The life of every living being is self-vindication…. Mimicry [of animals for protection] is self-vindication. Writing is self-vindication for the same reason. Fortunately… my writing managed to get by without any doubts being cast on its right to exist. That was because so-called criticism, whose own right to exist is even more dubious, and which has nothing intellectual or emotional to offer anyone, had not yet been invented. (242)

Kanai acknowledges that all writing aims at “self-vindication” for the guilty offenses of its authors. If so, this begs the question of the offense “Vita Sexualis” might hope to vindicate. We might assume it to have been his “illicit” sexual encounters with others, except that we are told Kanai actually “enjoyed the peccadilloes he committed,” and Ōgai takes pains to describe his passivity (and therefore implied lack of responsibility): “But his sexual desires were never quite strong enough to make him aggressively assert himself for satisfaction” (247). The one thing Kanai does seem reluctant to reveal, however, is his indulgence in masturbation: “Back then I developed a bad habit. It is difficult to record, but all of this writing would be worthless if I left it out, so I must document it now.” (237).

Kanai’s guilty confession here suggests that the “crime” his writing attempts to vindicate may not be any particular action toward others, but rather his self-absorption. His masturbation allowed him to avoid contact with others and to dwell only on the images he conjured of them – as dramatized, for example, when he ran from Eiichi’s mother’s inviting sensuality, only to lay in the grass and “imagine a plethora of images” (237). This self-absorption characterizes his few sexual encounters with others as well, during all of which he remained completely focused on his own point of view, making private and often disparaging judgments of his “partners.”

35 Kanai clearly envisions himself such a detached observer when he repeatedly scrutinizes his maid’s features and determines that she has probably developed a crush on him. But he also explicitly describes himself as such when he writes “I felt… as if I were looking at violent waves after having been flung on the shore from inside a swirling maelstrom. All the members of the party were mirrored in my eyes with perfect objectivity” (Vita Sexualis 117)
“Vita Sexualis” links Kanai’s self-centered sexual practice and the detached, aloof perspective of his first-person narrative writing; after all, the extended cogitation on the nature of writing, and his own critical reception, only makes sense in light of the novella’s extended, thematic conflation of his sexual and literary desire (references to books, reading, and writing as means of identifying with or defining oneself against others come up about as frequently as references to sexual desire or attraction between individuals -- indeed, the “attraction” he discusses in the quote above was not sexual but critical in nature).

As one who lives constantly observing and judging others from a privileged vantage, Kanai fears sliding from his sole, authoritative, and inscrutable subject position as judge to the object of others’ judgment. In anticipation of this fall, then, he hastens to beat future critics to the punch by analyzing his own work. His defensive admission of his writing’s “lack of passion” sums up precisely both his literary and sexual problems: he is too invested in the project of self-authorization, both morally and artistically, to engage in the kind of writing and relationships that would allow others to emerge as interesting subjects in their own right. In his “romantic” relations, he fails to experience love (which the introduction specifically notes “is not the same as sexual desire even though it may be closely related to it”), and discusses marriage, potential romantic interests, and intercourse itself solely in terms of his personal interest or lack thereof. And in his writing, he fails to represent anyone, or anything, really, in a way that gives it any reality or meaning beyond that which it acquired for him through his self-absorbed, monologic perspective.

The tyranny of his subjective vision, and the egocentric desire that underlies it, becomes more evident to Kanai in the course of writing the narrative that leads him to reflect on the very self-vindication his writing enacts. In other words, the “truth” of the desire he uncovers through his narrative act turns out to be about that act itself and the way it parallels the passionless, repetitive self-absorption of his youthful sexual desire. In the conclusion, Ōgai writes from an “authorial” perspective: “Once [Kanai] put down his pen, he came to suspect that the writing of these casual encounters, haphazardly repeated, might become mechanical” (150).

Kanai’s speculation about the nature of his own writing leads him to recognize that its failure lies in his inability to connect meaningfully with others:

> What he had written was not autobiography in the usual sense of the term… In sexual desire detached from love, there could be no real passion, so that even he himself could not but realize that a person without passion cannot be a good subject for autobiography…. He definitely decided to discontinue writing. And still he thought about it over and over again…. Somehow it seemed to him he was an uncommonly frigid person. (Vita Sexualis 130-1)

In other words, through his self-reflective act of reading, Kanai comes to realize what Ōgai has underscored from the start: that his sexual and literary practices manifest the exact same flaw in his character. Kanai’s writing was passionless precisely because it repressed and subordinated all other perspectives, translating his experiences into a single, judgmental worldview. As a result of the self-consciousness brought about by his reading, Kanai winds up (in the present-tense epilogue) abandoning his self-authorization narrative, and decides not to publish what he already had finished. Ōgai, of course, does publish that material; the key difference in their actions lies in the fact that his novella “dialogizes” Kanai’s “monologic” narrative through the contextualizing authorial frames that makes Kanai’s literary and sexual desires, and their
relationship to his narrative act, the subject of inquiry, and not merely the motivation behind his writing.

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, in his seminal 1930s essay “Discourse in the Novel,” suggests that “dialogization” in fact defines the novel as such. He proposes that the novel is distinguished as a genre for its inclusion of multiple languages (in its representation of the speech and thoughts of others, and in its incorporation of a variety of literary and non-literary languages) and for its capacity, through language, to concretely embody multiple worldviews. Moreover, for Bakhtin, the novel’s orchestration of these languages is a fundamentally ethical project because it presents languages foreign to the interpretive horizons of its readers (as well as its authors and narrators) in a way that does not subjugate them to a single, authoritative perspective, but allows them to exist in all of their diversity, permitting the recognition and understanding of valid subject positions other than any given reader’s own. “Dialogism” describes this ethical open-endedness of novelistic discourse.36

“Vita Sexualis” dramatizes the contrast Bakhtin draws between the dialogic and the monologic – that is, between writing that seeks to suppress the polyphony of language in favor of a single, authoritative perspective, and writing that opens itself to a heterogeneity of perspectives. The story the novella tells of Kanai’s self-centered incapacity to recognize sex as a shared, relational activity, dramatizes metaphorically his failure as a writer to achieve the dialogism required of the novel.37 While Kanai’s project fails in this respect, however, Ōgai’s “Vita Sexualis” succeeds; the novella foregrounds the relation of Kanai’s story to its narrative frame, dialogizing Kanai’s monologic voice through a deliberate emphasis on the authorial perspective that relativizes it. “Vita Sexualis” thus performs what Bakhtin theorizes as one of the definitive functions of the novel, namely, its dramatization of “the gaps that always exist between what is told and the telling of it, constantly experimenting with social, discursive, and narrative asymmetries” (xxviii).

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36 The term “dialogic” encapsulates the ways novelistic language acts openly and actively communicate with other languages. For Bakhtin this occurs both at the level of the text (that is, in terms of its intertextuality and acknowledgment of other language acts in relation to which it acquires multiple significances) and at the level of the word (that is, in terms of the alternative meanings a word may possess, and the alternative worldviews or contexts in which a word may participate, beyond those toward which the sentence semantically guides it).

37 Both Ōgai and Bakhtin also formulate this ethical problem in terms of passivity. We have seen that Kanai refused to aggressively pursue his desire, instead letting himself be led into situations from which he could maintain an emotional and intellectual distance, and how this attitude characterizes his writing. Apropos of this, Bakhtin writes:

A passive understanding of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all...insofar as the speaker operates with such a passive understanding, nothing new can be introduced into his discourse; there can be no new aspects in his discourse relating to concrete objects and emotional expressions. Indeed the purely negative demands... leave the speaker in his own personal context, within his own boundaries; such negative demands are completely immanent in the speaker’s own discourse and do not go beyond his semantic or expressive self-sufficiency. (281)

Bakhtin’s description applies to Kanai’s speech perfectly; although willing to relate situations that might embarrass him (but also attest to his bold honesty in confessing them), Kanai rarely if ever allows anything to modulate his “expressive self-sufficiency.” He maintains the same cool, detached tone and never dares to let the discourse or even personalities of others emerge in ways that would demand its modification.
It is precisely the experimental, half-parodic but nevertheless sustained investment in the confessional mode and monologic voice of its narrator, and the dissonant, dialogic interjections of authorial voice in the introduction and conclusion, that have made “Vita Sexualis” so difficult for critics to categorize. Neither true confession or psychological study, straight parody or sustained criticism -- nor even pure fiction (the novella encourages us to consider the voice of its introduction, and the history of its narrator, as belonging to Ōgai himself) -- “Vita Sexualis” challenges readers by obfuscating the stance of its implied author toward the “history” its narrator presents. In Booth’s view this would mark it as an unsuccessful work, because it prevents readers from aligning their sympathies with those of the implied author, whose values cannot be clearly ascertained. But Bakhtin suggests that this “failure” may have its own ethical function. He contends that the “dialogic tension between languages and belief systems” permits a kind of authorial “neutrality” that allows multiple perspectives to emerge without being subsumed into a single, authoritative worldview.

This theoretical “neutrality” appealed to Ōgai for several reasons. It provided a resolution to his quest for a language that would escape the subjective point of view of its author without falling back into the mere pretence of objectivity obtained by rational language, a pared-down rhetorical style, or supposedly detached observation without personal commentary. It also allowed Ōgai to experiment continually with new narrative perspectives without necessarily “authorizing” them, letting the interactions of his framing discourses and those of his narrators and characters play out in an open-ended manner that avoided full commitment to any particular worldview. This “neutrality” furthermore provided a means of making what I have shown to be Ōgai’s ethical self-consciousness -- his efforts to step back from and reflect on the sensibilities implicit in his own narrative acts -- a definitive, formal feature of his novels. Finally, as I will argue in the next chapter, the interplay of narrative languages permitted by this “neutrality” made it possible for Ōgai to embody concretely, and to specific aesthetic effects, the blend and clash of perspectives that constituted the personal and historical worlds he sought to represent.

From “Vita Sexualis” onward, Ōgai experimented with a number of narrative styles to create precisely this kind of neutral perspective. His writing also increasingly reflected on, and thematized, its own formal and rhetorical strategies for constructing such an illusion of neutrality, culminating in what the next chapter will show to be the pronounced “stereoscopic vision” of his

38 “Vita Sexualis,” as a parody of the kinds of pseudo-psychological studies that attempt to isolate and understand particular behaviors or attitudes through narrative histories, points out a common problem of psychological approaches that Bakhtin elucidates in the following terms:

Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse toward the object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word.... To study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of that real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined. (292, original emphasis)

Through Kanai’s approach to both sexual and literary activities (remember especially the pleasure he took in reading “through” texts to contrast their effects with the desires of their authors), “Vita Sexualis” demonstrates the danger of believing one can apprehend the “truth” of human life or desires through interpretive engagements that fail to understand the context which give them significance.
last work of non-historical fiction, “Wild Geese.” After that, Ōgai’s historical fiction continued to reflect on its own narrative investments, though less through the opposition of implied author and first-person narrator than through the tension created between literary and non-literary languages. That is, I believe that Ōgai’s later literary writing revealed the novel to be what Bakhtin formulates as a “self-critical genre capable of revising the fundamental concepts of literariness” (280), in a way that the philosophical language of his literary criticism could not.
In both Western and Japanese literary traditions, the earliest theorists of the modern novel defended the genre on ethical grounds, invoking what we might refer to today as the novel’s capacity to represent alterity—the way it allows us to experience vicariously perspectives other than our own. George Eliot, in 1861, argued that the novel allowed readers to “imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves.” (22) And in 1885, Tsubouchi Shōyō, even in the process of declaiming naïve ethical criticism for valorizing kanzenchōaku (the principle that good should be rewarded and evil punished) in prose fiction, implied that the novel’s capacity to represent “the fabric of human emotion” “ennobled” readers, allowing them to comport themselves more ethically due to their experience of other perspectives. Such thinking still prevails in contemporary ethical criticism, especially in the West, although critics now differ sharply over the role alterity plays in the novel. Some, like Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth, place an Aristotelian emphasis on the value of the novel’s capacity to represent and model real life; they argue that the representations of others in novels encourage us to “care” for others and to understand them better. In contrast, a view expressed perhaps most clearly in the theoretical writing of Judith Butler and Michael Wood suggests that this “sympathetic” approach may produce dangerously colonizing attitudes in readers, insofar as it encourages surmounting rather than respecting the difference that marks others as such. 39

The key to reconciling these positions may lie in an “oscillation” between the two that turns out to be intrinsic to both, an oscillation brilliantly and complexly demonstrated by modern Japanese literary pioneer Mori Ōgai (1868-1922) in his last work of fiction, Gan (“The Wild Geese,” 1911). It may seem odd to turn to a Japanese novel to shed light on a contemporary impasse in ethical literary criticism in the West (especially considering that the Japanese writer in question argued fiercely and famously that the value of the novel lay purely in the realm of aesthetics, and should not be framed in ethical terms at all). My analysis in this chapter suggests, however, that the realist novel frames its narrative construction of ethos in ways that depend upon but also transcend the value judgments or affective responses elicited by the particularities of novelistic representation itself. That is, I argue that the ethical problems of perspective and positionality inhere so strongly in the form of the Western realist novel that even when the genre was interpolated into the radically different literary, cultural, and political context of late nineteenth century Japan, the Japanese writers most absorbed in forging the new genre recognized its capacity to establish an ethos through its narrative rendering of perspective as one of its most salient features, even if many approached this capacity on aesthetic rather than ethical terms.

The earliest pioneers of the novel in Japan, most prominently Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935), Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909), and Mori Ōgai, interpreted the Western novel from the

39 The former camp argues that through its sustained portrayal of others, the novel helps us to develop appreciation for sensibilities other than our own, or at least make us more attentive to our own values, through its “particularity”—its intimate depiction of details we tend to gloss over in our assumptions about what is worth knowing. In contradistinction, theorists such as Judith Butler and Michael Wood warn of the dangers of believing we can ever truly “identify” with an “other,” particularly through an engagement with a genre that materializes precisely those social, political, and cultural codes that delimit, often traumatically, the boundaries through which we apprehend and recognize others as subjects or objects. These theorists point to moments in novels that refuse readerly sympathy, or else confront readers with the radical “unknowability” of characters, as ethical models of resistance to the colonizing forces of sympathetic imagination—in other words, they stand for what Charles Altieri refers to as an “ethics of letting be,” of allowing alterity to remain beyond understanding.
vantage of a literary history in which no fixed rules about literary realism and narrative perspective had been established, one characterized by relatively fluid understandings of narrators as storytellers whose position vis-à-vis the narration was rarely if ever a definitive concern of any given work. These writers were also under pressure to establish the value of prose fiction, which had in the past century taken its most popular form as loose, episodic, and often frivolous tales disparaged by clergy and intellectuals as “low” and “corrupt” forms of entertainment. Their work thus foregrounds with exceptional clarity what they saw as definitive and valuable in novelistic writing. For them, the capacity to construct and sustain narrative perspectives not set the novel apart from other modes of writing and implied a responsibility to represent others truthfully and “authentically.” In this chapter, I will show that their emphasis on novelistic voice, style, technical perspective, and the representation of the sensibilities of narrating persona, sometimes even at the expense of coherent plots and engaging characters, reveals the degree to which an ethos-based model of narrative engagement was intrinsic to their apprehension of the novel as a genre.

Mori Ōgai’s Gan foregrounds the ethos of its narration so jarringly (to the point where questions about the narration overshadow the story it tells) that it has met with widespread criticism. Even proponents of Gan have largely argued that it represents an interesting and insightful failure to achieve truthfulness in fiction, a turning point in the career of a man who subsequently abandoned fiction for the “truth” of historical novels. This lukewarm reception stems in part from the subsequent critical commonplace that for Ōgai, the aesthetic value of the novel as a work of fiction was incompatible with the Confucian ethics of honesty that informed much of his critical thought. Yet it may also stem from the fact that until recently, the terms of ethical literary criticism differed greatly from those of formal and aesthetic criticism, making it difficult to recognize Gan’s unique insight: that the aesthetics of the novel emerge as part and parcel of the ethics of its representation of what has become perhaps the definitive concept in contemporary ethical criticism of the novel, alterity.

Gan tells the story of how individuals establish and vie for power in their relationships by appropriating the lives and discourses of others in self-serving narrative performances. At the same time, it reveals its narrator’s complicity in the dynamics of (narrative) manipulation and triangular desire that his account portrays in others’ relationships. The novel thus invites a critique of its own narrative (and the literary conventions on which it relies to mask that complicity) on the same terms through which it critiques the narrative acts (and the social conventions that condition them) of characters who fail to apprehend others on any terms beside their own. The thematic problems of the characters’ self-centered interactions, and of the

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40 These forms were generally referred to under the collective appellation gesaku, or “frivolous writings.” Some more “serious” forms of prose fiction, such as setsuwa, or Buddhist folk parables, had also flourished, though they implicitly justified themselves through the religious and ethical merit of illustrating good principles of thought or conduct.

41 As I argued in the previous chapter, this “authenticity” (shin, shinsō, shinjitsu, etc.) was ethically inflected insofar as it involved representing the world free from subjective prejudice or prescribed literary convention, allowing those “others” represented to emerge as subjects in their own right. It is true that while advocating such “authenticity” these pioneers did overwhelmingly argue against the ethical value of the novel, in order to contravene prevalent views that its only merit consisted in the illustration of moral principles. This was part of their project to raise the novel to the status of high art. However, close analysis of both their literary and critical writing shows that their sense of the responsibilities of the novel to represent the world and human relationships in fact rests on ethical principles (see chapter 1, pages 1-4, 8-17, 30-37).
narrator’s own desire, cannot be separated from formal problems intrinsic to the narrative structure itself, and both raise questions about the capacity of discourse to represent perspectives beyond those of its locuters.

Reflection on the ethics of the stories the novel tells lead us to reflect on the form of the novel, which can only be understood in relation to the unfolding story in which the narrator plays no small part. The novel thus shuttles us between immersion in the world it describes and self-conscious reflection on its representation of that world; any ethical question we might ask about the stories depends upon our approach to the form of the novel, and vice-versa. This oscillation corresponds with what literary ethicist Dorothy Hale, in her recent article “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel,” identifies as a link between the two major contemporary positions on the ethics of the novel. In Butler’s work, for example, Hale finds that human understanding comes into being through the oscillation between “reading for life” and “reading as if for life.” In the former process, “we ignore or forget the conditionality of our understanding,” immersing ourselves in the totality of the textual world and its vision of human relationships and “others.” In the latter, “we are self-consciously aware that our certainty is all hypothetical: we understand that we create the meaning we think we find; we know that when we feel most certain we are taking for fact exactly what we pretend to be.” As Hale parses Butler’s theory, what allows human understanding to develop from reading a novel is not the reader’s sympathetic immersion in the world of the characters, nor critical reflection on the implications of that readerly activity, but continual oscillation between these contrary impulses. (Nussbaum’s theory similarly depends upon both sympathetic “care” for characters and conscious reflection on the value of the responses and judgments novelistic representation elicits.)

This oscillation between engagement and reflection seems fundamental not only to each of these sharply contrasting accounts of the ethics of alterity in novels, but to the project of contemporary ethical criticism as a whole. In “A Humanist Ethics of Reading,” Daniel Schwarz proposes two dimensions contemporary ethical theorists of the novel need to distinguish and explore more thoroughly in light of complications in contemporary thought about the relation of narrative and real life. The first is an ethics while reading, embroilment in the ethical situations and questions manifest by both events described in the world of the text and by the methods of that description itself. The second is an ethics of reading, which involves reflection on the particular values we bring to a text and considers what alternative perspectives might be possible or required for fuller understanding. What distinguishes the latter from the former of these positions is self-consciousness with respect to the way we assign significance to our cognitive and affective responses to a text. In effect, what Schwartz, Butler, and Nussbaum all describe is an oscillation between the way we approach texts as involved, self-forgetting readers and as self-conscious, reflecting critics.

The implicit consensus among many contemporary Western ethical theorists, then, is that an ethical reading of a novel requires both fully engaged immersion in the world of the work and self-conscious, reflective distance on the value structures it represents or engages. The narration in Gan demands precisely this kind of reading. It alternates between getting lost in its own empathetic portrayal of characters, whose thoughts and voices literally take over the first-person narration, and foregrounding the narrator’s self-conscious manipulation so completely that it raises questions about the credibility of the story he tells, disrupting readers’ immersion in the story and forcing them to reflect instead on the narrative structure instead.

In the end, Gan exhibits startling metatextual self-consciousness with respect to the conflicting impulses of its own narrative. The narrator comments directly on the structure of the
novel, suggesting that we think of it as a “stereoscope” – a device whose dual lenses allow viewers to look at two photographs, taken from slightly different perspectives, as though they constituted one three-dimensional image. Through its self-consciously “stereoscopic structure,” the novel tests a range of first- and third-person narrative positions that expose the way conventions of genre and narrative perspective implicitly naturalize the sensibilities of narrators and authors, precluding certain kinds of questions about the ethics of their representations of other subjects -- questions Gan deliberately raises. The novel in fact turns out to be about the ethics of narrative representation that it investigates through its formal experimentation: it dramatizes the relationship it establishes between the text, narrator, and reader through several subplots about characters (including the narrator) whose reading practices, themselves conditioned by the genres they read, determine the way they interact. These characters’ (including, perhaps, the diegetic narrator’s) appropriations of others’ discourses turn out to have devastating consequences for those whose speech they appropriate.

Gan foregrounds and reflects on its own narrative performance to the point of distraction, insisting that we cannot come to any conclusions about the ethics of the story it tells, or the aesthetics of that telling, until we first address what it identifies as intractable problems of perspective, problems that the literary conventions and genre expectations set up by the modern realist novel tend to disguise. Gan thus links the questions raised by its form to ethical questions often asked of a novel’s plot: What kind of affective or cognitive response does the representation call for? What are our responsibilities in terms of consent or resistance to that call? Does the text illustrate or address ways in which we ought or ought not to think, feel, or interact with others? What, if any, responsibility does the writer bear in representing the world as he or she does?

My argument about Gan will first work through two close analyses, one examining the novel’s self-conscious attention to its form and narrative perspective, and the other expanding upon the relation of the plot to the narrative structure, before stepping back to examine the model of literary ethics (and aesthetics) it offers. I will first show how Gan deliberately constructs and then undoes the illusion of an epistemology of presence (constructed by the narrator’s claims to be an eyewitness and his invocations of real, verifiable names and places) on which it seems to premise its realism and its aesthetic coherence. In doing so it exposes the fictionality of the narrator’s “true” account and the desires that motivate his telling the story as he does. It also points to the way that the literary conventions and genre-based expectations structuring our approach to the relationship between truth and fiction in the novel condition the ethics of our reading practices. That is, by revealing the illusoriness of the transparency with which we presume access to the characters, the text undermines the impulse (which it seems to encourage) to sympathize with its represented subjects as we would with “real” others. It demands that we take into account its mediated quality, and leaves readers ambivalent in their stances toward the ontology of its characters (either as “there-for-us” elements of an aesthetic object or “real” others whose autonomy and rights demand respect). This ambivalence corresponds directly with the two poles of ethical response, immersion and reflection, through which contemporary ethical theories of the novel approach their object.

Gan establishes this ambivalence in part by exposing the narrator as a subject of desire whose manipulative narrative practices not only mirror those of the characters he describes, but also potentially reflect our own. The relation of narrator and reader becomes critical to understanding the ethics of the story. In the second phase of argument, I will analyze the formal dissonance in the structure of the novel -- a mirroring, undermining, or relativizing of competing
narrative voices -- that causes readers to reflect on the ways the narrator(s) may exploit genre expectations and interpretive conventions for self-serving purposes. Drawing on René Girard’s theory of triangular desire in the novel, I will show that the narrator’s activity is conditioned by a specifically literary form of desire for mastery over the narrative itself. Gan helps us rethink Girard, showing that his insights apply more to the structure of the narrative itself than its plot. By alternately engaging readers in stories about the ethics of the way characters represent themselves and interpret others through narrative performances, and then by exposing how these practices crystallize in the literary conventions of realism and novelistic perspective, Gan asks critical readers to consider the parallel between the ethical problems represented in the plot of the novel, and the ethics of the interpretive stances called for by the novel’s formal modes of representation. In this way, I suggest that the novel shuttles us from what Schwartz’s “ethics while reading” to an “ethics of reading”, demanding of readers the same kind of oscillation between self-reflection and involvement that characterizes its own narrative framing of the story it tells.

I. Gan’s Formal Ethics: The Complicity of Novelistic Perspective

Japanese prose fiction in the nineteenth century often moved fluidly from the perspective of one character to another, frequently within the purview of an individual authorial personality who freely and directly expressed his personal views, moral and otherwise, as part of the narrative description of the world of the work. However, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the convergence of a number of literary concerns led modern Japanese intellectuals to condemn previous Japanese models of prose writing. These concerns included frustration with the quality of Japanese fiction, the desire to establish fiction as a fine art that treated the experiences of ordinary life with seriousness and gravitas, cognizance of the success and appeal of Western realism, and, as Kamei Hideo suggests in his History of Meiji Literature (Meiji bungakushi, 2000), the realization that literature could serve as a much-needed forum for working out non-religious philosophical concerns. Modern proponents of the novel argued that writers needed to attend more to the formal qualities of representation, in particular the language and perspective through which the world of a work was rendered. They felt that the “authenticity” of novelistic representation, its correspondence and evocation of the experience of real life (often theorized in terms of mimesis, truthfulness, and immediacy), should become a priority over either its value as entertainment or its communication of a particular (moral) message.

As a scientist trained in the “objective method,” and a thinker deeply interested in aesthetic philosophy, Ōgai numbered among those who explored questions about the novel’s capacity to represent the world “authentically,” and to escape the subjective judgments of an individual narrator or author. In The Dilemma of the Modern, Dennis Washburn notes that Ōgai

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42 This is not to say that prose fiction before the period lacked virtuosity, philosophical import, or original insight; on the contrary, the prose works of Ihara Saikaku, Bakin, Ueda Akinari, and many others engaged serious issues from original perspectives through masterfully rendered narratives. Rather, as scholar Tanizawa Eichi explains in The Conception of Modern Japanese Literary History (Kindai nihon bungakushi no kōsō, 1964), intellectuals writing about literature at the turn of the century concerned themselves with disposing of stale dictums about prose writing which hardly anyone believed anymore, but which remained in place because, until exposure to the Western novel, they lacked a convincing replacement. Thus it was perceptions and received wisdom about the role of prose fiction, as well as the general trend in the quality of such writing in recent years, against which these writers took their critical stances (in their zeal to raise the status of the novel and thereby prove Japanese literary accomplishments on par with those of the West).
had a strong suspicion of “the relativistic sense of knowledge implied by the reliance on the 
validity of each individual’s understanding of life” in the novel (185) As he continued to 
experiment with the novel throughout his career, Ōgai became increasingly concerned with the 
limits of realism. Washburn suggests that in Gan, Ōgai turned to “parodic narrative that turns 
the convention of the romance on its head in order to deal with the issue of credibility or 
reliability of fiction as a means of conveying truth” (186).

The anti-romance parody of Gan consists chiefly in the mock-heroic plot. The handsome 
protagonist of the story, Okada, discovers a beautiful woman, Otama, at the mercy of a selfish 
moneylender, Suezo. Okada slays a snake that attacked her lovebirds and thereby further gains 
her heart. In the end, however, he completely fails to act the part of the romantic lead, killing a 
wild goose with the narrator instead of taking Otama up on an obvious invitation on his last day 
before heading overseas. The handsome hero, the slaying of a monster to save a beautiful 
woman, and the (failure of) the romantic ending all play on romantic conventions and readerly 
expectations about the story that unfolds. Yet these elements are themselves framed in a formal 
structure that simultaneously challenges contemporary literary conventions of realism and 
narrative perspective in the modern novel.

Shortly after beginning this story in a confessional mode, the narrating “I” disappears 
almost completely and the narration roams into the minds of Otama, her father, Suezo, and even 
Suezo’s wife with the narrative freedom of earlier forms of Japanese fiction, such as gesaku or 
monogatari. 43 This unjustified, unannounced change to something like omniscient third-person 
perspective contradicts the illusion of realism (“I am telling you about these events as I 
experienced or learned about them from my real, limited point of view”) the narrator cultivated 
so painstakingly from the start, through several direct addresses to the reader. It also puts in 
tension the narrator’s role as fabricating storyteller and his role as passive character-witness to 
real events, and forces readers to consider questions of his reliability and motivation in telling the 
tale itself.

Washburn argues that the formal contradictions in Gan signal Ōgai’s negative answer to the 
question of authenticity in fiction. He sees Ōgai’s work as the embodiment of a struggle 
against the ambiguities of literary form and language in hopes of achieving the closest thing to 
“authentic” representation. 44 On Washburn’s view, Gan represents a final fictional assay against

43 In Japanese writing, neither grammar nor convention require subject markers such as the “I” to appear in 
sentences. Gan capitalizes on this ambiguity, leaving ambivalent the narrator’s agency in rendering the “third 
person” scenes while raising questions about his reliability and even the relevance of those scenes. This has been 
confounding even to Japanese readers; at the time, Ōgai’s audience saw the ambivalence of the narrator’s position 
vis-à-vis the characters he presumes to know so well, and his thin explanation for that knowledge, as shortcomings. 
They did not, however, frame their complaints in terms of formal perspective, but rather character and appeal— 
highlighting the importance of ethos in the novel without really grasping the innovative formal play through which 
Ōgai self-consciously reflected on the story’s own production of that ethos.

44 Japanese novelists in the first two decades of the twentieth century, including most of those who considered 
themselves part of the “naturalist” movement, tended to aim at two ironically incompatible goals. One was the 
representation of the individual’s private and subjective experience of the world, a task with a clear ethical relevance, 
especially to authors such as Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943) and Tokuda Shūsei (1871-1943). For them, the novel’s 
representation of individual perspective could legitimize subject positions that were often marginalized by cultural 
and national configurations of the roles and requirements of citizens to be recognized as such. The other goal of the 
novel was to achieve a kind of pared-down truthfulness approaching “objectivity,” a recreation of the immediacy of 
experience prior to interpretation and translation into established aesthetic modes and styles of discourse. Ōgai, 
Washburn notes, was extremely skeptical of both goals. His career-long experimentation with points of view and 
types of novels, in Washburn’s view, represents his efforts to find a satisfactory solution to what he saw as an
the problematic relation of fiction and reality, which Ōgai then went on to address through meticulous fidelity to authentic historical documents in his “historical novels.”

Washburn’s assessment of *Gan* as orchestrating the deliberate failure of romantic and realist conventions is generous compared to more typical views. Ōgai scholar Ikeuchi Kenji notes that most critics have read *Gan* as riddled with abortive digression and internal contradictions, which they argue represents Ōgai’s frustration with the enterprise of writing fiction (which he subsequently “abandoned”) (172). The inconsistencies in its narrative structure, coupled with the apparently inexplicable shift in focus to characters on the periphery of the main story, have led to condemnation of the story in English language studies as well. Richard Bowring and Masao Miyoshi typify this view, noting the novel’s “awkward structure” as evidence of its failure. Masao particularly laments the discordant note struck by the juxtaposition of narrative perspectives and apparently digressive stories that fail to cohere in aesthetically satisfying ways. But as my analyses in the previous chapter suggest, narrative perspective in Ōgai’s novels works precisely to aim at such discordance, for ethical and aesthetic purposes. *Gan* simply does this more boldly and self-consciously, and perhaps more vexingly, than his earlier fiction.

The novel begins with the line “This is an old story” (*Furui hanashi de aru*), which as Stephen Snyder notes recalls the formulaic opening from traditional Japanese fiction *Ima wa mukashi,* (literally “Now it is then”). The traditional phrase is used to situate a story in a distant, perhaps mythical past (much the way the phrase “Once upon a time” functions in English), and creates expectations for certain fantastic or romantic elements (364). In *Gan,* however, Ōgai deliberately puts the ancient phrase in modern vernacular, a symbol of the constitutive ambivalence between two opposing modes of literary representation: those of classical Chinese and Japanese tales and those of the “modern novel.”

The tension between these modes is one ethical critics face with understandable discomfiture, as it is directly related to our approach to questions that bear on the ethics of its representation and our response. Are we reading a fanciful tale whose fabrications bear no responsibility to be true or authentic, and need only contribute to an aesthetically or ethically rewarding “design?” Or are we reading a story about contemporary reality in which we are to invest our sympathies on the promise of credulity? Do the characters of the text exist solely for the purpose of an edifying or entertaining aesthetic design, or are we to assume that they are

Endemic problem of perspective in literary narrative that neither of these widely pursued avenues of novelistic representation seemed to recognize.

Underlying Washburn’s account, and explicitly characterizing the stance of a majority of Ōgai scholars, including Robert Bowring and Marvin Marcus, is the suggestion that Ōgai found himself persistently worried by the fact that literature could never achieve the accuracy or objectivity of reason or science in representing the world, and that there was some legitimacy to the Confucian view that all fiction boiled down to “lies” (in contrast with Confucian imperatives of fidelity and truthfulness). Even favorable readings of *Gan* apprehend the narrator’s claims to “truthfulness” as expressions of the novel’s own desired goal, and therefore posit the (deliberate) self-destruction of the novel when those claims prove impossible to substantiate (and indeed are contradicted by internal evidence). In most critical views, *Gan* aims at rendering some kind of empirically grounded truth that it can only fail to achieve. With widely varying degrees of praise or condemnation, but a clear trend toward the latter, most critics agree with Stephen Snyder that the novel is an attack on the “machinery of fiction” which seemed to demand the sacrifice of truthfulness in the name of aesthetics. (Snyder, Steven. “Ōgai and the Problem of Fiction: *Gan* and Its Antecedents,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 49.3 (Autumn 1994), 353-73.)

I have argued that Ōgai sought to create what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a “dialogic tension between languages and belief systems” that permits a kind of authorial “neutrality.” This theoretical neutrality would allow multiple perspectives to emerge without being subsumed into a single, authoritative worldview.
“real” individuals and that the narrator, if not the text itself, bears some responsibility in representing them fairly? As readers, we tend to take the genre of a literary text as a guide for our interpretive stance toward it; without this direction we risk misreading, investing or withholding our sympathies or other responses in ways that prove inappropriate or perhaps contrary to what we come to understand as the ethical purchase of the novel.\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Gan}, however, foregrounds its ambivalent relationship to genre from the beginning, asking us to reflect on the very interpretive conventions that structure our apprehension of the ethics of its representation.

\textit{Gan} quickly ties the problem of its \textit{genre} to the problem of its narrator’s perspective. The narrator takes great pains to emphasize the realism of his tale, repeatedly attesting to his own experience of events and adjuring the reader to confirm the existence of some landmark or shop (which did in fact exist), proving his “reality” commensurate with that of the reader: “What Okada would do on these walks was nothing more than to stop in briefly at one used book store and then continue along his walk until the next. There are even two or three of those bookstores from that age in Uenohirokōji and Nakamachi still standing today…” (304). Upon careful analysis, however, his urgent claims that he has faithfully transcribed “reality” actually underscore the self-consciously fictional and written quality of his account, giving the lie to the delusion of presence it seems to create. The landmarks situating the novel in the real world are \textit{book lenders}. The narrator marks the time in which the novel takes place by discussing \textit{literary} rather than political or cultural history, commenting explicitly on the difference in literary sensibilities between the time the story takes place and the time of writing:

We would say in modern vernacular that the reason Okada stopped in at these bookstores was his literary taste. But at the time, new novels and scripts had not been published, and in lyric poetry the \textit{haiku} of Shiki and verse of Tekkan had not yet been born… and everyone even thought that Mukō and others’ sensitive poetry about women’s thoughts and feelings was the most powerful and evocative. Even I read them…” (304)

The narrator repeatedly ties Okada to the literary sensibilities of that age, as when he suggests that “Okada’s literary taste amounted to nothing more than an interest in reading about new happenings in the world through poetic forms,”\textsuperscript{47} or when he later explains how Okada’s view of

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\textsuperscript{46} In Japan in 1911, although the genre of the modern novel did not have the long history of its Western counterpart, the conventions of realism, and in particular the kind of first-person realism the narrator explicitly invokes (which would come to be called the \textit{I}-novel (\textit{watakushi-shōsetsu}), in which authors use literary persona to narrate ostensibly real experiences) had already been well established. See Kaneko Akio’s argument, in “The reader and novel in the newspaper” (\textit{Shinbun no naka no dokusha to shōsetsuka}), that the realist first-person novel in the first two decades of the twentieth century tended to rely so heavily on conventional identification of speaking persona and author that it often achieved its effects by deliberately leaving out information that readers could supply from real life biographical knowledge, attesting to readers’ sense of the deep connection between this confessional mode of literary realism and truthfulness.

\textsuperscript{47} In 1911, the narrator finds himself writing in the the age of the novel, on the cusp of a wave of enthusiasm for naturalist efforts to describe the world truthfully “as it is.” But he also notes that the events he describes took place decades earlier, before the modern novel took root in Japan, in an age of romantic tales and frivolous fiction such as \textit{gesaku}. To understand the mindset of his characters, he suggests, we must understand how banal and trite romances prevalent in Japan in the late nineteenth century informed their thinking (whereas, he implies, it is the sensibilities of modern literature that informs his own, more authentic representations). Thus the relationship between the frame of the writing (the circumstances of its composition) and its content (the consciousness of the characters represented) manifest the same oppositional relationship between realist and romantic text as we found inscribed in the formal dissonance of the first line.
\end{footnotesize}
women developed from his sentimental literary taste. He thus anchors the world of the story in a naïve view of literature that he, presumably, has surpassed (putting him in a position of insight with regard to the problems endemic to those views). The narrator further establishes the credibility and reality of his account by explaining that he used to share a wall with the protagonist, in a dormitory situated at the epicenter of several circular routes to the book lenders. The story would not even exist, the narrator continues, had he not gotten to know Okada by virtue of their mutual habit of strolling by and patronizing those shops, and through a particular episode in which they bid for the same book of fiction. This transaction literally gave them their first occasion to exchange words, in two senses: insofar as they address each other for the first time, and insofar as the narrator lends Okada the book in question after winning the bid.

Even if we accept at face value the narrator’s claim that he has faithfully rendered reality (a claim made more dubious by later revelations), that reality itself proves at every turn underwritten by the literary. The gestures with which the narrator establishes both his presence and the “reality” of the story all turn out to depend on the circulation of written books. The route between book lenders is the main thoroughfare of the novel, the only orbit along which any of the main characters connect. Despite having lived in the same dormitory for months, and despite the narrator’s interest in this “other” with similar habits and personality traits, they did not cross the wall separating their rooms (or the social customs and habits of character preventing spontaneous intrusion) until their mutual desire to possess a work of literature made the interaction (or transgression) possible.

Through its constant literary references, the narrator’s discourse works against his claims of immediacy and presence to foreground its narrative transformation of reality into fictionality, pointing to its deferred, retrospective, and written quality. This transformation is clearly highlighted by the slide it enacts from the opening to closing sentences, whose parallelism itself speaks to carefully controlled literary design, especially in a serialized novel written over the span of a year. The novel begins by describing itself in the first sentence as an “old tale” using the word hanashi, the word for speech, conversation, informal “news” about someone—literally “something to say.” In the last sentence, however, the narrator refers to the tale as a monogatari, which literally means “something told” but has been used since antiquity to designate stories or works of prose with fictional dimensions, highlighting its intentional structure and emphasizing its narrator’s vested role in constructing it.

Gan thus dispels the illusion of presence on which its realism seems to be premised, destabilizing the implicit surety of its narrative perspective and opening it up to the possibility of radical doubt. The prominent evidence of literary design, in conjunction with the shift from subjective to apparently objective narrative points of view, encourage us to question the

48 The narrator injects a description of Okada’s reading of Chinese romantic tales into the introduction of Okada’s relationship with Otama. The one specific tale the narrator mentions concerns a woman who preserves her beautiful appearance throughout grave illness and even when facing death, which the narrator says represented the “ideal” image of feminine beauty for Okada (see page 26). The narrator thus uses literature to establish the “character” of his characters, describing their attitudes through their reading habits, and then commenting on or illustrating how those reading habits determined their actions and interactions, as he also does with Otama’s father (see note [60], page 27).

49 The walk itself, though situated in the “real” space of Tokyo, serves as a metaliterary reminder that we are reading a deliberately crafted work of fiction: strolls through Tokyo localities were widely recognized as a staple trope of Meiji literary fiction, particularly the kind of first-person mode that would later come to be known as the “I-Novel.” See Dan O’Neill’s 2006 article “Portrait of a Writer in Tokyo, 1910: Mori Ōgai’s Seinen” for more on Ōgai and the convention of literary walks.
“truthfulness” of the narrator’s reportedly journalistic account (especially since he could not justifiably know some of what the omniscient narration describes), and consequently his own motives in presenting it as he does. This self-conscious exposure of the illusion of realism, on which the novel nevertheless openly declares its dependence, forces critical readers to attend to the epistemological problems that any novelistic representation entails, but which readers are usually asked to gloss over as a matter of convention. With every self-conscious gesture we are prevented from becoming absorbed in the narrator’s account, and forced to reflect on the fact that we are not being presented with immediate experience as the narrator claims, but rather a deferred and mediated one he has purposefully, and perhaps self-servingly, rendered. In *Gan*, then, the question of how we approach its genre, and accordingly how we respond to its representations and what value we assign them, becomes inseparable from ethical questions about the narrator’s character. Should we trust him? What are his investments in the story, what motivates his writing, and to what degree can we accept as genuine authorial points of view the proclamations he makes when he claims authorship of the text?

If, as Wayne Booth suggests, our response to a text depends on the degree to which what we construe as the (implied) author’s stance aligns with our own, then the question of the narrator’s authority in determining the perspective of the text and in presenting the situations described is critical to our apprehension of its ethicality. But *Gan* deliberately undermines the conventions through which we orient ourselves toward the narrator’s discourse, putting incompatible and even contradictory conventions (the third-person perspective that flouts the limitations on which the first-person perspective depends for its credibility, for example) for representing points of view in tension. The question of the narrator’s authority in telling the tale becomes impossible to resolve, overshadowed by the formal problems of perspective that raised questions about his character in the first place.

This irresolvable tension has led many critics to dismiss *Gan* as a failed aesthetic experiment, incapable of surmounting “the problem of fiction” (Snyder’s term for the problematic and problematizing relationship between the rhetoric of realist fiction and the truth or reality it strives to represent) or even establishing some kind of aesthetically coherent, stable novelistic perspective. I suggest, however, that it is the power of the novel to hold its various modalities in tension, and thereby to reframe and self-consciously work through very “problem of fiction” itself, that epitomizes the genre for Ōgai. We could in fact call *Gan* quintessentially novelistic in the sense that Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin uses to describe a fundamentally “self-conscious” genre that “incorporates all other genres,” consisting in the layering and structuring of various styles and (literary) languages (149). In *Gan*, this Bakhtinian “heteroglossia” destabilizes the narrator’s subjective perspective through its juxtaposition of multiple points of view and types of speech that resist reduction or assimilation into the first-person narration as part of what Bakthin sees as the ethical, and aesthetic, ends of the novel.

For Bakhtin, genre is very much a matter of narrative perspective and directly linked to the ethical modes available to given forms of writing. For him, the novel as a genre defines itself through its orchestration of the language, speech, and thoughts of individuals other than the author or speaker. Its ethical project, accordingly, is to free this language to resonate in ways that make relative or resist the sensibilities that the author’s discourse implicitly renders normative, and hence to allow others democratic representation as authentic subjects speaking in their own voices. While Ōgai has a Bakhtinian wariness of the ethical problems endemic to monologic narration, he is considerably more skeptical about the possibility of authentically representing others or their speech. For Ōgai, the desires of an author or narrator inevitably
structure and interfere with his representative gestures, leading him to appropriate and transform
the discourse of others for self-serving purposes.\textsuperscript{50}

Ôgai balances Bakhtin’s formal view of the novel with a more Girardian perspective. French
literary theorist Rene Girard sees the purpose of the novel as “revealing the presence of
the mediator.”\textsuperscript{51} In the Girardian novel, this “mediator” is a character who represents a position
of absolute authority to which the hero aspires. The hero’s “metaphysical” desire to occupy
the place of this mediator impels him (unconsciously) to desire an object desired by the mediator,
setting into motion the plot of the novel. The novel is thus structured by “triangular” desire for
Girard insofar as hero and mediator desire (and often vie for) the same object, while the hero also
implicitly desires the being of mediator.

The plot of \textit{Gan} similarly revolves around the triangular relationship between hero,
heroine, and narrator. But for Ôgai, metaphysical desire structures the telling of the tale even
more directly than it structures the relationships in the story told. That is, Ôgai brings together
Bakhtin’s insight into the formal structure of the novel with his own Girardian insight into the
relationship of desire and the novel, situating metaphysical desire not only at the level of the plot
itself, where Girard finds it, but also at the level of narration.\textsuperscript{52}

The clearest way to see that the narrator’s metaphysical desire shapes the structure of the
tale, and that this has profound ethical consequences for readers, is to consider the parallel
between the way he positions himself as narrator and the way he involves himself in
relationships with the other characters (the ethical implications of which are perhaps more
immediately recognizable).\textsuperscript{53} The \textit{Gan} narrator refuses to occupy a stable position vis-à-vis his

\textsuperscript{50} In the previous chapter, I argue that \textit{Maihime} and \textit{Vita Sexualis} deliberately undermine the intentions of their
narrators.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Gan}’s unique insight into the formal ethics of the novel synthesizes the radically contrasting theories of Bakhtin
and Girard—whose premises could hardly be more different. For Bakhtin, the value of the novel lies in its social
representation of languages and perspectives other than those of the author, whereas for Girard the value of the
novel is determined by the genius of the author in perceiving and revealing how the dynamic of triangular desire
motivates the interactions of individuals. While both Bakhtin and Girard suggest that the novel as a genre performs
an intrinsically ethical function, they differ strongly on the nature of that function. For Bakhtin, the ethical value of
the novel lies in its heteroglossic representation of the speech and language that materially constitutes others as
social subjects. For Girard, however, it lies in exposing the “psychological circle [of hatred, rivalry, and jealousy
directed at the mediator] inscribed in the triangle of desire,” so that readers may become cognizant that “Most of our
ethical judgments are rooted in the hatred of a mediator, a rival whom we copy.” (73) That is, for Girard the
revelation of the dynamic of triangular desire potentially frees us from our illusions of autonomous desire, and from
a tyranny of consciousness that seeks to establish itself as the sole authoritative subject (an illusion perpetuated by
“bad” novels inattentive to this dynamic). For Bakhtin there is a conscious and immediate ethical effect to formal
choices about the language of the novel, while for Girard the ethics of the novel consist in the manifestation of
unconscious desires that prove to have profound consequences for human relationships.

\textsuperscript{52} This move represents a corrective to both theories. It reminds Bakhtinian readers of the potential tyranny of
authorial subjectivity, even in the heteroglossic novel, and thereby raises questions about the authenticity of
novelistic representations of the discourse of others in what ultimately proves to be the purposeful language of an
individual subject of desire. At the same time, it frees Girard’s notion of triangular desire from assumptions about
the psychological realism of characters in the novel, and from its dependence on particular kinds of plots, allowing
us to see how his insights into the metaphysical nature of desire might prove definitive of the novelistic at a
structural rather than thematic level.

\textsuperscript{53} “Position,” according to James Phelan in “Rhetorical Literary Ethics and Lyric Narrative: Robert Frost’s ‘Home
Burial,’ may be the crucial concept for ethical criticism, insofar as it is “a concept that combines \textit{being placed in} and
\textit{acting from an ethical location}.” Phelan defines the ethical position of any narrative instance as resulting from the
intersection of four ethical “situations:” the values exhibited by the content of the narration, the relation of the
narrator to the multiple levels of audience he addresses, the (implied) author’s relation to the narrator and his
narration, sometimes casting himself as character (placed in the relationships that constitute the story), sometimes as retrospective author (acting from an ethical location through his narrative performance), and sometimes disappearing altogether. He situates himself partially within and partially outside the plot of the story he tells, having been present for some parts and only learned others secondhand. He draws on real biographical details from Ōgai’s life (he locates himself in the same dormitory during the same year Ōgai lived there, for example) and mixes them with fictional inventions, hinting at his “real” identity but then deliberately donning a fictional mask. Within the tale, he declares himself an uninvolved bystander but then hints at a deeper relationship with Otama. He calls himself Okada’s friend, but then deliberately withholds information that could help him, and casts him in an increasingly skeptical light.

Observing these odd dualities, Atsuko Sakaki argues that the narrator has conflicting desires to claim the extra-textual reality of the author, on the one hand, and the privileged centrality of the protagonist-hero on the other—he’s ambivalent self-presentation reveals his refusal to subjugate himself to either role. For Sakaki these desires are distinct; she actually splits the narrator into two opposing subject positions, suggesting that the central dynamic of the story is the contest between the “narrator-character,” who desires to assert himself over Okada and to win Otama, and the narrator as an “encoded author” who wants to establish his authority over the entire narrative as such, even at the expense of his character-self.

Sakaki literalizes the division between the written and writing selves of the narrator, forcing the ambiguities of his position into two prescribed categories. The awkwardness of this binary disappears, however, if we consider these the ambivalence of his self-presentation as expressing one and the same metaphysical desire, toward different audiences—that is, expressed with respect to his peers, on the one hand, and his (implied) readers on the other. In other words, the narrator’s ostensibly “opposing” desires are not only coextensive but also covalent, insofar as both aim at assuming an authorial role.

To see the unity of the narrator’s desires (to occupy Okada’s place, on the one hand, and the place of the (real) author on the other), we need only remember that the narrator’s reality is itself structured by textuality. The narrator’s rivalry with Okada is not rivalry for the position of the hero _per se_; to assume this is to miss the key role _narrative_ itself plays in instigating their rivalry. The very occasion for their relationship is the fact that they both bid, as rivals, for possession of the same book (which the narrator won). Moreover, although the narrator had already seen Otama, he thought nothing of her until he heard Okada’s tale of a potential romantic connection between himself and the beautiful woman. Only the transformation of the woman into an object of Okada’s storytelling arouses the narrator’s desire. Even more significantly, the only action we actually see the narrator take is to _retell_ Okada’s story itself, the act which generates the narrative we read. In other words, what Okada represents for the narrator is not the place of the hero but a position of textual authority -- the place of the author. The story we read is the expression of the mimetic desire he feels as a result of his encounter with Okada’s story; it

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narration, and the “flesh and blood reader in relation to the sets of values, beliefs, and locations operating in [the above.]” (632)

He thus finds that the ethical dimensions of a text emerge in the interaction of the (changing) response of the reader to the (developing) dynamics of the plot as a function of the ethically charged positionality established by the narrative perspective itself.

54 With respect to both real and fictional addressees, the narrator seeks to assert himself as the sole authoritative subject, to occupy a position of unfettered agency and to exercise control over a narrative that threatens to leave him on the periphery.
is the aggressive wrestling into the narrator’s own words of a tale originally belonging to Okada himself. His desire to assert himself over Okada and his desire to assert control over the narrative itself amount to one and the same metaphysical desire to occupy the authoritative position of the author and exercise control over the story of another that threatens to leave him on the periphery.

Through both the thematic illustration of the narrator’s desire and his metatextual self-reflection on the telling of the story itself, Gan points to the strong connection between mimetic desire and narrative. It is precisely the power to construct meaning through narrative that the narrator secretly denies his rival: he takes great pleasure in withholding information (including Otama’s status as Suezo’s mistress) from Okada, information that would surely change Okada’s apprehension and possibly treatment of the heroine. He also hides his interpretation of Okada’s story: after hearing how Okada wound up killing a snake attacking the lovebirds she had received from Suezo, the narrator realizes that Okada seems to be living one of the romances he so avidly read, and may have even found the very type of heroine he so idealizes. But the narrator stifles his urge to tell Okada of this revelation. He reserves the exclusive right to orchestrate and make sense of the unfolding story of their relationship at the expense of his “friend’s” understanding and potential romance.

The narrator manipulates the narrative of Gan to the same ends that he dissembles in his discourse with respect to Okada, and with resonant ethical implications. Early in the novel, he uses his retrospective insight to point out Okada’s blindness to his own desire, showing his rival’s failure to understand Otama’s feelings or to act on his own—implicitly positioning himself as the better suitor. He also exposes the way that Okada later failed to reveal certain information to him, taking revenge for Okada’s efforts to keep the narrator on the periphery of his story by claiming a position of superior insight, aware not only of everything Okada knew, but also of Okada’s duplicitous intent in withholding information. The narration becomes a means of ensuring that the narrator has the final word—in fact, the narrator tends to use reported speech (that his, his own words) rather than direct quotes to represent Okada’s dialogue, literally taking over his rival’s position as narrator of his own tale. The Gan narrator’s interactions with Okada and his construction of the text of Gan itself prove structured by one and the same metaphysical desire to establish his own authority. Consequently, the ethics of his manipulative narrative performances in the plot has corresponding valences with the ethics of his narrative activity in the text itself, both in the story, with respect to his treatment of other characters, and in terms of his engagement with his readers.

55 It is no accident that the archetypal example of mimetic desire in Girard’s account comes from Don Quijote, the story of that famous reader spurred into action by his devotion to tales of chivalry. See my chapter “Critical Desire in The Girardian Paradigm” from the dissertation “Critical Desire: The Profession of Literature in Nabokov’s Metafiction” for more on the role of the reader in Girard’s theory of the novel.

56 The way the narrator claims a position of insight with respect to his rival here, exposing the blindness of Okada’s attempt to deceive the narrator who was really deceiving Okada, plays out the triangular dynamic Lacan uncovers in his analysis of “The Purloined Letter.” In that text Lacan discovers a cycle of one-upsmanhip in which rivals either lay claim to a position of authoritative insight by identifying what former claimants have missed or attempt to reflect on the very critical dynamic in which they themselves participate. In Lacan’s analysis, rivals vie for the authority that possession of a letter would bestow upon them, putting them in a privileged relation of power with respect to the Queen (just as in Gan, Okada and the narrator both have claims to privileged relationships with Otama). And just as Barbara Johnson shows that the triangular dynamic Lacan uncovers motivates not only the plot of the story he analyzes, but also the practice of literary interpretation itself in which Lacan himself engages, so too does Gan show that the triangular desire motivating narrator’s interactions in the plot of the story also structures his approach to the narrative of Gan itself.
The narrator takes exactly the same attitude toward his readers that he does toward Okada, literally refusing question about his own involvement with Otama through a final injunction against the reader’s curiosity. In the last sentences of the story, when he claims to have heard part of the story directly from Otama herself, he insists that the matter of how he came to know her lies “outside the scope of the story” and that readers should “refrain from idle speculation” (348). He limits the reader’s ability to question his claims and his motives, maintaining the authority of his account and shielding himself from accusations of bias or betrayal. In other words, he tries to make it as difficult as possible for readers to wrest from him the tale he wrested from Okada, preventing readers from contextualizing it in ways that could undermine his authority or reveal him to be driven by same desires he claims to be observing and revealing from an unaffected, objective distance. He hides his desire from the reader (who implicitly winds up occupying the role of “rival” over the narrative itself) in precisely the way Okada attempted to hide his own desire from the narrator, in a deceptive move akin to what Girard calls the “hero’s askesis” (the feigning of indifference toward desire for the sake of desire) – a move which signals the hero’s desire to triumph at the expense of his mediator.

The narrator engages readers through the same rivalrous practices through which he attempts to manipulate Okada—also mirroring precisely the methods through which Okada previously attempted to deceive him. And just as Okada’s efforts at dissembling wind up exposing rather than masking his desires (the narrator uses them as evidence of Okada’s hidden desire in the retrospective narrative of the text), so too do the narrator’s various strategies to maintain control over the narrative of Gan fail to cohere in ways that reveal to readers how his own desires structure his purportedly objective storytelling activity. The story the narrator tells turns out to reflect precisely the kinds of ethical problems that condition its telling. Exploring the ethical entanglements the narrator maps out in the plot of the story he tells will therefore help us understand the effects of the novel’s dissonant structure and see how our experience of its (aesthetic) form ultimately depends upon its ethical positioning.

II. The Colonizing Imagination

Otama’s father’s reading preferences, Suezo’s strategies for dealing with his wife, and Otsune’s self-conscious reflection on her own response to Suezo’s lies have almost no bearing on the romance (or anti-romance) that the narrator insists, in his own words, is “the story of which I must make Okada the protagonist” (303). The scenes on which the novel lingers so long have emotionally compelling dimensions, and the narration itself adroitly leads us through the various points of view in ways that round out our understandings of characters who seemed one-dimensional from the narrator’s perspective. Yet there is no obvious aesthetic justification for their inclusion. The dramas spelt out in the third-person narration do not wind up coming together through plot twists that make them relevant, and the narrative perspective itself required to tell their tales is never satisfyingly justified. It is only through the ethical dimensions

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57 It is tempting to consider these narrative digressions into the lives and minds of peripheral characters a kind of resistance to precisely this imperative, to conventions of the novel that insist on unity of action and a teleology in which all elements are ultimately brought together in a moment of revelatory denouement. But Gan does not so much challenge the aesthetics of novelistic unity per se as he does the notion of what counts in constituting the novel as an aesthetic object. The subplots are a far cry from the digressive (though pointed) play of the kind found in Tristram Shandy or the loosely associated musings found in the traditional Japanese form of zuihitsu (literally, “following the brush”) writing. On the contrary, each of these stories dramatizes particular ethical effects of the transformation of reality into narrative, especially the possibilities of genuine sympathy or interpersonal understanding such practices potentially afford or foreclose.
illustrated in and through the narrative rendering of their stories (and not so much the stories themselves) that the long third-person portion of the novel attains its relevance, by resonating with the self-conscious attention to the ethics of narrative performance both illustrated in the main storyline (that is, in the interactions of the narrator, Otama, and Okada) and performed by the claims the narrator himself makes on the emotions and judgments of the reader.

In the third-person sections, the narration tends to focalize around one character and then another, taking the tone of the thoughts and feelings of each in turn. In this way the text seems to facilitate sympathetic understanding on the part of readers: the characters who, from one point of view seem manipulative, cold, naïve, or unable to understand others, prove in another chapter complexly capable of sympathizing and understanding. We learn that Suezo’s wife possesses a rich and complex if not articulate understanding of Suezo despite his insistence on her stupidity, and that Suezo recognizes and, in his own way, even attempts to rectify the injury he has done to her. Otama, too, surprises us by defying the expectations of Suezo and the deep understanding of her father: she becomes capable of deception and narrative manipulation while maintaining the air of innocence and transparency that made her so attractive.

By educating readers in this way, rounding out the apparent one-dimensionalities of the characters (as we see them through the minds of others or even the narrator’s discourse, in which they appear somewhat flat, defined more by their actions than by an active affective or mental life), Gan makes them more sympathetic even at the same time that it points out the limits of their respective understandings of one another. This deepening of insight into other characters seems to act in much the way Martha Nussbaum theorizes the novel to operate ethically: it gives us access to the lives of others in ways that make us care about them more as the novel progresses, and allows us to reconsider the prejudices or blind spots through which we first approached them. Gan directly comments on this Nussbaumian theme by discussing, on multiple occasions, how listening to the discourse through which others give accounts of themselves has a beneficial, “acculturating” effect on the listeners. For example, in the scene where Suezo first meets Otama and her father, he envisions a romantic encounter with the object of his desire and is extremely aggravated by her father’s insistence on accompanying her on this occasion. Bracing himself for the doting old man’s parental blather, he finds himself surprised and even transported by the grace of the father’s bearing and speech, which suggests a far nobler character than he had assumed. Listening to the father’s discourse “draws to the fore all of the goodness in his (Suezo’s) character” and leads to a warm conversation, where Suezo intended only to express cold resentment. The narration repeatedly remarks on the beneficial effects of Suezo’s encounter with Otama’s father—only to conclude, however, that those effects were “not quite enough to incite reflection on why he did not enjoy the same intimacy in his home life” (311). Listening to the father’s discourse might have done Suezo good in some way, but without conscious reflection, this does not translate into the kind of ethical effect Nussbaum envisions. The “acculturation” Suezo experiences remains strictly an aesthetic pleasure.

Even Otama’s heartfelt, moving account of her past fails to engage Suezo in even the briefest consideration of her situation or character, let alone spur him to some kind of caring action. For Suezo, her intimate confession “amounted to no more than the joy, anger, pathos, and humor she and her father had experienced over the years. Rather than listening to the content of this story (hanashi), he listened to the voice like the chirping of bell-crickets kept in a basket, and unknowingly smiled at the twittering voice” (133). He feels immense gratification that she told him her story, not for the understanding or greater intimacy it afforded, but for the aesthetic pleasure of the experience of the telling itself. The pathos of her account becomes for
him a pleasant reminder of his privileged position as a listener who feels no responsibility to respond sympathetically, but still enjoys “possession” of her account. This is similar to the attitude of Okada toward the heroine of the Chinese tale, whose pathetic struggle against fate he found so beautiful that, at least according to our narrator, it became his ideal vision of femininity. In both cases, the men apprehend the stories of women and their oppressive circumstances as aesthetic pleasures rather than occasions to respond either through action or reflection (on the ethicality of the situation or their own responses and responsibilities). This attitude leads both men not only to ignore Otama’s real needs and distress, but to transform it into the substance of gratifying tales.

Gan thus models the ways its characters, narrator, and even readers may take purely aesthetic pleasure in the privilege of “getting to know” other points of view, rather than ethical lessons. In the novel, narrative projections of the thoughts and feelings of others at best prohibit genuine intersubjective communication, and at worst actively impinge on the freedoms of others, as they plainly do in the case of the moneylender Suezo. An exceptionally shrewd analyst of others’ desires, Suezo’s business is built upon his ability to deduce from potential clients’ speech and behavior the attitude that will be most profitable. This applies to his personal life as well: at one point, he reads subtle changes in Otama’s manner and deduces that something in her attitude has changed, which he endeavors (deludedly, but completely self-satisfyingly) to remedy. He responds to another moment of recognition of the injury he has done his wife by defensively imagining an entire conversation with her, usurping her ability to speak for herself and using his “knowledge” of her likely perceptions and feelings to anticipate and deflect potential criticism the next time they do talk. He also engages her in actual dialogue only to calculate the extent of her knowledge about his affair, using his understanding of her character to extract information by feigning ignorance or anger. He then deceives her by weaving whatever facts she knows into a narrative tapestry of lies she cannot prove false.

In Suezo’s mouth, fictional tales do indeed amount to self-serving “immoral lies,” just as Otama’s father suggests. A contemporary ethical reading of this novel might point to the destructive effect of most of these narrative deceptions, and to the sympathetic understanding that the novel makes possible by illustrating them. Atstuko Sakaki does as much when she shows that Otama learns to manipulate her own narrative performance in an attempt to empower

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58 This “colonizing imagination” so thoroughly imbues the novel that it emerges as the dominant mode of interaction even in incidental moments. For example, in intermittent scenes of interaction between the women and their maids, the narration describes the way the characters attempt to gauge each other’s moods and thereby manipulate each other’s behavior. Similarly, in a scene with Otama and her father, the narration emphasizes to the point of tedium how each makes assumptions about the other’s feelings and therefore fails to communicate in ways that might actually bring them both solace, further isolating them instead.

59 In the course of this imaginative projection, he “discovers” the real feelings behind her disjointed accusations and strange fits of silence and productivity: she wants him to hit her. The overt violence of this conclusion, and its implication that she wants Suezo to demonstrate his authority over her, exposes the self-serving nature of the apparently reasonable and even sympathetic process by which he attempts to understand her.

60 Otama’s father refuses to read fiction because of its immoral deceptions, preferring historical novels that chronicle real events. Snyder and others understand this passage as a revelation of Ōgai’s own (Confucian) doubts about the moral value of fictional writing, and a prefiguration of his impending turn to writing historical novels himself. But the father’s credulous acceptance of the “truth” of historical fiction corresponds directly with his acceptance of Otama’s suitors’ stories at face value, though each proves to have presented himself in some self-serving way that foreshadows the unhappiness he will bring her. In other words, his attitude toward reading, like Okada’s (as we shall see shortly), conditions his real engagements in the world, with tragic consequences for Otama.
herself as a subject and express her own desire, despite the attempts of all of the men in the story to make her the object of their self-centered and manipulative tales (the illustration of this scenario and the degree to which power and subjectivity can be constructed by narrative performance constitute the ethical activity of the novel itself on her view). For Sakaki, Otama is the objectified “other” whose perspective the narrative ethically represents. But this is only a partial view of the complex stance of the novel toward the ethics of narrative representation, and one that disregards Sakaki’s own careful attention to narrative framing in the novel, a framing that implicates the representation of Otama’s perspective in precisely the same kind of objectifying discourse it supposedly resists.

_Gan_ clearly critiques the ways characters appropriate the points of view and speech acts of others within their own self-centered narratives. Yet it conducts its ethical inquiry into this kind of “colonizing imagination” through precisely the same means. _Gan_ even deliberately draws attention to its complicity in such narrative projections; the incommensurability of its third person narration and its narrator’s claims demand that readers reflect on his potentially vested and manipulative perspective on the characters’ manipulative use of narrative. In other words, the abrupt shifts in narrative perspective highlight the parallel between the way characters presume to understand the perspectives of others, in some cases projecting entire conversations that do not take place in reality, and the way that the narrator imaginatively constructs the stories of them doing so.⁶¹

Even the opening introduction to Okada involves a manipulative projection, although we cannot confirm that the narrator has no business knowing what he claims to know until we get to the end of the story. As we have seen, within the first few pages the narrator explains that Okada’s reading habits color his apprehension of Otama. But how could the narrator know Okada’s feelings developed from his reading practices -- or how could he know Okada’s innermost feelings at all? While the narrator takes pains to describe the blossoming “friendship” between himself and Okada, we know from later instances that the two reticent, proper young men hid their real feelings from each other, and that they never discussed these particular events with anything close to the kind of intimacy the narration assumes. We can thus determine, retrospectively, that the narrator has been “speaking for” Okada to a degree unwarranted by their actual communication.⁶²

This is more than a problem of the narrator’s reliability; it is critical to the issues of genre and interpretation that frame our own approach to the text and its ethics. The first-person novel depends on belief in the limits of the narrator’s knowledge; the third-person omniscient novel depends on the pretense that no narrator exists and that the account is a truthful and objective one whose representations are “fair” to the characters represented. The _Gan_ narrator’s presentation of others’ thoughts and speech at times he was not present, the novel’s abrupt shifting from obviously first-person narration to something like third-person omniscience and

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⁶¹ Even setting aside the liberties the narrator takes with his narrative imagination, we find Otama imagining whole scenes with Okada, Suezo imagining scenes with Otama and mentally responding to words he himself has put in his wife’s mouth, Otsune imagines how Suezo will defend himself, and both Otama and her father, now separated, fail to communicate precisely because they anticipate each other’s response.

⁶² Moments in which the narrative exposes its own manipulative projections abound. For example, one of the third-person sections (which, at least according to the narrator, are his own renderings of information gleaned secondhand) relates with incredible and improbable intimacy, whatever their present relationship, the sexual imaginings of Otama (so that, ironically enough, we find the narrator imagining Otama imagining Okada’s response to her desire). These passages give her fleeting thoughts in detailed, direct quotations that would strain credulity if not for the conventions of third person narrative that ask us to suspend such disbelief.
back, and the surfacing of first-person point of view markers in the ostensibly third-person sections radically destabilize these conventions.63

We cannot immerse ourselves in the illusion of objectivity created by the third-person narrative without the nagging question of the narrator’s role in the mediation disturbing the spell of realism it attempts to create (have we crossed into some kind of “genuine” omniscience or are we ensconced in the illusion of objectivity created by the narrator’s imaginative projections?). Nor can we count on the coherence (let alone honesty) of the first-person perspective of the narrator, when his account is overshadowed by the author’s ironic exposure of the desires that motivate his supposedly free and autonomous, but clearly plotted, narrative translation of “real” events (for example, as I shall argue, through the implication that he becomes romantically involved with the heroine after the events of the story he tells). Ōgai does not just expose the illusion of the verisimilitude upon which the narrative depends, but also shows, through the juxtaposition of the two forms of narrative point of view, that they are already in themselves dislocated from the realities they are meant to represent, by virtue of the intentional and fictive dimensions that convention demands we “forget” in the name of aesthetic pleasure.

Gan points to its own fictionality as a means of engaging readers in self-conscious reflection on the ethics implied by the literary conventions that produce it (by paralleling its narrator’s intent in invoking such conventions with the manipulative aims of the characters in — including the narrator—in employing the various narrative strategies they use). Inasmuch, it bears out Judith Butler’s argument that any narrative account of oneself involves telling the story of the relations of the self to others, and to the conventions or “regimes of truth” that make both the self and those others recognizable, so that “giving an account” is always an ethically charged project. On Butler’s view, all narrative effort to account for oneself necessarily produce that self “in a fictional direction.” This fictionality is inevitable because we are formed as subjects by pre-existent relations and conditions that cannot ever be narrated adequately, insofar as they determine the very conditions of intelligibility that make narrative possible. Therefore, Butler continues, “The possibility of the ‘I,’ of speaking and knowing ‘I,’ resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective it conditions…” (12).

This “perspective” in Butler exceeds the subjective experience of the self and makes possible the first-person perspective which it nevertheless dislocates and disorients by its sheer incommensurability. It is an “impersonal” function of the historically determined norms and ideological conventions that legislate what passes for a recognizable subject and with which any narrative account must reconcile itself: “The narrative authority of the ‘I’ must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story.” (37) This is singularly resonant with the situation Gan dramatizes by having the narrator’s first-person account literally give way to the convention of novelistic third-person representation that largely

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63 In Japanese, perspective (as understood as the relationship of the speaker to addressees and the subjects of speech) determines the forms and conjugations of verbs, honorifics, and even word choice. It is next to impossible to write in a sustained way without making conscious choices about the “position” of the narrative agent. Yet beyond the typical markers of perspective that necessarily surface in the Japanese language (such as the choice of whether to refer to a character politely, informally, or by their designated relation to others or their business, etc.), the third-person sections of Gan often report speech and thoughts in ways that make it clear a mediator is interpreting for us, as when the narration suddenly veers from its discussion of the interaction between Otama and Suezo to address readers with an analysis of why women turn to lies the way insects rely on mimicry to protect themselves from predatory environments. The “third-person” in Gan never achieves nor attempts to achieve the transcendent objectivity of its counterpart in realist Western novels; on the contrary, it unabashedly calls attention to the contradictions of its pretenses toward omniscience.
effaces the “I.” This “other” perspective interrupts and disorients his account in the process of attempting to establish, through its objective and impersonal representations, the parameters by which selves relate to others in the world of the work (for example, the deliberate narrative manipulation that it establishes as a discursive norm by revealing the desire motivating every character’s narrative performance). 64

Although Gan exposes the deceptive and self-serving nature of its characters’ narrative acts, it does not do so merely as a critique of the dangers of such narration, as though some kind of genuinely objective narrative were preferable or even possible. Rather, it raises questions about the ethics of the narrator’s subjective and fictionalized account in the process of carrying out its larger project of revealing the ineluctably relational and ethically charged nature of the novel’s narrative positioning. The questions it asks are not about whether or not the narrator’s account squares with some kind of objective truth, or does justice to other characters in its particular judgments or representations, but rather about the ethics of the very means and mode of “relating” to others implicitly established through the form of its narration.

Ōgai models the ethical dangers implicit in the narrative form of the novel through his careful framing of Suezo’s narrative performance. The moneylender’s rhetorical manipulation suppresses other sensibilities and undermines the validity of subject positions and self-expressions other than those that operate under the same economy (of self-interested exchange, in which expressions have validity only insofar as they represent objective facts or commodities that confer value through possession) as his own accounts. In his dialogue with his wife, Suezo insists that she rationally justify and clarify her vague sense of outrage if she wants him to recognize the validity of her feelings and respond. He boils down her expressions of emotion and her demands that he account for his mistreatment of her to matters of verifiable fact and questions about her source of information. He translates the conversation into economic terms, explaining his whereabouts and the necessity of his actions in a register of business dialogue he knows she cannot fully understand, and therefore cannot deny. “Just as when she was told something about social sanctions, whenever Suezo used those difficult words he read in the newspapers, she felt intimidated and yielded in her ignorance” (321).

Suezo refuses to recognize the legitimacy and even the coherency of her position on their relationship. His wife cannot even win recognition of her feelings, let alone sympathy or support, because he makes it the premise of their dialogue that only rational positions tethered to verifiable fact have any validity. It is not any specific argument, misrepresentation, nor even his infidelity itself that inflicts such deep trauma on his wife, but rather the way his account of himself implicitly establishes normative requirements of relating that leave no room for different positions or modes of response. His ability to construct seamless (and duplicitous) narratives oppresses his wife in ways that exceed mere deception. He seeks to control the terms through which what Butler calls the “scene of address,” or the “primary relationality on which any act of representation depends for its ethical orientation,” takes place. According to Butler, in the process of reflexive narrative self-construction, one also “recreates and constitutes anew the tacit presumptions about communication and relationality” through which that account establishes its relation to an “other” (50). On her view, the risk any narrative account necessarily takes,

64 In the process, the third-person narration implies that the first-person narrative account of the narrator, who is himself also a character and therefore beholden to the same discursive norms, establishes relations with his readers according to similar parameters. That Gan renders the “objectivity” and impersonal quality of the third person narration suspect points to Ōgai’s awareness of the impossibility of authentically rendering this “view from nowhere” as anything but a subjective, and therefore self-serving, interpretation.
independent of the truth value or ethical valence of any particular judgments it may make, is the potential violence it can do to the freedom of others to relate or account for themselves in ways incommensurable with the normative assumptions underwriting the narrative act. This is realized in the kind of violence Suezo’s narrative performance deliberately commits against his wife’s freedom of expression, causing her tremendous inner turmoil and forcing her into silence as a means of protecting herself from the abrogation of her rights to speak and feel as an individual that his discursive methodology establishes.

The narrator commits a similar kind of violence against both other characters and his readers. As narrator, he decides the terms through which characters appear as subjects at all, literally speaks for them, translates their discourse into his own words, deliberately withholds information both from them and readers, and chooses to emphasize the way they engage each other at a narrative level. He delights in the supremacy of his own insight into both their desires and the discursive methods through which they seek to realize those desires. All of these actions establish narrative control as the condition of authority as a subject, a condition he singularly meets. In this light, his insistence on the reality and authenticity of his account proves not only a means of assuring the aesthetic coherence of the novel as a realist work of art, but also of securing the sovereignty of his subject position, at the expense of the freedom of other characters to express themselves differently, and, were he to have his way, readers to interpret differently.

By “disorienting” his account with its perspectival shift, and by exposing the way the account is structured by the very metaphysical desire it describes in others’ relationships, Gan intentionally problematizes its own narrative coherence and its narrator’s aesthetic project in ways that lead us to ask question about its ethics. This “interruption” of “narrative coherence” itself has ethical value, at least for Butler, insofar as such coherence “may foreclose an ethical resource – namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others” (34). The narration of Gan firmly shuts the door on any attempts to apprehend it as internally consistent with its own account of itself, and categorically denies us information on the nature of the narrator’s relationship with Otama, offering only the one extremely problematic account of its own structure: the image of the stereoscope.

This story is somewhat like a stereoscope which makes one image by superimposing two pictures; it was told by combining what I saw before with what I heard afterward. The reader may want to ask: how did you become familiar with Otama? Under what circumstances did you hear all this? But, as I said, that answer falls outside the scope of this tale. I will only add that it should go without saying that I lack the necessary qualities to have been Otama’s lover; the reader would do well to avoid idle speculation. (348)

This account puts the incommensurability of Gan’s perspectives in almost synaesthetic terms, combining the “seeing” of personal experience and the retrospective “hearing” that allows him to transcend the limits of his first person point of view. The emphasis on the sensory difference is completely unnecessary as a practical justification: the narrator must certainly have heard what he “saw” firsthand as well. By making the distinction, however, the narrator reminds us that we constantly translate different modes of perception into coherent models of reality. The trick of the stereoscope is that it plays upon this habit of apprehension and convinces us to forge a coherent whole out of the juxtaposition of two different images, similar in content but in fact slightly at odds with each other in their perspective. The Gan narrator, too, hopes to play upon
the conventions of realism to convince us to forget the incommensurability of the two accounts, and to apprehend the text as coherent and even exceptionally “true to life” precisely because it adds a dimension to the forms of novelistic narration that limit themselves to one particular perspective. Where the narrator’s account fails to bridge the gulf between these perspectives and confer upon his account the coherence he claims, Gan does accomplish this. It does so not by creating the illusion of three-dimensional reality through the juxtaposition of its first- and third-person perspectives, as the narrator would have it, but rather by putting that illusion in tension with the ethical questions it raises in the process of constructing it. Gan thus shuttles us between immersion in the story it tells and self-conscious reflection on the consequences of accepting the premises of its modes of narrative representation, as I will make clear through a discussion of its aesthetics and the conclusion of the story it tells.

III. Gan’s Ethical Aesthetics

Two decades before the writing of Gan, Ōgai insisted that ethical considerations had no place in novel criticism, and that aesthetics—as he understood the concept through his exposure to German aesthetic philosophy, particularly that of Eduardo von Hartmann (1842-1906)—alone determined the value of the novel. As I have argued in the previous chapter, his dismissal of the novel’s ethics aimed at scholars who critiqued prose fiction based entirely on its illustration of ethical principles in the plot, whereas Ōgai’s later critical investigations and experimentation with novelistic writing would lead him to discover an ethics intrinsic to the form and language of the novel. That later writing, which plays heavily on the literary conventions associated with particular kinds of novels, foregrounds the ethical potential of various forms of novelistic writing with increasing clarity, as Dennis Washburn’s argument about manly virtue and the bildungsroman form in Ōgai’s second to last novel, Seinen (“Youth,” 1911), implies. This is not to say that ethics replaced aesthetics as the raison d’etre of the novel in Ōgai’s view. Rather, his growing insight into the way the novel positions itself ethically through its form led him to think about the way ethics might play a role in constituting the aesthetics of the novel itself, as I will now argue his last novel Gan makes clear.

Geoffrey Harpham’s gloss on aesthetics as a post-enlightenment concept aptly describes the so-called “enlightenment writer” (keimō sakka) Mori Ōgai’s sense of the term, which he himself borrowed from the Western philosophy Harpham discusses in Shadows of Ethics:

the aesthetic gathers into itself and focuses norms and notions crucial to the self-description of enlightened culture. These include the privilege of disinterested assessment; the relative autonomy of the artifact from historical, social, or economic forces; the uncoerced liberty of the judging subject, the universalizability of subjective responses; the human capacity to imagine and create objects, and indeed a “world,” that are harmonious and whole…. Interestingly, the “aesthetic” ambivalently refers both to particular kinds of objects and to the attitude appropriate to judging them. (120)

For Harpham, aesthetics represents the “other” of ideology, or rather its negation, and as such constitutes a blind spot for many ethical critics who focus their attention on the novel’s complicated relationship to ideology at the expense of aesthetics. Gan, however, makes the elements of aesthetics that Harpham describes above, in particular the “privilege of disinterested assessment,” the “universalizability of subjective response,” and “the human capacity to imagine
and create objects… harmonious and whole” (areas of particular interest for Ōgai) the explicit focus of its own self-conscious inquiry into the ethics of novelistic form. The novel puts the spotlight on exactly those aspects of aesthetic experience, especially its rootedness in particular subject positions, that Harpham suggests ethical criticism often overlooks.

In *Gan*, Ōgai links aesthetics to ethics in ways that readers contemplating either cannot but acknowledge its relation to the other, in part by pointing to the complicity of its formal structure in the ethical situations it describes, and in part by stressing the *failure* of its aesthetics when conceived on grounds that exclude ethical considerations. The *Gan* narrator’s project is avowedly aesthetic; he is writing a novel. Through his distinctly modern sensibilities (he takes care to distinguish the present time of writing from the nostalgic and naïve past of two decades earlier) and the detached, privileged position he claims as an observant and yet objective outsider, the narrator aims at transforming his “real” experiences into an artistic text very much in line with Harpham’s enlightenment model of the aesthetic. 65

The novel we read, however, is far from the coherent aesthetic object the narrator intends. The third-person narration, ambivalently beyond the narrator’s purview, scars the novel by virtue of its sudden and inexplicable shift in perspective. Moreover, *Gan* does not even manage thematic harmony, since its subplots (which occupy half of the narration) digress into the minds and lives of characters only incidental to its telling, and in ways that do not immediately pertain to the telling of the failed romance itself. *Gan* thus apparently fails to establish aesthetic coherence in both form and content, an odd fact considering the explicit goals of the narrator, the fact that Ōgai had established his reputation propounding “aesthetic beauty” as the chief measure of the novel, and that he spent more time on *Gan* (over a year) than on any previous works of fiction.

Historically, criticism of *Gan* in both Japan and the West seems to focus on its failure to provide what Harpham describes as the aesthetic effect of the appearing “harmonious and whole.” In *Gan*, we encounter something dissonant and divided that makes it register as deficient in some way. But to point to its unresolvable tensions and discordances is not to prove that *Gan* lacks aesthetic “harmony.” On the contrary, I suggest that *Gan* makes an exemplary model of harmonious and well-wrought design—it is just that the harmony of *Gan* consists not in the pleasing unity of its plot or its seamless telling, but rather in the resonances created by its formal and thematic dissonances. That is, the aesthetic effect of the “stereoscopic” text lies in its juxtaposition of two deliberate dissonances that delimit the ethos of the storyteller and the ethos of the reader. On the one hand, there is a dissonance between the narrator’s claims to an authoritative, detached perspective and what the text reveals about his metaphysical desire as an involved character. This dissonance reveals ethical stakes of his ostensibly aesthetic narrative act, an act which proves heavily invested in establishing himself as the sole authoritative subject at the expense of the other characters, and perhaps readers as well. On the other hand, the disjunction between the conventions of verisimilitude the narrator invokes and the meta-textual reflection the text encourages (through the parallel between the epistemological rift in narrative perspective and the problem of perspective that the text thematically explores) creates a

65 The narrator’s project of self-description attempts to transcend the gulf in sensibilities between the past he recounts and the moment of description, rendering his representations timeless and universalizable (see Dennis Washburn’s *The Dilemma of the Modern* for the argument that *Gan* epitomizes a Japanese sense of the “modern” that transcends the modern period in which it became a dominant ideological category), and his judgments authoritative, determinant of the norms that define the world he represents. He also has a clear investment in the coherency and harmony of his account, as he evinces in his final attempt to explain the narrative structure.
dissonance between readerly expectations deliberately set up by the text and the disappointing experience of its failure to meet those expectations. This dissonance directs our attention to the ethics at stake in the interpretive habits conditioned by the conventions of realism and confession invoked (we are made to realize that its realism comes at the cost of accepting certain conditions of the scene of address that the novel demonstrates have the potential to do violence to the freedom of others to make themselves recognizable as subjects). These two distinct dissonances prove resonant, then, insofar as each leads us to reflect on the ethics of the way we represent and interpret others through narrative (precisely one of the chief questions facing ethical criticism today) representation. Through the one we are made to realize the metaphysical nature of the narrator’s desire and how it conditions the ethics of his narrative representation of others (delimiting the ethos of the narrator), and through the other we are made to realize that the text engages readers in an analogous triangular relationship with the narrator and text, with similar ethical stakes and, perhaps, responsibilities (delimiting the ethos of the reader).

The aesthetic effect of Gan emerges from the relation of the discord it represents (between the narrator’s claims to authority and the way the text belies them) and the discord it forces the reader to experience (raising expectations and then proving them illusory or complicit in ethical problems). In other words, its aesthetic effect consists in its juxtaposition of the readerly and narrative ethos, which Wayne Booth describes as the object of ethical criticism par excellence.66 A reading of Gan therefore suggests that ethical criticism might productively turn to the province of aesthetics as a means of recovering the ethical value of self-conscious literature. Such texts often reflect or play deliberately upon the very oscillation between affective engagement and (reflexive and reflective) cognitive judgment that emerges as the theme of contemporary ethical debates, foregrounding the problems of perspective and position whose complexity ethical criticism attempts to elucidate.

The heavy-handed symbolism of the final scene could not highlight these concerns any more clearly. Having just passed Otama’s house and arriving at the turning point of their walk, the narrator and Okada encounter a classmate who says he will kill one of the geese in the nearby lake. Okada accidentally kills one with the rock he throws in an effort to frighten them off. The classmate, then, to swim out to the goose without losing his way, asks the narrator and Okada to stand apart from one another and guide his movements. He asks them to take complimentary positions according to the principle of parallax (which word appears in the story in Roman letters as Parallaxe), the idea that an object apparently shifts in position relative to the angle of observation, and that simultaneous observation from two vantage points can work to triangulate its location. There could hardly be a more explicit model for the Girardian paradigm—the object upon which the narrator and hero each fix his gaze is the titular “goose” of the story itself, an obvious substitution for the ostensible love object, Otama (and of course for the narrative that bears the title). This stark symbolism fuses psychological and narrative models of triangular desire at the same time it also fuses in one image the novel’s concerns with aesthetics—that is, the dual perspective (parallax view) of its “stereoscopic” vision—and the ethics of the narrator’s position (here he is literally situated in a triangular dynamic, despite his insistence on the singularity of his detached and uninvolved vantage point).

The unintentional violence with which Okada destroys the goose literalizes the offense of his internalization of conventional literary representations of women and his consequent apprehension of Otama as an aesthetic object whose distress renders her beautiful. But the

66 Booth writes that “Ethical criticism attempts to describe the encounters of a story-teller’s ethos with that of the reader or listener” (Booth, The Company we Keep: An Ethics of Fiction 19).
narrator’s more insightful apprehension of Otama no less relegates her to the status of an object to be “possessed” precisely by means of the insight his distanced vantage affords. What the two men obtain through their triangulation is not the living beauty they desire, but the destructive consequences of the colonizing force of that desire, symbolized by the battered and broken goose they proceed to purloin and consume.

The all-too literary feel of this climactic scene has rankled critics with good reason. Such obvious and convenient symbolism only further strains the premise of true confession on which the narrator bases his account. It also strains the efforts of any critical account, including my own, to give the episode much weight, since there is certainly a tongue-in-cheek element to the accidental death and subsequent struggle to smuggle the unwieldy creature, hidden under Okada’s coat, past a nearby policeman—all the while discussing mathematical formulas so as not to appear suspicious. It smacks of self-parody. Yet the scene does have a serious point: that novelistic representation risks reducing alterity to the status of there-for-us objects, and covers the violence of its operations through the formulas of convention. Gan’s parodic exposure of its own dependence on the same operations marks its self-conscious resistance to complicity in that violence.

The contradictory impulses of the text, the distancing push of its self-conscious reflection and the engrossing pull of its descriptions of characters’ narrative performances and affective experiences, engage readers in the oscillation we have seen marking new ethical theories’ accounts of an ethics of and while reading. In the process, Gan draws attention to the inseparability of its ethics and aesthetics, evincing what Hale describes in “Fiction as Restriction” as an “understanding of the novel as caught between its social and aesthetic nature [that is] constitutive of novelistic aesthetics itself.” (190) Balancing its careful attention to the ethics of narrative representations of alterity through its illustration of the social consequences in the story it tells, on the one hand, with an awareness of the degree to which the narrative form of novelistic representation itself bears an ethical responsibility, on the other, Gan puts two of the foremost (current) perspectives on the ethics of the novel in tension in order to create a unique ethics of self-consciousness that emerges as its aesthetic mode. 67

Harpam argues that ethics poses two essential questions: “How ought one live?” and “What ought one do?” He notes that “The first reflects the distanced perspective of some deindividuated and ideal being free to consider laws and norms as such; the second, the particular perspective of a real person confronting an actual situation.” (26) Gan makes an exemplary model for new ethical criticism precisely because it both dramatizes and reflects on the situation constitutive of the field of inquiry of ethics itself: the difficulty of negotiating the problems of perspective (and the responsibilities they entail) encountered through our simultaneous and fraught relations to abstract norms and real individuals. Gan shows us that the aesthetics of the novel depend upon the same negotiation, and warns us of the ethical consequences of unreflective acceptance of literary conventions that prove complicit in the same kinds of self-serving narrative manipulations its characters and narrator perpetrate. The ethical

67 Criticism that overlooks this interrelation has tended to indict the novel for aesthetic failure, and taking Ōgai’s subsequent turn to historical novels of evidence of his “break” from fiction. As in the third person sections of Gan, however, the narrating I is not absent from the “objective” and highly externalized descriptions of historical events in those late novels, however. On the contrary, I suggest that Ōgai’s later historical fiction, with its self-conscious and self-reflective attention to the process of its composition and the textuality of its sources, develops fully the narrative mode with which Ogai experiments in Gan, juxtaposing passages completely immersed in description with jarring notation that demands reflection on the real life process of fictionalization in which the novel inevitably engages.
imperative of the novel, according to Gan, consists in its self-conscious critique of the very interpretive structures through which it makes itself legible, demanding that readers both engage the text and reflect on the ethics implied by their mode of engagement as part and parcel of the experience of its narrative.

In this sense, Gan incorporates into itself the task ethical criticism in the West has reserved for the critic. Even contemporary emphasis on the agency of the reader and the ethics of reading practices themselves depends upon assumptions that the ethical imperative of the novel is to present readers with engaging representations of alterity upon which criticism can reflect. This dependence seems to me a remainder from the pathos-oriented tradition of European and American traditions of realism. Few major contemporary ethical critics turn primarily to metafiction or surrealism to ground their claims, for the very practical reason that they posit readers’ apprehension of characters as real human subjects in order to substantiate their claims about the way literature fosters readers’ capacity for “caring” for others, or developing human understanding (whether or not that understanding develops from sympathetic identification or from an acknowledgement of the other’s irreducible alterity).\(^6\) Booth in fact describes the ideal texts for ethical criticism as those in which “the story itself consists of the conflict of defensible moral and ethical stances; the action takes place both within the characters in the story and inside the mind of the readers as he or she grapples with conflicting choices that irresistibly demand the reader’s judgment.” For Booth, resonance between our response to dramatized ethical conflicts and our understanding of the ethical stakes of those conflicts relative to the aims of the novel model the relationship of (realistic) literary representations to real world ethicality.

Booth’s sense of the importance of ethos for ethical criticism depends upon his prioritization of pathos in the representations of novels themselves—on his view, it becomes the task of the ethical critic to derive the ethos of the narration from readings of pathos in the plot, and then to adjudicate whether that ethos conforms with whatever ethical values the critic holds. One way contemporary ethical theories might attempt to resolve their differences, however, would be to focus on texts like Gan that deliberately problematize their own representations of human relationships, foregrounding the operations of the novel itself rather than those of its characters upon one another. Gan calls attention to the scenes of address, the genre conventions, and the narrative structures through which such representation occurs in ways that raise ethical questions as productively as do those representations themselves. Gan asks ethical critics to attend to its own formal critique of the role of ethos in structuring the novel’s ethical commitments. By attending to the workings of ethos in fiction like Gan that consciously resists or plays upon the tradition of realism from which most pathos-oriented approaches to literary ethics have developed, we may find models for contemporary literary ethicality more conducive to simultaneously and seamlessly engaging in an ethics of and for reading.

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\(^6\) The tension between our awareness of characters as constructed elements of an aesthetic object and our desire to apprehend them as genuine others corresponds naturally with the tension in ethical criticism itself between the dual modes of response and the responsibility assumed by the ethical theorist with respect to the literary text.
We have seen in the previous chapter how Mori Ōgai’s (1868-1922) last work of fiction, the 1911 novella “The Wild Geese” manifests an ethics of self-consciousness that exposes the problems of its own narrative constructions of ethos and pathos, engaging discomfited readers in reflection on the inseparability of ethics from aesthetics in the novel, as well as on the potentially colonizing force of any literary representations of alterity. Just four years later after the publication of that work, the young writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927) broke unto the literary scene with a story that takes up the mantel of Ōgai’s self-conscious theoretical inquiry into novelistic ethics, but to strikingly different effects. Akutagawa’s “Rashōmon” (1915), like “The Wild Geese,” experiments with formal innovation that foregrounds its narrative structure and establishes a parallel between the ethical questions raises in the story it tells and those raised by its telling. Unlike “The Wild Geese,” however, “Rashōmon” does not seek to critique the ethics of the novel as a form so much as it explores the capacity of novelistic aesthetics to engage readers in an “affective ethics.” That is, the story calls our attention to the way affective responses to literary aesthetics may give shape to ethical identities in ways that resist or exceed the judgments that can be derived from our beliefs about what is right and wrong.

The difference between Ōgai’s and Akutagawa’s treatment of novelistic ethics corresponds with a contemporaneous divide in intellectual approaches to the philosophical field of ethics itself. In German philosophy two decades prior to the publication of “Rashōmon”, an attempt was being made to distinguish schools of ethical thought that approached ethics as a matter of rational reflexivity from those that considered ethics primarily a matter of affect. German philosophers Oswald Külpe, Walter Bowers Pillsbury, and Edward Bradford Titchener categorize philosophical thinking about ethics in their 1895 primer on the classification of philosophical schools, Introduction to Philosophy, as follows: “Affective ethics defines the motives of moral volition and action, in accordance with their psychological character, as feelings, emotions, etc. The ethics of reflexion, on the other hand, sees the impulse to morality in deliberation, a reflective process of the reason or the understanding” (111). The latter understanding of ethics, as a matter of conscious reflection, dominated German philosophical approaches to the field, while “affective ethics” was more or less relegated to the realm of psychoanalytic study. As a rigorously scientific thinker who studied German medicine and philosophy in Germany in the late 1880s, Ōgai worked from within this tradition. He maintained a strong suspicion of psychologized understandings of human experience and the emotions, and in his late writing almost completely eschewed representations of anything like interiority in favor of descriptions of the decisions, comportment, and actions of his heroes. In his writing, ethical conduct was a matter of bringing the will in line with rational understandings of ethical principles. The novel played an ethical role insofar as it could prompt readers to bring self-centered emotions and habits under the control of an understanding enlightened by the reflection it has been made to do on the ethical implications of its discursive, cognitive, and behavioral stances toward others. In short, the novel could make readers cognizant of the ethics of their attitudes toward others through its unique formalization and aestheticization of the language and narrative acts through which those self-other relations occurred.

For Ōgai, novelistic aesthetics brought readers into the realm of the ethical, demanding that we work through our emotional investments in dramatized ethical conflicts to arrive at self-conscious reflection on the ethics implied by the form of its representation. That reflection, Ōgai
argued, could be applied to our real-world activity and the ethics implied by our representations and interpretations of ourselves and others. On his view, aesthetics in the novel occupied a “middle position” that mediated between our subjective, emotional responses to literature and our ethical responsibilities in the real, objective world. In contrast, one of Ōgai’s contemporaries and the other major Japanese importer of German philosophy at the turn of the century, Takayama Chogyū (born Takayama Rinjirō, 1871-1902), argued that ethical consciousness itself mediates between our subjective aesthetic responses, on the one hand, and our “consciousness of truth,” or knowledge of what is right and wrong on the other. Chogyū contended that “the consciousness of truth has the most objectivity and the least subjectivity, while aesthetic consciousness is the most subjective and least objective. Moral consciousness occupies the middle position” (Marra, 100).

Chogyū switches the positions of the ethical and aesthetic in Ōgai’s thought. Ōgai argued that aesthetic experience brings together objective and subjective horizons of understanding (see chapter 1), and saw its ethical function as involving the translation of subjective perspective into the objective realm of ethical social relations. For Chogyū, however, it is moral consciousness that “appears to join together subjectivity and objectivity,” and has a “passionate side” as well as a cognitive or judgmental one, whereas aesthetic experiences are constituted by “the passions and the feeling of pleasure derived from those passions” (100). It is in the realm of ethics that the subject mediates a consciousness of the objective demands of the real world and the subjective experience of aesthetic responses and feelings.

Akutagawa’s own working out of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, and between the affects and the intellect, appears far closer to Chogyū’s than Ōgai’s. He referred to Chogyū frequently in critical writing throughout his career, generally with great skepticism about the thinker’s drive to categorize in abstract philosophical terms, but not without appreciation for Chogyū’s efforts to do justice to the subjective dimensions of beauty and to cultivate attention to the aesthetics of Japanese literature. Akutagawa began writing “Rashōmon,” which I will argue powerfully situates ethics in the domain of aesthetic experience rather than rational reflection, just a few months after the 1914 publication of the first major posthumous collection of Chogyū’s works, at a time when the thinker’s name surfaced frequently in popular debates about literary aesthetics. And in “Rashōmon”, Akutagawa, like Chogyū, explores how ethics represents an intermediary realm between subjective aesthetic responses and consciousness of social reality. “Rashōmon” goes farther than Chogyū’s writing, however, in fleshing out the role that affects (and specifically literary affects) play in the formation of our ethical identities, and in expressing skepticism about possibility or wisdom of subordinating affective response to rational judgments or beliefs at all. For Akutagawa, ethics did not consist in balancing fair-minded reason and personal feeling so much as it consisted in cultivating aesthetic sensibilities that would allow the self to respond to (artistic) representations of alterity by projecting the itself beyond the limits of its own understanding of others.

This difference in their approaches to the relationship of ethics and aesthetics may have to do with the fact that while Chogyū primarily concerned himself with general philosophies of ethics and aesthetics as they applied to real life, as evident in his many writings on the subject of “beautiful living,” Akutagawa was preoccupied with specifically literary ethics and aesthetics.

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69 In the previous chapter, I argue that Ōgai saw aesthetic mediation as affording an opportunity to make readers reflect on the subjective and self-interested perspectives they brought to bear in their encounters with others a means of mitigating the violence such self-interest entails (through rational reflection on the objective consequences of those practices).
This is not to say that he was silent on the subjects of ethics or aesthetics beyond literary representation. On the contrary, he wrote extensively about both subjects. Yet even his most straightforward efforts at articulating theories of real-world ethics, such as in his 1925 “The Morals of Tomorrow” (Ashita no dōtoku), refract understandings of real life through literary references. In that essay, for example, Akutagawa tries to explain what he sees as the future of moral thought in Japan. He frames his discussion, however, in terms of the development of literary approaches to the representation of realism, drawing a parallel between the movement and countermovement from romantic to naturalist and then “back” to neo-romantic literary schools, on the one hand, and what he sees as the historical development of a dialectic “critical spirit” of morality, one that forms itself in opposition to the morality of preceding ages, on the other. His conclusion is that Japanese conceptions of the moral will react against what he calls the “individualism of today” (kyō no kojinshugi) and return to the “social ethics” of the preceding generation, just as literary thought has turned back to romanticism.

Akutagawa’s invocation of literature as a means of working through modern Japanese ethics shows how thoroughly integrated they were in his thinking. In this chapter I will argue that for Akutagawa, the aesthetic experience of art and literature represented perhaps the only domain available to the modern subject for assuming any kind of ethical identity beyond its subjective self-understanding. He writes often of subjects cut off from the social world—marginalized for their social status, crimes, characteristics, talents, or simply by accident—who cannot imagine or achieve any kind of normalized integration into society. The thrust of these stories generally has to do with their efforts to reconcile themselves to their roles and responsibilities, or victimhood, vis-à-vis a society that rejects them. And in his last fictional writings it becomes apparent that this is not merely a matter of social positioning but in fact a full-blown interior as well as social crisis of identity, experienced by his literary subjects as an epistemic gulf dividing self from others, and foreclosing any kind of recognizable subject positions beyond the horizon of their own self-consciousnesses.

Throughout his writing, and especially in his earlier work, Akutagawa’s literature explored the capacity of intense affective experience, and particularly the experience of literary affect, to enable his dramatic agents to make the epistemic leaps necessary to construct new ethical (or unethical) identities for themselves that escape such foreclosure. This intensity in Akutagawa’s fiction emerges most vividly through his literary subjects’ aesthetic responses to encounters with others, and inasmuch finds itself directly modulated by ethical capacities to understand, respect, and sympathize (or to reject, deplore, and condemn). The most potent force for generating these kinds of affective responses turns out to be the narrative acts and stories of others; encounters with others’ accounts of themselves lead several of his protagonists to a breakdown in their fragile senses of selfhood and provisional understandings of their relationships and responsibilities to others. For example, in “Suspicion” (Giwaku, 1920) an ethics professor comes to question his own identity as a result of his disturbing encounter with the tale of an audience member, and in “Handkerchief” (Hankechi, 1916) a professor of Colonial Studies’ smug satisfaction with himself and his ethical theories shatters in the face of his encounter with a woman’s story of grief (though only after subsequent reading of a theory of artistic expression of the emotions that challenges his interpretation of that story). And we shall see in this chapter that even in his debut work “Rashōmon”, it is the story of an old crone propels the protagonist into a new social and ethical identity, while in “Yam Gruel” (Imo-gayu, 1916) the ethical accusation of the protagonist causes an unranked samurai to discover an unsettling spiritual connection with all of humanity.
The transformations in ethical sensibilities that these characters experience do not come about through any kind of conscious ethical response to those narrative acts, however. The ethical project for Akutagawa was not, as it was for Ōgai, a process of becoming self-aware of the ethical dangers of the habits and conventions on which we rely for representing others. On the contrary, while Ōgai arrives at self-consciousness as an ethical end, for Akutagawa self-consciousness is an anxious point of departure, a condition of the modern subject that potentially precludes authentic relations with others. Rational thought is not a means of marshalling self-interested emotion in the service of a greater good, but an entrapping mode of self-representation, as in the case of the protagonist of “Rashōmon”, who is paralyzed by his effort to reason through his ethical dilemma.

My argument in this chapter is that Akutagawa insists that ethics gathers its force in something that specifically resists cognition and even disrupts the very narrative acts and interpretations that seem to make ethical relationships possible. We find in his writing a continual effort to reach beyond the domain of articulation and even consciousness itself to render present a nani mono ka (“something”), an affective experience of alterity that threatens the fragile and provisional self-satisfactions that the intellect cultivates through its narrative constructions of the self and others. For example, we are told directly that the professor in “Handkerchief” feels the unsettling and threatening presence of “nani mono ka” at the end of the story, and that presence destroys his confidence in himself and his vision of having achieved a pleasing harmony of Western and Japanese manners. In the story “Suspicion” also, a nani mono ka turns out to have led the audience member to a fateful ethical decision, transmitted to the ethics professor by the end of the story, who is left silenced by the encounter.

As we shall see in this and the next chapter, this radically other nani mono ka threatens the integrity of the self that experiences it, as it negates the very modes of representation through which the self wants to establish its identifications and authorize its acts of self-construction. Yet the threat has positive valence as well, especially in Akutagawa’s earlier works, insofar as it transports the self into a state of intense feeling that potentially allows it to transcend its protective egoistic solipsism and the stultifying narratives through which it attempts to authorize itself and reduce others to the status of objects. The experience of this nani mono ka forces Akutagawa’s literary subjects to respond in ways that exceed what they can understand, and thereby potentially to achieve moments of communion with what they knew only as inaccessible alterity. By threatening the security of the self, the intensity of this experience seems, ironically, to make ethical understandings and identifications with others possible.

Akutagawa’s work throughout his career explores both the ethical potential and the dangers of these intensities. Part of the danger is not only that the self may not be able to withstand such experiences (as happens with particularly devastating effects in his last fiction), but that it may withstand them too well. Such intense states cannot be maintained in their intensity, and so the ethical identities achieved through them are threatened by instability. If these experiences do not lead so overwhelm the self as to lead to madness, there is the risk of their being subsumed by the reflections of a narrating intellect incapable of representing the radical alterity of this felt “something” except by translating it into something more familiar, and self-serving. His narrators tend to cast these affective intensities as transient epiphanies extinguished by modern life, perhaps ultimately no more than fantastic projections from within; since they are antithetical to the kinds of sustained identifications through which the metonymic logic of novelistic narrative tends to construct its versions of selfhood, they are frequently ironized or framed by narrators as subjective fantasy or psychosis.
The danger of solipsism is ever present in Akutagawa’s work, from the overwhelming isolation of the servant in the early “Rashōmon” to the self-enclosed linguistic aporia experienced by the protagonists of his final works. Akutagawa’s novel approach to the problem of solipsism was not to turn to politics popular at the time, but rather to work through the very totalizing self-consciousness that seemed to doom the self to alienation and division. By putting the self-consciousness of his narrators in tension with their efforts to represent alterity, Akutagawa’s writing attempts to render the radically other nani mono ka present as an affective and potentially unifying force—not for his characters, but for his readers. That is, Akutagawa generates the literary affect of his work by foregrounding the contrast between his characters’ experience of moments of affective intensity and their ultimate entrapment in a narrative perspective imprisoned by its own self-consciousness. Writing with an acute awareness that any effort to dramatize the ethical potential of intense affective experiences could only appear an idealistic fantasy of social integration, Akutagawa sought to create from the juxtaposition of the pathos of his characters’ experiences and the ethos of his self-conscious, highly stylized narrative voices, the same kinds of intensely self-aware and often unsettling affective responses for his readers as those experienced by some of his characters.

The argument of this and the next chapter is that Akutagawa sought this ethically charged vividness and intensity by posing the ethical and epistemic crises his characters face as particularly literary crises of representation. Akutagawa parallels the acts of self-construction and self-representation that his characters undertake and those his writing itself enacts, with increasingly metaliterary overtones throughout the course of his career (and in this much his career has a trajectory resonant with Ōgai’s own). The authorial protagonists of “A Fool’s Life” and “Cogwheels,” for example, possess an acutely metaliterary awareness of their status as written characters, and really are the provisional, fictional, exposed, and entirely linguistic subjects they fear themselves to be. Their anxiety about the potentially illusory qualities of their relationships to others, and their persistent feelings that they have no external existence beyond their subjective imaginings, not only prove “true” insofar as they are literary characters, but also resonate with the epistemic crisis facing many modern Japanese intellectuals concerned with the literary, linguistic, and ideological construction of selfhood. The distinction between the aesthetic concerns of the narrating selves in establishing the ethos of their stories and the existential concerns of the narrated selves with the possibility of establishing relationships to others, which generate the pathos of the stories, collapses in the metaliterary self-consciousness of his late works.

In the early fiction that this chapter will explore, Akutagawa deliberately foregrounds the relationship between literary ethos and pathos, demanding that we reflect on the complexity of the relationship between literary ethics and aesthetics, although to substantially different effects. In stories like “Rashōmon” and “Yam Gruel,” the characters have no metaliterary consciousness, and experience the world without the same sort of existential anxiety of the later protagonists. The dilemmas they face are more manifestly social and ethical in nature, generally concerning how to comport themselves in response to confrontations with others. In contrast, however, the highly self-aware and generally extra-diegetic narrators of these stories tend to make their presence felt through reflexive descriptions of their acts of writing and wry comments on the naïveté of their characters. The early works thus tend to put the pathos of the affect occasioned by characters’ experiences of ethical dilemmas in tension with the ethos generated by narrators absorbed with the aesthetics of their self-conscious literary projects. The effect of this dissonance, I argue, is to generate in readers a felt self-consciousness vis-à-vis their own ethical
and aesthetic sensibilities. We shall see how the narrators of “Rashōmon” and “Yam Gruel” often playfully mock the characters with whose pathetic plights nevertheless make demands upon our sympathy, leaving us to work through ambivalences similar to those the characters experience in confronting the conflict between their desires for satisfaction and their ethical sensibilities.

Through both thematic representations of characters’ affective responses to narrative, and through the actual narrative perspective his works establish, Akutagawa foregrounds how the métier of literature can bring readers into a felt confrontation with our own aesthetic responses to the story and the limits of our own capacities to project ourselves within it. He explores the capacity of novelistic aesthetics to “transcend the vulgar interest of the uninvolved spectator,” (Akutagawa, “Literary, all-too Literary” 149-150) and to move readers into a mode of feeling that exceeds the solipsistic pleasure of the voyeur and involves something beyond the cynical forms of “sympathy” that one of his narrators argues we tend to experience when we hear of the fortunes of others. 70 In Akutagawa, aesthetics, far from being opposed to life, turns out to be the domain of experience that moves us engage in it more fully, and potentially more ethically.

Akutagawa’s early stories became famous for their highly stylized aesthetics and carefully wrought plots. One of his most striking innovations consisted in his use of literary voices that worked through neoclassical registers to tell tales culled from ancient texts, with distinctly modern inflections. Two of his earliest tales to work in this way, “Rashōmon” and “Yam Gruel,” take up the stories of outcasts for whom it becomes both a social and existential dilemma to maintain the meager identities (neither were of such a status to merit recording their names, as the narrator of “Yam Gruel” deliberately notes) and lives they have managed to stake out for themselves. The substance of the tales themselves might appear sentimental or reductively allegorical taken in isolation. Yet the rich language and self-conscious narrative perspective through which Akutagawa frames them produces a complex and distinctly literary affect that reminds readers, even as they work through emotional responses to the pathos of the represented stories, that they are engaged in an essentially aesthetic activity framed by the ethos of an artistic sensibility.

Contemporary novelist Murakami Haruki’s introduction to Jay Rubin’s recent translation of Akutagawa’s short stories glosses the effect of his style by describing it as a “glass pane” separating the narration from the engrossing worlds of the stories—a complete yet delicate barrier that presumably shattered in his last autobiographical fiction. This is a convincing image for the phenomenological experience of reading Akutagawa’s prose: the intellectual quality of his writing and the self-consciousness of his narrators prevent unreflective absorption in the tales told, and Murakami’s account is consistent with nearly a century of critical consensus. Yet the apparently ontological barrier between narrating and narrated personae (as well as author and text) often proves a fictional construct itself, as both characters and narrators prove implicated in the same structures of feeling and desire. The fissures in this pane are well-hidden but perceptible even in his first real success, “Rashōmon”, which describes the way a moral crisis facing a recently fired underling resolves itself in dramatic fashion.

The tale takes place in an abandoned gate of the same name, in a period of the middle ages following earthquakes, fires, and famine. The ethical structures of society have broken down, and people steal from buildings and each other, destroying cultural artifacts for the meager benefits of the raw materials they provide. As the story opens, the protagonist, a servant, has just

70Cf. “Yam Gruel” 232.
been fired from his position and is waiting out the rain in the gate, below numerous corpses and the unlikely presence of an old woman stealing the hair from the dead. He is trying to decide whether he will starve to death or become a thief, with no success.

We soon learn that the servant is moved more by impulse and passion than by the limited power of his reasoning. His impulsiveness and lack of self-awareness are sharply accentuated by the carefully wrought artifice of the self-conscious narration and the dispassionate, distanced acumen of the narrator. The servant has no conscious control over the circumstances of his expulsion from society or even his ability to choose from his limited options. In contrast, the narrator purposefully demonstrates his mastery over the aesthetic choices represented by each particular moment of narration, including those passages which belittle the servant for his crudity, cowardice, and moral turpitude. Yet the very gestures with which the narrator asserts his authority turn out to situate him in a position analogous to that of the servant himself.

In an early description we find a clear parallel between the deteriorating physical and ethical structures described in the story, and the structure of the narration itself—indicating a resonant parallel between the activity of the servant and that of the narrator. Both the gate and the narration itself are defined by the absence of enlivening details: the partially wrecked gate bears the remains of ornamentation long since stolen, and the narration makes counterfactual gestures that represent the scene by virtue of what is no longer present. The narrator tells us, for example, us that the Rashômon gate, “could have been sheltering a few others from the rain—perhaps a woman in a lacquered reed hat, or a courtier with a soft black cap. But there was no one besides the man.” (3) The narration thus emphasizes that the reality of “Rashômon” is conditional, a construct of the narrator’s imagination subject to his control and revision. This point is driven home by a more obvious vanishing act, a self-conscious retraction of the opening lines of the story.

This writer said earlier that the servant was “waiting for the rain to end,” but in fact even were the rain to end, the servant did not know what he would do…. Instead of saying that the servant was “waiting for the rain to end,” it would be more fitting to write that “a lowly servant trapped by the rain had no place to go and no idea what to do.” (Akutagawa 1: 146)

Here both the reality of the fictional world and the textuality of the story itself find themselves retraced and refigured in this moment of narrative reflection. The narrator acts as though his original narration possess a finality that can be dismantled but not erased, that leaves its traces even in a future that proves its undoing—not unlike the artistic and cultural creations that are stolen and stripped of the surfaces that made them valuable in the world of “Rashômon”. The gesture conflates the nature of the situation described with the character of the narration, highlighting the discursive quality of the space of the story at the same time that it marks that discourse as subject to the same uncertainty and ambivalence that characterizes the protagonist’s dilemma.

The narrator’s statement here naturally begs the question why he did not choose the “more appropriate” description at which he now arrives, or did not simply go back and change it once he did come to this conclusion. This invites reflection on the structure of the story itself, on how the story benefits from the suspense that develops from the original description of the character’s “waiting.” The move adds a level of self-consciousness to the narrative frame while
acting simultaneously on that frame and the story itself; it revises the trajectories of both the protagonist’s situation (he is not waiting but trapped) and the reader’s mode of apprehension (we are alerted to the strong presence of the narrator as literary writer). The self-conscious passage enacts a subtle transfer of our emotional investments: we begin the story by focalizing our construction of the fictional space through an imagined perspective of the character situated within it, but find ourselves having to attend as much if not more to the sensibilities of the narration and the perspective it establishes, as we are led again and again to revise our apprehension of the texture and textuality of the story world through narrative retracing. We begin to ask ourselves how we feel about the narrative effects even as we let them influence our attitudes toward the servant.

By calling attention to the artifice of “Rashômon”, and by reworking in one and the same gesture both the reality of the story and its writing, the narration creates a uniquely ghostly mood at both levels. The story sustains an ambivalent affect that refuses to resolve itself into any particular emotional effect; we are kept in suspense about whether or not we are reading a ghost story, just as we are kept in suspense about how the protagonist might resolve his situation. The self-conscious passage enacts a subtle transfer of our emotional investments: we begin the story by focalizing our construction of the fictional space through an imagined perspective of the character situated within it, but find ourselves having to attend as much if not more to the sensibilities of the narration and the perspective it establishes, as we are led again and again to revise our apprehension of the texture and textuality of the story world through narrative retracing. We begin to ask ourselves how we feel about the narrative effects even as we let them influence our attitudes toward the servant.

The self-consciousness of “Rashômon” with respect to its own narrative effects (the way it calls attention to the narrative construction of atmosphere, rather than simply describing an external gloom that reflects the character’s affective state) makes us aware of the fabricated nature of its mood as an aesthetic effect—this is the semi-reflective effect of the glass pane Murakami describes. What that image of glass obscures, however, is the way this reflection links the narrator and the protagonist, overlaying their images, at the same time it seems to distance them ontologically. The narrator makes his presence felt in ways that suggest crucial parallels with the servant: both make assertions and try out stances toward the world of “Rashômon” only to revise them; both vacillate between moments in which they seem to disappear in activity and moments in which their reflections completely dominate the narration; and both seek a resolution that will confer a telos on their ambivalent activity (the servant works toward a resolution to his identity crisis, and the narrator a resolution to his tale). The most striking differences between them seem to lie in their respective states of passionate involvement and dispassionate reflection, and the fact that the lowly servant struggles with moral choices and the lofty narrator with aesthetic ones. The unique insight of the story, however, consists in its suggestion that these efforts are not so dissimilar, that in fact ethics are inextricable from aesthetics in the world of the text.

It will require readings of works from throughout Akutagawa’s career, continuing into the next chapter, to flesh out the relationship of affect and ethics in his writing, and to recognize the deep interrelation of the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of his writing about human emotions. To begin here, however, it is enough to point out that what distinguishes the narrator and his protagonist for us is not simply our awareness of a difference in their ontological status,
since the narrator turns out to be equally subject to the conditions of ambivalence and uncertainty he creates for the servant. Rather, what distinguishes the narrator is his self-consciousness with respect to the fictional quality of the narratives through which he actively constructs his worldview.

The servant proves uniquely ignorant of his own dispositions and motivations, and how they take shape in his expressive acts. He seems to respond almost automatically to his surroundings. The narrator can ironically parse the servant’s motives by explaining, for example, that he was “moved by six parts fear and four parts curiosity,” but the servant himself is continually driven by his environment (he only came to the gate to take shelter from the rain) rather than conscious thought. His only efforts at reflecting on his situation prove completely useless in guiding his actions, as he vacillates between the two possibilities before him (to starve, or to become a thief) without approaching any kind of resolution:

If he didn’t choose—the servant’s thoughts kept going back and forth between the same options until he came to this place. Yet this “if,” no matter how much time passed, remained an “if.” While affirming that he would have to do whatever was necessary, he could not muster the courage to affirm those words that necessarily followed this “if,” namely, that “there was nothing to do but become a thief.” (Akutagawa 1: 147)

When he proposes it to himself as a matter of rational decision-making, in the logical form of an “if” proposition, the dilemma proves intractable. His thinking is caught up in an episteme of traditional ethics that offers nothing but a self-destructive paradox (as the narrator says, “he had to do something in a situation for which there was nothing to be done”) from which no amount of reasoning can free him. An ethical identity is not obtainable; he can only cease to exist or abandon the ethical system from which his sense of his integrity and selfhood derives.

What actually moves him toward one choice and then another is not logic, but his involuntary, affective responses to another person: the old crone on the upper floor of the gate whom he discovers plucking hairs from the dead bodies piled there. When he first discovers the crone, the servant experiences a surge of emotion that wells up into an ethical stance, one that explicitly defies rational understandings of good and evil. “[H]e felt not so much a loathing for the old woman as a revulsion for all things evil…. The servant had no idea why the crone was pulling out the dead person’s hair, and thus could not rationally call the deed either good or evil. But for him, the very act of plucking hair from a corpse on this rainy night up here in Rashōmon was itself an unpardonable evil.” (6-7) Here it is the servant’s aesthetic response to the repulsiveness of the scene, and not reason, that moves him to assume an ethical attitude. The story essentially inverts the traditional (Kantian) German ascription of ethics to the domain of reason and aesthetics to the domain of judgment; rather than reflecting on the universalizability of particular actions to determine their ethical value against a preconceived framework, the servant spontaneously universalizes (in his revulsion not just for the old woman, but “for all things evil”) a judgment that arises from his particular experience of the scene. In this Akutagawa explores the way affective responses can build into ethical identities not by leading to actions with ethical consequences, but by constituting the ethical values of the experiencing subject.
His affective response to her actions moves him in one particular ethical direction, but not strongly enough for him to escape the gravity of his paradox. It takes the old crone’s story to move him so passionately that he leaps into a new ethically positioned identity. The imaginative identification allowed by the “as if” of her tale transports him beyond the intractable “if” of his dilemma. While hearing the story, courage suddenly builds within him; he becomes able to imagine himself “as if” he were in the same situation. His loathing of her ugliness and that of her actions coalesces into a passionate fury that her tale allows him to marshal in the construction of an attitude and, ultimately, an action. It is because of his participation in the “as if” of her story that he can, with considerable irony, retrospectively justify his decision to rob and leave the woman for dead by claiming that “You won’t blame me, then, for taking your clothes. That is what I have to do to keep from starving to death.” (9)

The narration describes the building up of his emotion during the tale, so that it is clear that the decision resulted from his affective response to her story, as a matter of “courage that formed in his breast as he listened,” and not from the logical reasoning displayed by the rationalization he applies in the end. For Akutagawa it is affective responses to narratives in particular that allow his dramatic personae to make projective identifications and either assume new ethical identities or, in less fortunate scenarios, become crippling self-consciousness about the limits of their understandings of others.

That the servant’s ultimate decision to abuse and rob a destitute and defenseless old woman violates the bare minimum of just about any ethical standard need not lead to the frequent conclusion that Akutagawa eschewed real-world ethical considerations in favor of an aesthetics that could provide refuge from what he saw as the baseness and egocentrism of real human life—as Sako Junichiro concludes in his influential study Ethical Explorations in Modern Japanese Literature (Kindai nihon bungaku no rinriteki tankyū, 1966). On the contrary, the ethics of Akutagawa’s art has less to do with the ethics modeled by characters in his stories than the multivalent states of affective engagement and considered reflection in which they seek to engage readers. “Rashômon,” we must remember, is not only the story of the servant’s experience, but also the story of the narrator’s self-conscious stance toward the representation of that experience. The force of its ending comes not simply from the germ of life that begins to grow within the protagonist’s breast, but from the contrast between that brutal vitality and the ironic gesture of the conclusion in which the servant escapes the purview of the narration by fleeing the gate, as though the narrator were bound to the liminal discursive space of Rashômon, permanently subject to the very undecidability to which he had condemned the servant.

The ambivalence of the narrator’s attitude toward the servant’s decision, and the narrator’s own performance of ambivalence (the retracings and vanishing acts) in the writing of “Rashômon” itself, confronts readers, too, with a dilemma analogous to the one in which the story situates the servant. We are presented with two equally unworkable options: either we valorize the servant’s decision and find ourselves forced to defend a decision we find ethically abhorrent, or condemn the decision and find ourselves standing against the powerful vitality of the story and defending the very system of ethics that forced the servant into his own impossible circumstances. Our ethical values and our aesthetic sensibilities come into conflict. Whatever paralysis we may experience in terms of the judgments we form, however, the necessity of choosing turns out to be obviated by the force of our affective response to the story. The mood created by the ghostly atmosphere of “Rashômon” impresses its ambivalence on us in a way that directly corresponds to the ambivalent emotions in which our experience of the servant’s dilemma engages us. We move from sympathy with his plight to ironic amusement at his self-
righteousness to bemused awe at the complexity of the (similarly oscillating) emotional adjustments he undergoes with each new stage of the unfolding story. At first “moved by six parts terror and four parts curiosity,” then by a loathing for evil, then by pride and satisfaction, and finally by a “new courage, one that was moving in the opposite direction from the one that impelled him to seize the old woman,” the servant makes pendulum swings through the choices presented to him until the momentum finally propels him beyond the ethical structures that previously defined him (149). These vacillations make it difficult for us to construct an attitude that situates itself within the framework of our beliefs about what is right and wrong; we are presented with a difficulty in judging both the character and the narrative stance toward the character. In facing this difficulty, we find ourselves transported from the position of self-conscious spectators to that of subjects embroiled in the same problem facing the servant: the problem of translating our affective responses into a stance that accords with both our ethical sense of ourselves and our desires for (aesthetic) satisfaction. The felt experience of this self-conscious reflection on the ethics of our interpretive activity constitutes what I call the “affective ethics” of the story.

In “Rashômon” Akutagawa explores how affective response to aesthetic experiences can move literary subjects beyond the limits of the ethical identities they project for themselves and confront the ethical implications of their stances toward others. Although in the plots of his stories he often represents this experience through characters’ direct encounters with the narrative accounts of others, in his theory of the novel he focuses on a distinctly literary affect—one in which his stories seek to engage readers by virtue of their literary form. Akutagawa perhaps most explicitly makes a case for his sense of the novel’s deep dependence on readers’ affective experiences in his 1927 critical essay “Literary, all-too Literary.” Here he makes a distinction between vulgar or popular (tsûzoku) novels and pure novels by comparing the appeal of the former to the voyeuristic pleasure afforded spectators by traumatic or momentous events. In contrast, he wants the novel to afford something beyond the pleasure of the spectator; he wants it to manifest a “poetic spirit” that allows for the same kinds of pleasures and intensities to be felt in lived experiences that may specifically lack this kind of vulgar interest. This spirit comes about not from the appeal of the subject matter per se, but from the sensibilities developed in the novelistic presentation itself, which for him constitutes the “purest” essence of the Japanese novel.

The “poetic spirit” seems his best effort at a critical articulation of the nani mono ka so often felt in moments of intensity in his fiction. Critics, such as Tanizawa Eiichi, Makoto Ueda, and Noriko Lippit, have pointed out the apparent contradiction between his emphasis on plot-less novels in this late essay and the “sensational,” elaborate plots of his earlier fiction. But the existence of such plots need not undermine the poetic spirit of the novel on his view; on the contrary, his earlier fiction deliberately involves readers in “the pleasures of the spectator” in order to bring about a self-conscious confrontation with the consequences of those pleasures and their attendant worldviews. The reflection such confrontations demand turns out to embroil readers in the very human emotions and situations we thought ourselves observing from the privileged position of the spectator, and casts our affective response and interpretive activity in same ethical light as the dramas that play out in his stories.

The way “Rashômon” demands that we both reflect upon and work through the emotions produced by the work we do in attempting to square our values and senses of ourselves as ethical beings with our affective response to the text make it a fitting point of departure for his career-long work on affective ethics. Modern Japanese literary scholar Ebii Eiji argues that
“Rashōmon” marks the beginning of a lifelong struggle of Akutagawa to negotiate the divide between social and internal configurations of the self, which he finds represented respectively through the concepts of the ethically responsible “human” (ningen) and the subjective “self” (jiga) as they emerge in some of Akutagawa’s later works. This is an important observation, but one that too easily falls into understandings of selfhood in terms of epistemological oppositions between internal subjective experience and external relationships. It also leads to the same conclusion as most other approaches: that Akutagawa turned to art in hopes of a transcendental reconciliation between the subjective and objective dimensions of selfhood.

In contrast, taking our cue from “Rashōmon”, we should understand representations of selfhood in Akutagawa as explorations of the frameworks we have for apprehending and mobilizing the desires and passions that move us to act in ways that constitute our selfhood in relation to others. In Akutagawa’s work, the social dimensions of the “human” and the subjective dimensions of the “self” manifest themselves as more of a continuum of selfhood than the binary Ebii constructs. At the social end of the spectrum, Akutagawa forces us to recognize the role that ethos plays in the formation of coherent attitudes that stage desires and emotions in communicable ways, giving shape to our identity at the same time that it also defines our relationships others. At the internal end of the spectrum, he forces us to feel the incapacity of those narratives through which we identify ourselves as (ethical) subjects to represent the desires and passions that lead us to construct our values and senses of selfhood as we do, and, perhaps, make us human.

Whereas in “Rashōmon” much of the drama of ethical self-construction occurs in relative isolation from the social forces that led to the servant’s predicament, and against which he ultimately defines himself, in subsequent stories Akutagawa brings the social dimensions of his protagonists’ efforts to define themselves as “human” to the fore—just as he makes his particular interest in the ethics of literary affect a more self-conscious focus. Akutagawa’s 1917 “Yam Gruel,” the work which cemented his ascension to the ranks of the literary elite, tells the story of a low-ranked samurai (called Go-i, or “fifth-ranked”) forced to confront the inadequacy of his sense of selfhood. Without money or future prospects, always wearing the same dirty, tattered clothes, unable to grow anything but the mere “shape of a beard,” and burdened with a bulbous red-nose that becomes an epithet for his character, Go-i represents such a low state of humanity that he brings out repugnance and a “child-like cruelty” in all those around him. The abusive treatment he receives, however, has become internalized as the standard of recognition he expects, and we are told that he seemed not to feel the slightest affront at the numerous insults hurled at him daily, but only repeated the same mantra to all offenders, “That’s not right, you.”

This ethical admonishment only encourages most of his tormentors, who egg him on just to produce it. But response has another affect on them as well, one always experienced but generally forgotten or ignored by all but a handful:

Every person who saw that face and heard that voice was momentarily overwhelmed by sympathy. (They felt as though the one being insulted by them was not only the red-nosed Go-i. An unknown someone, a multitude of someones, inhabited his voice and face to assail them for their lack of feelings). It was because of this kind of feeling, vague though it was, that sank deeply into their
hearts for a moment. But there were very few who cultivated that feeling for long. (226)

In this unexpected reversal whereby Go-i’s tormentors themselves become assailed by a multitude who stand in the place of the man they persecute, they find themselves alienated from the very “humanity” they deny Go-i through their cruel treatment. This moment of ethical self-consciousness is not so much a conscious realization for them as an affective one; it is described as a “feeling” three times in as many sentences. Like the “Rashômon” servant’s initial affective responses to his environment, however, this ethical feeling subsides quickly for most, and they readily fall back into unreflective continuations of their former lifestyles. Yet at least one particular unranked samurai has a sensibility that allows him to experience an affective intensity that permanently transforms his stance toward the Go-i. This unranked samurai “begins by making fun of Go-i, without any particular reason, just like everyone else. But one day after he heard the phrase ‘That’s not right, you all,’ he could not get Go-i out of his head.” After this experience, every time he sees or thinks of Go-i he encounters the appearance of ‘the human,’ sobbing at the cruelty of the world....

Everything in the world suddenly seemed to express a fundamental degradation. And yet at the same time, he also thought that the frostbitten nose and the beard with so few hairs they could be counted somehow brought to him a particular feeling of comfort. (226)

The complex crosscurrents of affective force at work in the unranked samurai recalls the oscillations of the lowly servant of “Rashômon”; yet whereas the servant’s options of starving or becoming a thief both entailed social alienation, the samurai here finds a capacity for sympathy and feeling of connectedness even with a figure that revolts him. Rather than resulting in a choice that secures a particular identity for him, however, this samurai’s felt impression of Go-i’s demand for ethical behavior leaves him unable to take any definite position toward that imperative. He can only oscillate between self-satisfaction with his sympathy for “the human” in Go-i, and his repugnance and despair at what it would mean to truly embrace “the human” that he recognizes.

The unranked samurai’s oscillations in response to the pathos of Go-i’s statement model avenues of response the story makes available for readers. On the one hand, the text clearly invites our sympathy in its descriptions of the cold cruelty he faces on a daily basis. On the other, the narration blatantly refuses any sentimentalizing of his character and invites a certain measure of scorn at Go-i’s pathetic naivety, cowardice, and oafishness. Immediately after the description of unranked samurai’s ambivalent response to Go-i’s accusation, we are told of the one time the “cowardly” protagonist mustered the courage to act on his feelings (his self-consciousness vis-à-vis his inconsequential position relative to others around him always “prevented him from expressing his sympathy in action”). Go-i came upon a group of children abusing a dog and felt intense sympathy for the creature—a sympathy that may be explained by the fact that the narration earlier and later describes Go-i as “having to continue his dog-like existence amidst the cruelty of everyone around him” (227). Go-i kindly explained to the children that hitting the dog would hurt it, and that therefore they should spare the poor creature. He then found himself so roundly ridiculed and humiliated that it “felt like being hit in the face,” and the children chased him away in a hail of insults that left him full of self-pity. The narrative pronouncements on his cowardice, his “inability even to muster anger,” his failure to save a dog from mere children, and
his penchant for self-pity, complicate the readerly affect it produces. Even as we feel inclined to
distinguish ourselves from the cruel masses and sympathize with Go-i, we are reminded by the
self-conscious narration and the comic overabundance of pathos that he exists as a nothing more
than a representation of the pathetic character of humanity, created for our amusement—to cry at
the cruelty of clowns is to misread the nature of their performance. Go-i’s hyperbolic
submissiveness and naiveté make sympathy overwhelmingly difficult even while they seem to
call for the same kind of sensitive response they elicit from the unranked samurai.

The ambivalence of our stance toward Go-i differs from what we experienced in
“Rashōmon” insofar as the text invites reflexive awareness of our relationship to the story as an
aesthetic creation. In the case of the lowly servant, the hopeless atmosphere of the story and
ironic veil of the narration clouded our feelings and judgment so that our experience of
uncertainty resonated with that of the servant. In “Yam Gruel,” the comic effects of the narration
clash with the impulse to sympathize elicited by Go-i’s victimhood and our desire to manifest the
rare sensibilities of the one sympathetic samurai. We are once again forced into an oscillation
between positions of distance and sympathy neither of which we can satisfactorily maintain (to
plunge into pure sympathy for the unranked samurai would be to controvert the obvious intention
of the implied author and do injustice to the full range of affective involvement the text affords;
to retreat into ironic scorn would be to align ourselves with the cruel masses). But in “Yam
Gruel” another level of self-consciousness comes into play in the way we construct our affective
responses: we are asked to reflect upon the ethical consequences of the kinds of satisfactions we
seek in novelistic representation.

The narration ambivalently frames the story it presents, inviting both sympathy and scorn,
immersion in the pathos of the story and reflexive awareness of Go-i’s existence as an aesthetic
and perhaps comic element created for our pleasure. It brings our awareness of ourselves as
conscientious readers into conflict with our investments in the novel’s mimetic representation; as
we read for the first time, we find we must hold our judgments in suspicion and remain mindful
of how we invest our emotions lest we wind up caught in a position (of sympathy or distance)
indicted for its self-congratulatory or self-serving qualities by the conclusion of the story.
Akutagawa thus involves readers in the practice of what literary ethicist Dorothy Hale sees as “a
conceptualization of the reading subject as engaging in self-restriction as an act of free will.” For Hale, a fictional character is “felt to be no different from a real human being to the degree
that her functional positionality seems like a restriction of her potentiality, a limit to the full
freedom that she has a right to enjoy beyond the aesthetic uses to which the novel puts her.” Part
of the ethical task of the reader in her view consists of honoring the freedom of subjects
produced by the novel while acknowledging the necessity of the restrictions through which that
production occurs, apprehending the aesthetic uses to which the novel puts the characters as
inflected with the ethical valence of the normative restrictions through which real-life subjects
are produced. Readers of “Yam Gruel” however, do not so much voluntarily restrict themselves
from conclusive interpretive gestures as they find that the contradictory feelings the text
produces forestall the possibility of arriving at clear judgments.

Reading on in the story does not resolve this tension, but rather intensifies it. Akutagawa
makes the ethical dilemma of our ambivalence as readers the substance of the story itself: it turns
out to concern how an audience of the protagonist responds with both sympathy and scorn, and
winds up treating Go-i in a way that seems both to accord him dignity and respect and to make
him object of amusement. The representative “audience” is the affluent son of a minister,
Toshihito. Toshihito chances to hear a murmur escape the poor red-nosed samurai’s lips, an
expression of the one desire for which Go-i apparently (according to the narrator) lives: to eat his fill of yam gruel, which he gets to taste once a year during a certain ritual. With a “mixture of sympathy and contempt” resonant with the one we have seen the narration itself establish, Toshihito makes a spectacle of his magnanimous decision to grant Go-i’s wish. The poor protagonist does not know if he is the butt of another joke or the recipient of unprecedented generosity, and neither does the reader, but has no choice but to go along with the offer.

We puzzle along with Go-i at the elaborate staging of the quest, and at the motives of its orchestrator. Toshihito arrives one morning and seats Go-i on a horse while others follow on foot, treating the man as an honored guest. He remains vague about their destination but reassures Go-i that it is near; yet as they pass each potential site Toshihito apologetically admits that it is “a little farther.” This ruse forces the protagonist to perform symbolically the story of the beckoning of desire and its repeated deferral (each year receiving only a taste of the satisfying Yam gruel, and each year hoping the next will provide more) with which the narrator framed his own tale. Toshihito virtually usurps the role of the narrator, moving Go-i through situations of his own creation that dramatize the way his desire takes shape in the course of his life.

Toshihito further exercises a specifically narrative authority over Go-i by arranging elaborate scenes that create a story designed to play upon his naiveté. At one point, Toshihito entrusts a fox he apparently captures (servants had already bagged the critter) with a message that miraculously gets delivered to Tsuruga, where the fox gets made a guest of honor along with Go-i. The protagonist is awe-struck, but before we can even smirk at the scene (still wondering what mixture of malevolence and benevolence lies behind Toshihio’s actions), the narrator breaks in to adjure us not to judge Go-i’s feeling of awe too harshly. He explains that Go-i’s wonder at Toshihito’s amazing abilities merely expressed “his strong feeling that if Toshihito’s field of control extended so broadly, then his own self, magnanimously comprehended (hōyō sareru jibun) within the scope of that man’s will, had become that much more free.” (81) For all his naiveté, it seems, Go-i never doubts that Toshihito is manipulating him, and does not resent the manipulation (although he rightly fears its possible consequences). On the contrary, he experiences a sensation of freedom that leads him to play willingly the part of unwitting actor, not with hopes that it will turn out well for him, but because the very restrictions imposed by Toshihito’s control (Go-i receives little information about their planned activities and has no agency in determining their agenda, but is rendered a passive agent in the drama) seem to provide a framework for more freely working out Go-i’s relationship to his own desire. He understands all too well that something like genuine freedom for someone of his station in life lies far beyond reach, but his heart leaps at the chance to imagine himself in a story controlled by a powerful, magnanimous will that allows him to range beyond the roles and responses ordinarily reserved for him. The telos that the powerful authorial will of Toshihito imposes upon his life promises to structure it in a way that may render it meaningful for him.

“Yam Gruel” leaves readers ambivalent about the treatment of Go-i. Should we feel affront at the unethical co-opting of Go-i’s freedom into a narrative under Toshihito’s control,

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71 “Yam Gruel” divides into two sections. The first gives background about Go-i and describes the events leading up to the journey; the second begins with the beginning of that journey itself. Akutagawa’s mentor and famous novelist Natsume Sōseki commented on the structural division by noting that the writing of the first section seemed belabored, registering the presence of the author too strongly, whereas the story seems to progress more naturally in the second half. This would corroborate my argument for the story’s self-conscious exposition of the deployment of Go-i as a character, first in the story we read, and then in the elaborate plot constructed by Go-i, which repeats on the thematic level what the first half accomplished through its narrative presentation.
for his own amusement? Or should we understand Go-i’s lack of freedom as an inevitable part of the aesthetic design of the story, a design whose overall effects justify the means (effects which might constitute a more appropriate object of ethical judgment anyway, having ontological priority over the illusory world of fiction)? In responding to Toshihito’s treatment of Go-i we find ourselves having to address the very ethical questions that confronted us in our own apprehension of the protagonist in the first half of the story: ought we to sympathize with his pain as though he were a real human being, or take pleasure in the comic pathos of the representation of his character as an aesthetic element of the story? What Akutagawa adds to our experience through Toshihito is a further level of self-consciousness, one that demands that we consider the parallel between the ethical questions raised by exercises of narrative authority over literary subjects and those real world exercises of authority—like Toshihito’s within the frame of the story—that create the narratives through which subjects can assume their identities.

If our sympathies at least ambivalently lie with Go-i, however, our desire to orchestrate our judgments and affective responses to his situation in a manner consistent with our values and sense of ourselves find their model in Toshihito. Toshihito is first introduced as an audience to the expression of Go-i’s desire, much like readers. Furthermore, the ambivalent mixture of disgust and sympathy in his initial offer to help Go-i resonates with the ambivalent responses deliberately solicited by the narrative presentation of the protagonist, so that we are led to seek in Toshihito’s stance a possible resolution for the conflicting emotions we ourselves experience. The story refuses such resolution, however, consistently holding possible attitudes in tension, whether via Toshihito’s mocking pretense of supernatural powers and yet his refusal to turn Go-i’s naiveté into an opportunity to humiliate him, or his distressingly elaborate and yet ultimately genuine provision of as much yam gruel as the protagonist likes. Toshihito seems to enjoy both the pleasure of jokes at Go-i’s expense and the knowledge that he affords Go-i the experience of a lifetime and treats him better than he could ever expect.

“Yam Gruel” thus represents at the level of the story the same kind of dissonant narrative framing of its subject that characterized “Rashōmon”. The mytho-poetic power Toshihito wields over Go-i’s world in creating the quest of the story, the fact that Go-i literally performs his desire at Toshihito’s pleasure, for a final audience of Toshihito’s choosing, and the mixture of condescension, irony, and, sympathy that characterize Toshihito’s ambivalent stance toward Go-i all suggest the particular role and attitude of the “Rashōmon” narrator in his relationship toward the lowly servant (both characters also possess ugly and defining facial features and have virtually no control over their environments). In “Yam Gruel,” however, the ontological barrier separating the narrating Toshihito and the “character” under his authority has disappeared, leaving Toshihito “responsible” for the consequences of his actions in ways we might not hold the teller of a fictional tale.

Those consequences for Go-i reflect the story’s self-conscious exploration of the aesthetic and ethical consequences of its construction of ethos. As he approaches the elaborate conclusion arranged for him with their arrival in Tsuruga, Go-i’s feelings intensify to a point where they demand a complete restructuring of his sense of self. This intensification begins with contradictory emotions that overwhelm him the evening before the anticipated yam gruel feast. On the one hand, he cannot wait and the passage of time agonizes him; on the other, he begins to have the sinking feeling that “the time for eating yam gruel must not come so quickly.” He wishes desperately that some calamity would occur and delay the event, and that only then, after some further hurdle, would he finally have the chance to eat his fill. In other words, the provisional loosening of the social and economic restrictions preventing the fulfillment of his
desire frees him, ironically, to realize that what he truly desired was desire itself, and not its fulfillment.

The realization leaves him hollow, and his will to act evaporates along with his newfound sense of freedom. He wakes up and wanders through the hubbub of the servants with the feeling that he is surveying a war zone or a devastating fire—reading the violence done to his sense of purpose into the very activity that drove him through the adventure. He thinks of magnitude of human activity involved in fetching him, journeying to Tsuruga, harvesting the staggering stockpile of yams and laboring to produce the yam gruel itself, and “loses the appetite that demanded sympathy,” since the sight, smell, and steam from the sickening amounts of food alone are more than enough to “leave him sated” (246). Toshihito turns in his view from savior to oppressor, since his generosity becomes felt as an imperative to which he can no longer muster the will to respond. When bowls of yam gruel are finally placed before him, and both Toshihito and his father ceremoniously adjure him to enjoy without restraint, he finds himself not wanting even a drop. It is all he can do to force a few sips down before he must publically confess that he has had his fill of satisfaction.

With a nonplussed expression, Toshihito commands him to watch as the fox drinks the gruel nearby, accorded the honor in reward for his faithful service. As Go-i watches, “in his heart he looked back nostalgically on his self before coming here. The self humiliated and scorned by servants and even children… like a dog without an owner, the self that wandered along Suzaku road—that pathetic, lonely self. And yet at the same time, the self who so carefully nurtured in his breast the single hope to eat his fill of yam gruel— that happy self” (247). The story concludes shortly after this reflection, first describing the sweat dripping down his red nose despite the cold air, and then finally ending with his flailing effort to stifle a large sneeze that bursts from it.

In contradistinction to the resolution of “Rashōmon”, Go-i’s oscillation through dramatic states of emotion does not lead him to any conclusive action, but rather to an incapacity for action and a final involuntary gesture that betrays the nakedness and ugliness of his humanity. The explosion of his nose betrays the build-up of undeployable emotions that resulted from his oscillation between hope and despair at having to face the insufficiency of his desired object to satisfy the desiring that structured his life. Situated between the eyes (windows of the internal self onto the world) and the mouth (instrument of expression and communication in the social world), the leaky nose is a mess, a site of the production of automatic, embarrassing, and ineffectual responses to the environment beyond the control of conscious will. If the sneezing Go-i figures “the human,” as the unranked samurai came to feel, then to be human in “Yam Gruel” is to be enmeshed in narratives beyond our control that leave our passions and desires exposed to the judgments and treatment of others—in short, is to be produced much like a character in fiction.

The characters of both “Rashōmon” and “Yam Gruel” move through oscillating affective states that bring them to unexpected confrontations with their desires, forcing them to abandon their former senses of themselves. “Rashōmon” parallels the experience of the lowly servant (whose aesthetic responses move him through various ethical purchases until his encounter with the old crone’s story propels him beyond his ethical sense of himself) and the responses his plight invites from readers (our ambivalent responses to the story move us to identify with the

72 One of Akutagawa’s other early successes, “The Nose,” (Hana, 1916) in fact tells the comic-pathetic tale of someone who tries to alter the shape of their humongous nose.
protagonist, and to consider the way our aesthetic responses marshal themselves in ethical attitudes). “Yam Gruel,” however, works through an additional layer of reflexivity, deliberately and thematically playing upon the fictionality of its protagonist (in large part by having him become a virtual character in a narrative orchestrated by Toshihito, but also by reminding us from the start that he is an unnamed character in ancient written tales), and inviting us to discover in him a humanity all the more human for its fictional dimensions.

Like “Rashōmon,” “Yam Gruel” refuses to resolve the ambivalence of the ethical questions it raises. Since the unethical treatment of the protagonist is foregrounded as a primary theme of the work, and since it is Toshihito’s treatment of Go-i that leads to the resolution of the story, we find ourselves confronted with questions about the ethical consequences of Toshihito’s narrative manipulations that the ending only exacerbates. While Toshihito clearly makes jokes at Go-i’s expense, he is careful to prevent Go-i from feeling humiliated—in fact, the very treatment that renders him an object of amusement is clearly the best the protagonist has ever received. We also cannot really be sure that confronting the emptiness of his dream did not perhaps benefit Go-i in some way—or whether there are even grounds for judging the ethics of bringing someone to the point of devastating self-realization. Even more to the point, Toshihito’s treatment of Go-i in the second half of the story so clearly parallels the narrator’s presentation of the protagonist in the first half of the story—both stage him as an object of ridicule, both joke at his expense, both present Go-i as approaching and then deferring the achievement of his desire, both present him acting naively vis-à-vis others’ treatment of animals (the dog in the first half and the fox in the second), and both conclude by laying bare the structure of his desire—that any judgments we might make of Toshihito’s manipulations find themselves checked by our self-conscious awareness of the literary structure of the plotting Toshihito performs. That is, the parallel between Toshihito’s and the narrator’s treatment of Go-i precludes any kind of simple ethical judgment because we are forced to work through our recognition of the fictionality of the protagonist, as an aesthetic element of the text, who exists only insofar as he is employed in the narrative construction of another. A self-consciousness quite different from the one readers experience in “Rashōmon” (in which we discover how our own affective experiences parallel those of the servant) thus prevents us from marshalling our ambivalent feelings of sympathy and amusement into a conclusive interpretive stance—a self-conscious awareness of the fact that we are reading a literary work that thematizes the way we deploy our emotions in response to literary affect.

Over the course of Akutagawa’s career, the works of Akutagawa’s that most deeply explore the relationship of affect and ethics do so with increasingly metaliterary inflections, as the next chapter will demonstrate. In the 1920 story “Green Onions,” for example, Akutagawa thematizes the literary sentimentiality of the protagonist who goes on a fateful date with a predatory suitor, while reminding us continually that he is writing the short story on a deadline and it must soon be sent out in the world to be “devoured by critics.” And in his final works, his protagonists seem to intuit the fact that they exist as fictional characters literally constituted by the literary affects through which they represent their experiences of the world. While in the end Akutagawa seems to despair of the possibility of maintaining the passion and intensity necessary for projecting the self beyond its subjective sense of selfhood and assuming ethical identities, his masterful portrait of that despair undertakes a kind of ethical self-theorizing that I will suggest defines for him the essence of the novel.
Chapter 4: Metaliterary Ethics and Affect in Akutagawa’s Late Work

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927) is famous for his fluid literary language at times seductively inviting and at others ironically distancing, capable of shifting seamlessly between neoclassical and contemporary registers. Yet his writing in the year before his shocking suicide seems to exhibit none of that celebrated virtuosity; on the contrary, it appears agonizingly fragmented and self-consciousness, redoubling on itself with repetitions and question marks, or trailing off into elliptical moments of aporia or paralysis. In subsequent scholarship, this transformation has been read as a “deterioration” of his mental and literary faculties, one associated with a decline in modern “Taishō intellectualism,” especially insofar as the Taishō period (1912-1926) was largely co-extensive with Akutagawa’s literary career. Seiji Lippit represents much critical consensus on the matter when he points out in his *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* that

during the 1920s, the conventional boundaries of literary practice were assaulted by various cultural developments, including the growing emphasis on class consciousness and the increasing demand for literature to engage social reality…. [Akutagawa’s *A Fool’s Life* (1927)] reveals his inability to create a novelistic narrative of his life. He instead had to reduce the story to a succession of separate moments in time stitched together to form a somewhat disjointed, patchwork personal history. (50) [emphasis mine]

In Lippit’s account, Akutagawa’s ultimate “intellectual crisis” led to a desperate “assault on [modern] literary form.” (51) This critical perspective, which takes Akutagawa as both metaphor and metonymy for his generation, has its historical origin in Miyamato Kenji’s 1929 “The Literature of Defeat,” an essay that conflates Akutagawa’s life and art to make them both symbols of an intellectual bourgeois consciousness that ignored material reality in favor of art, and which could not in the end transcend history. For Miyamoto, the consummate artistry of Akutagawa’s writing amounts to no more than a veneer of aestheticism covering the absence of any true understanding of (or ethical intervention in) the social world. Modern Japanese absorption with the literary construction of subjectivity appears symptomatic of an anxious solipsism born of intellectual elitist idealism, a turn to art for salvation rather than facing the hard work of engaging real-life problems.

Miyamoto’s approach to the ethics of Akutagawa’s aestheticism remains pervasive even among those who disagree completely with Miyamoto’s politicized notion of literary history and his particular interpretations of Akutagawa’s writing. Makoto Ueda extracts the principles of Miyamoto’s criticism from his politics through his 1976 pronouncement that “Akutagawa made a religion of art,” and that the ultimate failure of art to provide a transcendental ground for the self led to Akutagawa’s loss of faith in that religion, and life as well (111-144). The idea of Akutagawa as a dreamer who preferred to dwell in the realm of the imagination has dominated twentieth century criticism, even those works that attempt to view the social theories that emerge through Akutagawa’s work. Sako Junichirō, who devotes one hundred and fifty pages to Akutagawa in a long study of *Ethical Explorations in Modern Japanese Literature*, scarcely mentions the terms “ethics” in that discussion, resting ultimately on the critical commonplace that Akutagawa despaired of securing any ethical understanding of the world, preferring instead the perpetual recreation of an imaginary world through acts of poesis.
The failure of Akutagawa’s art to provide a ground for social life remains a dominant narrative in criticism no doubt because it offers an explanation that accounts for the changes in Akutagawa’s writing and links his spiritual crisis to the intellectual climate of the modern period. It weaves his life and work into a cogent whole whose tragedy critics can interpret as symptoms of literary and cultural history, and therefore mobilize as evidence for more general theoretical or historical claims. With Akutagawa’s suicide and the end of an era foregone conclusions, Akutagawa criticism has framed the disorienting effects of those texts in largely pejorative terms, casting them as symptomatic of his “inability” to write coherently and “reductions” of the masterful novelistic expression that he had achieved in earlier work.

Yet if anything attests to the mastery of those final works it is the persistent power of the myth of himself Akutagawa created through them—the portrait of himself as a tragic artist who flew too high on man-made wings—which has given shape and life to the very criticism that condemns it. Even the severest critics of these works seem to recognize an uncanny affective power in them, one that threatens the stability of the portrait of Akutagawa they have constructed. One of his best biographers, Sekiguchi Yasuyoshi, reads Akutagawa’s last works as a desperate turn against the literary identity Akutagawa had constructed for himself. He suggests that Akutagawa anxiously deconstructs the artistic ideals in which he had taken refuge, in an effort to establish some kind of grounding, identifying relationship between the self and an ever-receding “real” world (373-379). For Sekiguchi, like so many others, the gripping emotional power of these works emerges forcefully, but only to be interpreted as a symptom of Akutagawa’s “crisis of self-consciousness”—his awareness of the impossibility of bridging the gap between life and art.

In this chapter I argue that the affective power of his late work is of direct theoretical interest to Akutagawa, and not simply a side-effect of his style or frame of mind. I will trace the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in Akutagawa’s late writing to conclude that the powerful literary affects generated by his last work emerge as the culmination of a perilous exploration of what I have called in previous chapters an “ethics of self-consciousness”—reflexive attention to the ethical implications of the formal modes of representation through which self-other relations are constituted in novelistic discourse. Sekiguchi and others miss the ethical dimensions of his work because they frame their discussion on aesthetic terms that foreground the crises of consciousness and understanding that his writing represents. In this, they take their cue from Akutagawa’s characters and narrators, who so often experience the gulf between their subjective experience of life and their projected ideals as epistemic, rather than ethical, crises of self-consciousness. Yet in the previous chapter we have seen that even his first breakthrough success, “Rashômon” (1915), cultivates an intense anxiety about the role that aesthetics and the affects play in determining the ethical identity of the protagonist. And in his late critical writing, Akutagawa explicitly expresses the complex relationship between life and art not in terms of oppositional epistemological categories like truth and fiction, but as a matter of affect and sensibility that turns out to have profoundly ethical as well as aesthetic dimensions.

In a short essay called “Art and Other Matters” (Geijutsu sono ta, 1920), Akutagawa argues against the dangers of thinking that “art exists for its own sake or for the sake of real life,” since either approach will obfuscate artistic affect (geijutsu-teki kangeki) by subordinating it to critical understandings that relegate its deep emotional effects either to mere entertainment or utilitarianism, whereas he envisions a more vital and definitive role for the emotions in art (5:164). He makes an even stronger case for the crucial role the affects play in art in an
unfinished essay the “Paradox of Japanese Literature.” In it, he explains the paradox of the title as the fact that we need a general concept to understand and appreciate the particular, but must have the visceral, emotional experience of the particular to form a general concept. He then virtually equates life and art as reciprocally provisional epistemological constructions constantly in need of the revisions brought about by concrete experiences in both domains, each of which help us to appreciate the other. Neither art nor life has priority over the other in his view; rather, by engaging us emotionally and moving us to explore them more fully, each teaches us to understand the other better. Affect proves the means through which we shuttle between life and art and experience each in deeper, more embracing ways.

In his ambitious theoretical essay, the 1927 “Literary, All-too Literary,” (Bungeiteki na, amari ni bugneiteki na), Akutagawa makes his most direct and vexed attempt to elaborate a theory of the novel that privileges questions of affect over questions of reality and representation in the apprehension of literature. He suggests that the essence of the novel consists in its “poetic spirit” (shiteki seishin), a concept he can only define by eschewing conventional frameworks for critical argument and representing its sense in fragmented anecdotes and quasi-literary language that invoke, among other things, the “poetic sublime” (shi-teki sōgon) and a “lyricism” (jojō) capable of expressing and engaging us in the “feelings of the present (kyō no kanjō)” (15: 200).

The essay was published during a public debate between Akutagawa and Tanizaki about the nature and structure of the novel. Criticism has traditionally taken Akutagawa’s comments about poetic spirit in the context of this argument about the form of the novel, and has consequently emphasized the inconsistency of Akutagawa’s effort to define the novel by its poetry.

Considering the “poetic spirit” he proposed as a matter of affect rather than of literary form, however, provides us with means for challenging now entrenched understandings of a polarized opposition between “life” and “art” in Akutagawa’s work. For if the novel is defined by its capacity to engage us in the feelings of the present, to move us into its artistic representation as a means of moving us more fully into the shared values of our age, then it may be theorized as a domain through which the individual might transcend the limits of subjectivity and truly participate in life as a social agent by virtue of his or affective involvement in its aesthetic representation.

Akutagawa self-consciously thematizes this power of aesthetics to engage subjects in ethical self-construction in works written throughout his career. We have already seen how his earliest works portray how characters repeatedly confront and seek to move beyond the limits of their capacities to project the self into the social world, and to sustain inter-subjective relationships with others, as a result of intense aesthetic and emotional experiences. The servant of Rashōmon, for example, finds himself agonizingly unable to choose between his physical needs and his ethical sense of himself (whether to starve to death or become a thief), and only becomes able to act as a result of his aesthetic and emotional response to the story of another. In his later work, however, Akutagawa grows more skeptical of the positive ethical valence made available by the affective force of the novel. The devastatingly self-aware narrator-protagonist of the late 1927 “Cogwheels” is no less subject to the experience of alienation from society than the Rashōmon servant. Yet his self-consciousness and disillusionment with literary activity prevents the kind of intense, unreflecting immersion that allows the servant to move beyond the

73 Many critics, including Noriko Lippit and Tanizawa Eiichi, point out that even though he “lost” the debate, subsequent literary history in Japan effectively sided with him against the necessity of “plot-like plots” in the novel.

74 See previous chapter for more on how Akutagawa links ethics and the “feelings of the age” in his essay “The Morals of Tomorrow.”
dilemma into which his social and economic circumstances have thrust him. The “Cogwheels” narrator encounters everywhere an “enamel” or veneer of fiction separating himself (experienced as pure physical sensation, “all nerves and nervousness”) from others—an impenetrable surface that translates discourse of others into an alienating aporia of self-referential language from which he can find no escape, save the momentary vicissitudes of aesthetic encounters in which he desperately seeks some kind of salvation from his feelings of moral guilt and alienation. Akutagawa’s distressing portrait of the narrator’s failure to escape his modern self-consciousness, however, need not itself be cast as an ethical or artistic failure. On the contrary, Akutagawa’s later fiction makes compelling cases for the role of literature in the ethical construction of the self, in part by reflexively acknowledging the very ethical problems it raises through its exploration of literary affect and the relation of real life and literature.

I.

The ethical critique that Akutagawa critics such as Makoto Ueda, Ebii Eiji, Yoshida Seiichi, and, more recently, Sekiguchi Yasuyoshi and Seijii Lippit, among many others, most frequently level at Akutagawa’s work is that it fails to establish any kind of coherent or substantive social reality, so that his literary subjects have no common ground for assuming ethical identities or responsibilities in relation to others. Leftist critic Miyamoto Kenji’s 1929 essay, “Literature of Defeat: On Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s Literature” set the standard for this kind of analysis. Miyamoto begins his essay referring to Akutagawa as a “man of letters” (bunjin), emphasizing the lexical play of this compound to suggest that Akutagawa was trapped in the “artificial” (jinkō) armor of his “intellectual” literary art (bungei), and therefore incapable of authentic relations and any kind of genuine representation of reality. Miyamoto aims at cleaning up literary history for an emerging “literature of the proletariat,” and so criticizes Akutagawa’s literature for its isolationism, egocentrism, highbrow elitism, and intellectualism. But he also levels these same criticisms at the “man of letters” Akutagawa himself, claiming that his greedy intellectualism, though his only true “weapon,” led to an intellectual solipsism in which “he came to think of reality as only his own self” (146). Thus trapped in his own bourgeois world of ideas, Akutagawa could no longer authentically portray anything in the world: “‘He’ could not even satisfactorily write a single dog. When he discovered that the only thing he got from his self-reliance, [his intellectual literary production] turned out to be powerless and easily damaged, since ‘his’ world was no longer bright” (137-165)

This was not merely a matter of technical representation for Miyamoto, but a social, political, and ethical problem as well; in failing to represent others or society adequately, Akutagawa’s literature did not merely fail as art but served to codify further an oppressive and self-serving bourgeois regime. Conveniently forgetting the veil of fiction separating author and self-figurations, Miyamoto claims that the decline of Akutagawa’s “literary life” corresponds exactly with the rise of the influence of proletariat movements in Japan. He therefore reads the fragmentation of Akutagawa’s later work as symptomatic of the dissolution of the “intelligencia”

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75 For modern literary scholar Tanizawa Eichi, the servant’s choice in Rashōmon marks Akutagawa’s rejection of ethics in favor of a vitality he sought in literary representation. For contemporary critic Itō Takahito, “Cogwheels” represents the collapse of the social world into solipsistic fantasy, in part as an unconscious response to Akutagawa’s overwhelming personal guilt (expressed directly in “A Fool’s Life” (Aru ahō no isshō, 1927) over immoral conduct. Both scholars corroborate readings of Akutagawa’s turn to aesthetics as a repudiation of ethics (and both conform to the narrative of his “decline”) Tanizawa emphasizes conscious choice in his early work and Itō theorizes unconscious response in his later writing). Neither take into account, however, the role that affect plays in constituting the aesthetics of his work and linking consciousness to social ethics.
itself. The moral vacuity that appears so horrific in Akutagawa’s works turns out, on Miyamoto’s view, merely to reflect the inherent corruption and essential emptiness of the whole bourgeois project Akutagawa’s work fosters.

Miyamoto’s claims rest essentially on the blurred distinction between Akutagawa’s “real” (social, political) life and that of his literature; he reads the latter as a narrative of the failure of the ideals of the former, which in turn he interprets as a product of the outmoded social and political structures informing the latter. In the end, Miyamoto’s article implies that both were doomed to be driven, by the proletariat, to “surrender to life.” This portrait of Akutagawa’s life and literature as culminating in failure persisted, even in criticism considerably more sympathetic to Akutagawa’s work, throughout subsequent decades. In his lauded 1941 article “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke,” Japanese literary critic Fukuda Renzon, for example, tries to work out the relation of Akutagawa’s personal anxiety and his writing, in the end finding the fragmentation of his literary work stemming from his fragmented experience of the world (44-78).

Unlike Miyamoto, Fukuda begins by acknowledging that the literary “problems” Akutagawa encountered stemmed not only from personal circumstance but also from his investigations of literary representation and human will: “[Akutagawa realized that] the problem of literature is not reflecting reality. It is the relation of the will to the world it sets up” (46). The elusive grail of Akutagawa’s work, according to Fukuda, was setting up a world which would satisfactorily represent the will, or the self’s efforts to express and thereby impose its desires on reality. The problem was that the “self” and the “reality” that Akutagawa sought to realize made contradictory demands on the author’s framework for apprehending the world. Representing the self required abstract formulation, whereas the world required something more “realistic.”

Fukuda argues that Akutagawa’s problem was not exactly an inability to see social reality, or the fact that he did not, as Miyamoto argues, “live in the real world.” Rather, Fukuda argues, Akutagawa simply could not separate reality from human desire any better than he could reconcile them. Fukuda claims, quite contrary to Miyamoto, that Akutagawa was a “realist,” albeit one who believed, perhaps fatally, that realism had to include the “abstract idealism of human desire” (55). Accordingly, Fukuda sees the form and structure of Akutagawa’s literary work as born from the struggle to frame his experience of reality in a way that did justice to both the abstract needs and desires of the self, on the one hand, and the social and ethical responsibilities imposed on that self by the real world, on the other. He concludes that Akutagawa’s literature embodies, by virtue of its failure to reconcile the self to the social world, a tormented sigh of frustration with the impossibility of representing, or achieving, any kind of authentic social relations. Fukuda gives far more credit to Akutagawa, but in the end, like Miyamoto, finds Akutagawa’s literature ultimately solipsistic and unable to find or construct any social or ethical ground for identity.

Influential scholar of modern Japanese literature Yoshida Seiichi takes the theme of fragmentation in Akutagawa’s personal life, and its relation to his literature, all the way back to Akutagawa’s birth. In his 1953 literary biography “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s Life and Art,” Yoshida begins by addressing the “doubt” which has been cast on the circumstances surrounding Akutagawa’s naissance and early life, mapping out something like a history of the “nerves” or “nervousness” that were to inform Akutagawa’s subsequent life and work. One of the main pieces of evidence Yoshida submits to show the depth and extent of Akutagawa’s fragmentary sense of the self comes from a line in his late critical essay, “Literary, all too Literary:” “Born in
contemporary Japan as I was, in a literary way as well I cannot help but feel within myself an infinite splintering/disintegration (\textit{bunretsu})” (208). Yoshida argues that a pervasive uncertainty about the isolation of the “self” and the lack of transcendental or social grounds that would permit it to assume a coherent, unified subject position haunted Akutagawa throughout his life and literary career.

In the end, Yoshida’s account, though it largely defends the artistic value of Akutagawa’s literary accomplishment, seeks to account for an assumed “downfall” at the end of his career—one he also ascribes to a failure to understand the self as social being. Like Miyamoto, Yoshida suggests that Akutagawa’s personal, cultural, and historical situation proved his undoing: “Among the many problems – domestic, political, literary, moral – that hounded Akutagawa, perhaps the rupture of generational consciousness of the self (\textit{jiko-ninshiki}) was the most critical” in determining the course of his life and literature (26). He finds the fragmented form and structure of Akutagawa’s later works representative of a crisis of identity beyond Akutagawa’s control—the struggle of the self-conscious modern intellectual to come to terms with a sense of the self as a social being burdened with moral responsibility. Yoshida in fact ends his account with a statement that makes Akutagawa a symbol of the problematic condition of his age: “Yet when we set him against the backdrop of the Taisho period, we can see that… [more than any other scholar or intellectual] Akutagawa possessed a demeanor suited to absorbing the troubles of his time, as well as those of humanity.”

The classical criticism by scholars such as Miyamoto, Fukuda, and Yoshida, among others, focuses primarily on what Akutagawa’s novels exemplify (largely through their thematic representations, but also through his style and rendering of narrative point of view) about the role of the social world in shaping individual experience. It examines the experiences of the characters in light of the stylistics of his writing to arrive at conclusions about the ethical worldviews manifest by the stories themselves. Implicit in this critical perspective is a sense that the ethics of the novel lies in its verisimilar representation of real-world experiences and perceptions of social reality, the ethical significance of which it becomes the province of criticism to interpret.

This assumption, which I suggest Akutagawa’s literature calls into question, may be endemic to the field of ethical criticism itself. Geoffrey Harpham explains the attraction of the novel for ethical critics by first defining ethical inquiry as consisting in the tension between two essential questions: “How ought one live?” and “What should I do?” The first question invokes the third-person, distanced perspective of some “deindividualized and ideal being free to consider laws and norms as such.” The second question demands that we attend to the particular, first-person perspective of “a real person confronting an actual situation.” (28) Since ethical criticism works from more or less analytic perspectives distanced (epistemologically and ontologically, if not in sensibility) from the worlds of literary texts, the stories told through literary narratives serve as the necessary, complementary “examples” of first-person particularity. Harpham sees the two points of view as required for ethical inquiry in irresolvable tension with each other, and concludes that the task of ethical criticism is “articulating this perplexity, not guiding the perplexed.” (29)

\footnote{These accounts are certainly not wrong about Akutagawa’s sensitivity to the “troubles,” existential and otherwise, of the Japanese modern. But the pictures they tend to paint suggest his literature reflects these more transparently, and to that extent unintentionally, than I shall argue. Their accounts tend to frame his final works as revealing an already-present anxiety, whereas I want to ask whether that anxiety is not in fact an effect of the literary work, and not vice-versa.}
In a 2007 article entitled “The Moral of the Story,” Candace Vogler works from the distinction Harpham proposes to challenge ethical criticism that turns to the novel for “examples.” She agrees that novels seem to offer ideal opportunities for ethical critics, especially since for any given ethical situation, novels make every relevant detail known, including sometimes the thoughts and feelings of all involved parties. Yet this very ideality, she suggests, constitutes a fatal flaw: human beings simply are not knowable in this way. Vogler argues that characters are not complete psychological entities, only aesthetic elements that exist as part of a semblance of tendentiously represented ethical situations whose purpose is to manifest some kind of significance for readers. To believe that our understandings of represented experiences give us ethical insight, for Vogler, is positively frightening, since it implies that it may serve our ethical interests to acquire a totalizing knowledge of others’ most private and sensitive thoughts or feelings, and to treat them as objects of our understanding rather than subjects in their own right.

In the previous chapter I have argued that “Yam Gruel” deliberately makes us aware of the tension between the impulses it occasions in us to respect and sympathize with Go-i, on the one hand, and to treat him as an aesthetic element of a performance, to take pleasure in the description of his embarrassments and failings, on the other. In effect, “Yam Gruel” asks us to become self-conscious of the problem Vogler discerns in the way that literary representations invite us to imagine that our interpretations of characters can yield ethical insight or improvement in ourselves. Akutagawa goes farther than Vogler, however, in asking whether or not the fictional status of characters necessarily precludes the novel from producing ethical effects. He makes this very metaliterary question the theme of several of his middle and later works, adding yet another layer of literary self-conscious that demands readers think through not only real-world ethical questions, but particularly questions about the ethics of literary interpretation itself.

The 1920 short story “Green Onions” works through this metaliterary layer perhaps more explicitly than any of Akutagawa’s other stories. It thematizes the relationship between literary sensibilities and real-world relationships at the same time that it dispels any illusion of mimesis and repeatedly discusses its own status as a literary object, designed by its Akutagawa-like narrator for both practical (economic) and aesthetic purposes. Within the story this narrator tells, the heroine O-Kimi proves a sentimental reader of fiction who takes such self-congratulatory comfort in the depth of her own “literary feelings” that she spends an entire night tearfully writing a letter to the unfortunate fictional heroine of a Russian novel. In stark contrast to her willful apprehension of literary characters as real others (an echo, perhaps, of Go-i’s naïve acceptance of the personification of the fox-messenger in “Yam Gruel”), the narrator spares no effort to demonstrate that his own heroine has no existence save as the fictional character he must create in order to finish a story for a deadline later the next morning. Yet “Green Onions” paradoxically depends upon our caring for her despite this knowledge, as the plot concerns the dangers that a predatory suitor poses for her innocence and safety—as well as the narrator’s voiced concern for the ethics of his heroine’s conduct.

The story’s reflexive attention to the way we apprehend the “reality” of literary representations does not only manifest itself the structural tension between the narrator’s self-conscious irony and O-Kimi’s credulous sentimentality. It turns out that the “danger” O-Kimi faces in the story itself arises from the difficulty she experiences negotiating between the

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77 Cf. Chapter 3 (pp. 30-31) for a description of the fox incident in “Yam Gruel.”
sentimental, fictionalized quality of her beliefs about herself and others, on the one hand, and the
demands of the real social and economic circumstances in which she finds herself positioned, on
the other. What puts her in danger is her habit of projecting into the real world the values she
has cultivated through sentimentalized reading practices: “O-Kimi would sit beneath the portrait
of Beethoven alias Wilson and read The Cuckoo... indulging in an artistic ecstasy far more
steeped in sentimentalism than even the moonlit-shore scene in the movie-version of the book”
(5:237). Her failure to discern the true nature of her suitor stems directly from the regular
practice of willing herself into romantic moods through encounters with amateurish literary
works designed to prey upon her lower-middle-class aspirations. The predatory suitor himself,
Tanaka, embodies the ideals peddled by the tawdry works she reads:

Tanaka was an unknown, well, artist. We’ll say that because Tanaka was the
talented sort who could write poetry, play the violin, work with oil paint, work
as an actor... and play the Satsuma lute. There’s not a person who could tell
which of these were his real profession and which were hobbies. As for the man
himself, his face was smooth as an actor’s, his hair had the sheen of oil paints,
his voice was as gentle as a violin, his speech as careful as poetry... and his
ability to skip out on a loan rivaled the bravado of his Satsuma lute playing....
If I think about it, he is really one of an already well known type, the kind you
might find sitting (in the cheapest seats) at local music academy performances,
or in cafés and bars, with a look of scorn for the vulgar masses. So if you
would like a clearer portrait of young Mr. Tanaka, you should go look in one of
those places. I am done with writing about him. (239-40)

Tanaka exists as pure performance, both “literally” as a character of the narrator’s whose
fictionality the story deliberately emphasizes, and more metaphorically insofar as he seems to
have no true substance or profession save the staging of these signifiers of masculine ideality.
He cultivates just enough demonstrable “talent” in these conventional measures of sophistication
to produce an image of himself as a kind of ideal literary hero, and this is precisely how O-Kimi
perceives him: “To O-Kimi, Tanaka was like Ali-Baba after he learned the magic spell that to
open cave of treasures — who knew what kind of unknown pleasure garden would appear
before her once the spell was uttered?”) Tanaka disguises worldly motives in the same veneer
of romantic idealism that O-Kimi has learned to pursue in lieu of more substantive and less self-
deceptive experiences with “reality.”

Tanaka’s self-conscious cultivation of a distinctly fictional image of himself merely
exaggerates in more perfidious manner the kinds of romantic self-projection in which O-Kimi
herself engages. We are told early in the story that the heroine

appears to have stepped out of one of Takehisa Yumeji’s illustrations for a novel.
Which seems to be one reason why the café’s regulars long ago chose to give
her the nickname ‘Potboiler.’ She has other nicknames, too, including... ‘Miss
Mary Pickford,’ because she looks like the American movie star...” O-Kimi is
also “quietly contemptuous of [co-worker] O-Matsu’s low-brow taste. She is
convinced that O-Matsu has done nothing since graduating from elementary
school but listen to naniwa-bushi (folk-tale style narrative songs), eat mitsu-
mame, and chase after boys. (Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories 121)
O-Kimi makes pretensions toward the fine sensibilities of high-brow literati, and her own performance of this identity casts her in the eyes of others as a quasi-fictional character or even a work of fiction herself—her patrons call her “potboiler.” The image of the potboiler, an often hastily produced work of relatively poor quality designed to make money, has both thematic and metaliterary resonance with O-Kimi’s role in the story. On the one hand, it reflects how on a daily basis she must sell an image of herself in the café to make enough tips to survive, without the luxury of time or money to cultivate any deep literary sensibilities or to accentuate her beauty with elegant and tasteful clothing. It also makes her a figure for the “Green Onions” text itself, which began with a resonant admission of its own need to sell itself: “I plan to write this story in a single sitting in time for the deadline I’m facing tomorrow…. So then, what am I going to write about? All I can do is ask you to read what follows” (5: 234).

The narrator’s cavalier attitude toward the value of his work is of course belied by the carefully wrought structure of the story itself, including the thematic and structural repetitions of the theme of the relationship of literary and real-world concerns. There is also an irony in the quiet contempt of the narrator’s own condescending description of his heroine’s pretensions toward more refined sensibilities than those of her co-worker. It seems that both narrator and heroine define themselves in the story vis-à-vis their superior aesthetic insights and literary taste. This irony magnifies to the point where the narrator himself plays upon it in the subsequent discussion of O-Kimi’s apartment:

Ah yes, I imagine O-Kimi all alone at night when the sounds of Tokyo have faded away, raising her tear-moistened eyes toward the electric lamp, dreaming the dream of the oleanders of Cordoba and the seabreeze of Namiko’s Zushi…. If I’m not careful, I could just as easily be swept up in sentimentalisme as O-Kimi! And this is me talking, the fellow critics are always blaming for having too little heart and too much intellect. (Rashômon and Seventeen Other Stories 123)

The gesture here is not serious; the narrator does not imagine he may really be falling into the same kind of sentimentalisme as his heroine, but merely plays upon the possibility as part of the self-conscious motif of the story. His own writing deliberately invokes the very sentimental literary conventions he scorns, situating them in an ironic frame that exposes their affected qualities as a further means of distinguishing his own literary sensibilities from those of O-Kimi. Yet this very irony functions as a self-protective literary device not much different from O-Kimi’s sentimentality: both use them to cultivate an air of taste, to create specifically aesthetic effects, and to fabricate a world and a worldview that they believe to be more insightful and fulfilling than the vacuity they see in what passes for reality in others’ views.  

The parallel between narrator and protagonist invites us to peer beneath the veneer of irony with which the narrator protectively veils his created world, just as he peers beneath the

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78The irony in the passage above expands beyond the level of narrative to include metaliterary reference to Akutagwa’s own literary reputation, raising the question of the relation of the literary representation of the narrator to the “real” Akutagawa; in attempting to discern the attitude of the narrator toward his represented character, we find ourselves forced to reflect on the relation of the real author to his fictionalized narrative self. The narrator’s ironic stance itself may even prove an object of authorial irony, insofar as the text invites us to consider the parallels between its narrator’s ironic worldview and the sentimental worldview of the character he derides. Our efforts to apprehend the narrator’s perspective on the story demand that we work through the very questions about the relationship of fictionalized literary representations to real life emotions, conditions, and identities that the story thematizes in the experiences of its protagonist.
veneer of sentimentalism in which O-Kimi protects her own. If the narrator aims at exposing the real pressures operating on O-Kimi’s recourse to the idealism of romantic fiction, then perhaps the novel’s reflexive attention to its literary representation of the narrator’s relationship to O-Kimi aims at exposing the real stakes of its self-consciously ironic stance toward its own representation. The story’s apparent refusal of the literary pathos it so blatantly parodies might signify a self-imposed blindness on the part of its narrator similar to O-Kimi’s—an anxious refusal to accept its dependence upon the very prosaic emotional responses and conventional understandings of literary realism that it distrusts. Despite the narrator’s efforts, we clearly do find a pathos in “Green Onions,” one perhaps all the more compelling for both its fictional, fabricated quality and its narrator’s apparent scorn for such sentiments. It is the ambivalent tension between this pathos and the ethos of the narration, I argue, that raises the ethical questions Akutagawa asks of literary aesthetics.

The narrator makes it clear that O-Kimi steeps herself nightly in a dreamy pathos conjured up by artificial flowers and deliberately romanticized readings of melodramatic texts as a balm against the shabbiness that surrounds her on a daily basis. The art adorning her walls consists of what she could cut out from magazines (a portrait of Woodrow Wilson hangs in her mistaken belief that it is Beethoven), her “desk” proves a rickety table covered in a thin cotton cloth, and even the artificial lily she prizes is really just a damaged ornament no longer needed by the café where she works. The very details that make her seem ridiculous also attest to the limitations imposed on her sensibilities by the social and economic conditions she faces. The narrator acknowledges as much when, with characteristic irony, he plays up the pathos of her situation by deliberating pointing out the pathetic effects of his description:

While I write this story, the fact is that I cannot suppress a smile at O-Kimi’s sentimentalism. But there is not a trace of ill will in that smile. Lined up in O-Kimi’s second-floor room, in addition to the artificial lily, the collection of Tōson’s poetry, and photograph of Rafael’s Madonna, are all the kitchen tools she needs to survive without eating out. There’s no way to say how much the harsh realities of her Tokyo life symbolized by these kitchen tools continually heap oppression upon her. Yet when you look through a mist of tears, even a desolate life can develop a world of beauty. To escape the oppression of her real life, O-Kimi hid herself in her tears of aesthetic ecstasy. (5:238)

The narrator effectively beats readers and would-be critics to the punch, calling out his own heavy-handed symbolism (the kitchen tools as “symbolizing the harsh realities of Tokyo life”) as part of his tongue-in-cheek production of precisely the kind of affected potboiler world of sentimentality that attracts O-Kimi’s sympathy. Yet the double-consciousness O-Kimi must cultivate in order to preserve her sense of herself against those harsh realities, even rendered as it is through the thick melodramatic irony of the narration, cannot but strike readers as a deeply human response to the difficulty of reconciling aesthetic ideals and sensibilities with real situations. For at the very least, this double-consciousness is what our experience of the story demands from us, working as it does through the double valence of the narrator’s meta-story about the production of the text and the nested story of the dangers that lurk behind O-Kimi’s perhaps willful misconstruction of the literary ideality she discovers in Tanaka. In order to understand the ethical inflections of the effects “Green Onions” seeks to produce through its metaliterary reflexivity, then, we might look to how this double-consciousness plays out in O-Kimi’s own negotiation of literary and real-life experience.
O-Kimi turns out to be not quite as naïve as the narrator at first portrays her. She possesses considerable self-consciousness about the disjunction between how she interprets Tanaka and the true nature of his character:

Across the vision that O-Kimi was picturing for herself just now, dark clouds would pass sometimes as if to jeopardize her entire happiness. True, O-Kimi loves young Tanako. But the Tanaka she loves is a Tanaka on whose head her artistic ecstasy has placed a halo. . . . Nevertheless, O-Kimi’s fresh, virginal instincts are not entirely unaware that her Sir Lancelot has something highly dubious at his core. Those dark clouds of anxiety cross O-Kimi’s vision whenever such doubts come to mind. Unfortunately, no sooner do those clouds form than they melt away. (Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories 125-6)

No mere victim of sensibilities inherited from potboiler fiction that preys upon her need for fantasy and escape, O-Kimi proves a willing participant in the idealization of her suitor. O-Kimi ignores the symbolic “clouds” that trouble her fantasies, and only notes those clouds that take real shape; the narration continues to explain that because she is young and lives almost entirely for artistic ecstasy, “she rarely takes note of clouds except when she is worried about rain on her kimono.” (241)

Her attitude models the one into which the narration deliberately pushes its readers, soliciting our emotional involvement in the developing tale despite occasionally “clouding” our imaginative vision of the story (by reminding us of its fictional qualities, and of the social and economic forces conditioning its production as a literary text, as well as by vexing our impulses either to smirk along with the narrator or sympathize with the protagonist by making both stances equally problematic and inviting). We approach the story through obscuring clouds of self-consciousness that the dramatic action prompts us to dispel as we follow O-Kimi on her fateful date. As we have seen happen in Rashōmon and “Yam Gruel,” the reflexive narration confronts us with the parallel between the conflicted roles it casts for readers and those in which we find the protagonist cast. “Green Onions” goes further than any previous story, however, in dramatizing, as a specifically literary concern, the conflict the text creates between our aesthetic sensibilities and the ethical positions we assume in our apprehensions and interpretations of “others.”

In the plot of the story, the ethical issue that presents itself with the most urgency is Tanaka’s designs on O-Kimi. He deceives her and takes advantage of her innocence, leading her astray with compelling stories—first of the date they will have at a circus performance, and then, after she accompanies him, of why they cannot go to the circus and where they will go instead. Her willful credulity in the fantasy he represents puts her in danger of very real emotional and physical violation. This readiness to see in him literary-ideal qualities he does not in fact possess also signifies another more pervasive, if more subtle, ethical problem in the text—the refusal of subjects to recognize each other as such. None of the dramatic agent in the story attempt to engage others on any terms other than the relatively self-serving and decidedly fictionalized ones they project for them. The patrons all devise various nicknames (most related to some mode of literary or artistic production, such as “potboiler” and the appellation “Mary Pickford,” for the Western actress) for O-Kimi, and treat her as nothing more than the affected object of attention her role as waitress invites. O-Kimi and her co-worker, O-Matsu, mutually scorn what they perceive as the other’s vulgarity, each making assumptions about the other without any true
knowledge of the other’s interior life or values. We have already discussed O-Kimi’s imaginative projection of Tanaka as the literary ideal of a suitor; at the end of the story, however, it turns out that Tanaka himself has constructed a fantasy version of O-Kimi, one that her sudden purchase of a bunch of green onions as they walk on their date destroys:

In his imagination he had been seeing a house with lattice doors at the end of the street…. Standing there, however, he felt the image of that house had begun to fade, to be replaced with a mound of green onions with their “1 bunch for 4 sen” price tag. Then, suddenly, all of his fantasies were shattered when the next puff of wind brought a stink of green onions—as piercing and eye-stinging as real life itself—that punched him in the nose…. Poor sad-eyed Tanaka stared at O-Kimi as if seeing an entirely different person. (5: 246)

The surprise twist of “Green Onions” is that real life intrudes to save O-Kimi not so much by dispelling her fantasy, but by dispelling the image of her romantic fantasizing that aroused and motivated the scheming Tanaka. This dispelling takes place as a metaphoric substitution in which the image of Tanaka’s fantasy of the house toward which they headed (itself a parody of domestic fantasy) becomes transformed into an image of green onions, and then destroyed by the real sensation of the green onion’s overwhelming olfactory presence. Tanaka’s experience of the powerful sensation quickly translates into a disappointment that renders his fantasy unsustainable, literally nauseating him. Real life has intruded on his imaginings not, as it may seem to do for readers (who are reminded by the narrator of the reality that the story is a fiction), as a matter of awareness or cognition, but through visceral contact whose physiological dimensions lead to an emotional state contrary to his original arousal.

Like the servant in Rashōmon, both Tanaka and O-Kimi find themselves moving in one and then opposite directions toward immoral conduct, as a consequence of affective states brought about by their responses to physical stimuli. In “Green Onions,” however, the kinds of experience that produce these ethically directed affects are deliberately framed as part of the thematic conflict between literary fantasy and reality. The pleasurable fantasies O-Kimi internalized through her reading practices lead her to ignore the real characteristics of others, so that she looks down upon her co-worker and projects an image of Tanaka that leads into a liaison that would violate her own romantic ideals. And it turns out that Tanaka, too, nurtured a complementary fantasy of O-Kimi as a reader of the literary ideals he projected—an image of her enraptured naivety and willingness to sacrifice reality for the sake of the fantasy he represented.

In the end, however, affective responses to the reality represented by the bunch of green onions prove more powerful than either of their romanticized projections. “In O-Kimi’s happy heart, which until that moment had been intoxicated with love and art, latent real life woke from its torpid slumber.” (23) O-Kimi’s response abruptly reminds readers that her fantasies take place within the province of a reality that conditions them. Even the most meager pleasures that real life offers trump those spun from her reading practices. In other words, potboiler literature, on whose conventions the story itself both plays and relies, offers only a flimsy and insubstantial version of the reality that proves to have had a kind of latent presence in the background of her fantasy all along—perhaps not unlike “Green Onions” readers’ consciousness that they are willfully participating in an illusion.

Unlike O-Kimi’s potboilers, however, which parade as sincere and moving works of refined sensibilities, “Green Onions” identifies itself as hastily written potboiler fiction from the
start. This reflexive move foregrounds the questions that it asks of the genre, and perhaps
literature in general (the more melodramatic works of some canonical “literary” authors such as
Shimazaki Tōson can also be found in her collection). Can popular literary writing offer
anything beyond thin fantasies and transient pleasures for readers? Do the reading practices it
invites necessarily translate into the same kind of self-serving projections and fantasies of others
that they do in the thematically represented world of the work? Are literary ideals at best
dangerously distracting from real-world circumstances, and at worst deceptive and solipsistic?
These questions are far from “merely” rhetorical in Akutagawa’s work; in fact, much of
his writing wrestles with them at great length and from various angles. What distinguishes
“Green Onions” from his previous works is the metaliterary self-consciousness with which it
raises them, and its willingness to dispel the very mimesis upon which it would seem to depend
for its effects. “Green Onions” ends with a further intrusion by the narrator. Following the
description of Tanaka’s disillusionment and O-Kimi’s banal bliss, we encounter a graphic line, a
bookend to one that sets off prefatory remarks about the Akutagawa narrator’s need to write the
story quickly for economic reasons, that symbolizes our crossing from the representation of the
story to the reality of its narrative framing.

The narrator here plays on the double valence of the divide between the self-conscious
frame of the story and the “reality” of the world he constructs, in one breath marking it all as a
fiction concocted for a deadline, and in the next describing a feeling of deep depression because
of the concern he has developed for the protagonist of the story, as though she were a real agent
beyond his control. The suggestion here of course is that even when literary representation is not
mistaken for “reality,” the affect generated by our attention to literary characters has a very real
dimension that can overcome even the writer himself.

Of course, this “real” dimension, on the other side of the dividing line, still occurs within
the fictional frame of the work, in the representation of the Akutagawa-narrator’s response to his
own writing. “Green Onions” nests its acknowledgements of the illusory qualities of such claims
in further pretences toward establishing their validity, foregrounding and playing upon the
problems intrinsic to novelistic mimesis and creating that ambivalent tension between ethos and
pathos that, as we have seen, characterizes his earlier fiction as well. The metaliterary approach
of this story, however, frames these problems in a way that directly addresses the question
Vogler asks of literary representation: can it tell us anything of real life ethics?

For Vogler, the answer is no, because literary representations of characters are merely
aesthetic devices designed to produce the illusion of personhood. “Green Onions,” however,
complicates the question first by creating its own literary effects not simply through that illusion,
but by exposing that illusion, effectively undertaking the theoretical work that Vogler herself
accomplishes. Moreover, “Green Onions” throws into question Vogler’s assumptions about the
epistemic divide between literature and real life by dramatizing the way that real life itself may consist in negotiating between fictional projections and real situations.

Akutagawa grants Vogler’s objection that literary reality cannot substitute for real experience. The text culminates, in fact, with the contrast between the anemic fantasies of the characters and the powerful smell of real life. Fiction cannot attain the kind of substantive, immediate presence of green onions; it cannot represent reality except as a fiction. However, this is not to say that Akutagawa therefore satisfies himself with the kind of thin and formulaic imaginings represented by potboiler fantasy in “Green Onions,” or that the situations modeled in his literature have no “real” ethical value. On the contrary, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Akutagawa’s writing aimed at “transcending the vulgarity of spectator” in order to bring readers into ethically transformative experiences of literary affect.

In his earlier fiction, Akutagawa accomplishes this by setting up parallels between the ethical situations of protagonists and the experience of working through the aesthetics of his narration. In “Green Onions” and later texts, Akutagawa still deliberately pits pathos against ethos—the affective appeal of the stories told against the self-conscious frame that pretends to finer sensibilities than those of the hapless characters. However, in the later work this self-consciousness intensifies into metaliterary reflexivity that does not merely parallel the narrative and story levels, putting readers in positions resonant with those that the characters face. Instead, “Green Onions” collapses story and narrative levels by making the narrative frame part of the story told. “Green Onions” is the story of its own writing at the same time that it is O-Kimi’s tale. It is a fiction about how realities are constituted by acts of fiction-making, and the embedded story possesses no more or less “reality” for us than the clearly fictionalized story of its telling. Every apprehension of reality represented in “Green Onions” proves at least partly constituted by fiction: the characters view themselves and each other through fictionalizing projections, the narrator self-consciously represents the characters as fictions under his thumb, and the narrator’s own claims that the story aims only at completion by a deadline prove part of a fictional posture belied by the carefully constructed tensions between story and narrative, reality and fiction.

The narrator’s claims to having been pressured by economic reality into generating the fantasy, on the one hand, and having been emotionally moved by the fantasy anyway, on the other, situate him in an inverse relationship to his heroine. O-Kimi begins willingly participating in a literary fantasy only to lose her emotional involvement in the narrative she imagined for herself as a result of the awakening of her latent practical sensibilities. The worldviews of both dramatic agents turn out to be determined by their complementary oscillations between reality and fantasy, between the affect generated by literary representation and the felt demands of everyday life. In my chapter on Mori Ōgai’s novella “The Wild Geese” (1914), I argued that Ōgai engages readers in an oscillation between an ethics of reading and an ethics while reading—between attention to the ethical dynamics of the story told and self-conscious reflection on the ethics implied by the literary mode of its telling. Akutagawa thematizes this very oscillation, so that the plot of the story itself describes the double-consciousness Ōgai sought to produce in his audience through formal innovation and self-conscious narration. The intensification of metaliterary reflexivity in Akutagawa’s writing results in a concomitant intensification of a dimension of literary representation that for Ōgai always remained subordinate to conscious reflection: affect.
What moves both O-Kimi and Tanaka are their fantasies of the other. In both cases, however, it is clear that the fantasy works in the service of a vision of the self through the romanticized eyes of that other: each wants to see the self as an idealized object of literary affection. This would seem to bear out an argument Derrida and other deconstructionists make about affect in their reworking of continental philosophy. Rei Terada, in Feeling in Theory, explains that for Derrida, even the physiological dimensions of affective response, to which continental philosophers have been inclined to attribute “immediacy” and “self-presence,” are characterized by a kind of second-order projection of alterity. She argues that in Derrida’s view, every affect is already a “representation” that takes place through the domain of sociality, an inward interpretation of sensory experience based on a projected social identity in which the self apprehends itself as seen by others. On this view, even in the most private moments of our affective lives, in our responses not only to others directly but to anything that moves us, we interpret and engage the social world vis-à-vis our conversion of the experience of phenomena into signs of distinctly social significance that we then manifest in our emotions. Affect proves the domain through which we translate personal experience into an emotional “language” of shared values.

For Derrida, affect emerges as “emotion” when this interpretation is staged as interpretation and directed toward others: “Emotions emerge only through the acts of interpretation and identification by means of which we feel for others” (73). This staging process has ethical valence for Derrida in part because, as Paul de Man explains, it constitutes the very possibility of recognition that allows ethically salient feelings like sympathy or pity to take shape in attitudes or relations. “Pity, the arch passion in Rousseau, is itself, as Derrida has very well perceived, inherently a fictional process that transposes an actual situation into a world of appearance, of drama and literary language” (75). On this view, we need not concern ourselves with Vogler’s argument that literature cannot represent real-life ethical situations, because in real life we arrive at ethics only through a process of fictionalization that construes the actual as though it were in fact “literary.”

“Green Onions” underscores the theatricality of the staging of emotions, perhaps most obviously in O-Kimi’s private but thoroughly stylized performance of sympathy for the fictional character of the novel she read. Moreover, the text points out the ethical dangers that fantasies about our own emotional lives might pose without self-conscious attention to the fictionalized dimensions of that staging—that is, the dangers of sentimentality. Sentimentality, in Terada’s reading of deconstructive theories, is the name we give to emotional responses that refuse to recognize the performative nature of affect and persist in delusions of unself-conscious and unmediated orientation toward others. In “Green Onions” O-Kimi’s sentimentality underscores a willful blindness to the performative quality of her own feelings, a blindness that extends to her failure to recognize others as anything more than elements in the drama in which she acts as heroine.

Through its refraction of O-Kimi’s self-deceptive feelings into the ironic, self-conscious emotional response of her narrator to those feelings, “Green Onions” allegorizes its own

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79 Akutagawa’s self-conscious thematization of literary affect, as the domain in which personal response shapes itself in social terms, therefore offers itself as the ideal field of representation for his effort to make the epistemic leap from private individual experience of the world to something like social ethics.

80 We shall see that this inversion of the real and fictional in the treatment of affect precipitates the devastating crisis in his final writing.
translation of O-Kimi’s sentimentality into literary pathos, which characterizes literary affect par excellence. Pathos is a second-order emotion, a feeling about the representation of feeling, specifically an “emotion for another” (23). Pathos is opposed to sentimentality in that pathos presumes distance from an original, generative emotion (which on deconstructionist and, I argue, Akutagawa’s views may be no more than self-deceptive illusion) whose immediacy and authenticity sentimentality refuses to question.

For Terada, de Man’s Allegories of Reading presents itself as a paradigmatic exposé of sentimentality, which de Man discusses as “ostensible pathos,” connected in his view to “entirely thematic readings” and the idea that “keenly affecting texts must be based in the real—in real, not fictive, emotions” (48). Ostensible pathos, in de Man’s view, is an illusion produced by the “reality-effect” of literary representation, a kind of self-deception in which one construes the affective response to literary representation as a manifestation of irreducibly “real” character. This “ostensible pathos” is what O-Kimi feels for the suffering heroine of the work she reads, and what translates into the projections about her own life that lead her to misrecognize others and, critically, herself. “Green Onions” exposes the ethical stakes and illusory nature of literary reality-effects and the affects those projections generate, so that the text reads as an allegory of the reading processes it seems to invite.

In de Man’s view, “any narrative is the allegory of its own reading,” and therefore about the “appearance of its own undoing” (76). Akutagawa’s reflexive framing of the problems of literary reading in “Green Onions,” however, distinguishes its allegorical function as self-theorizing. Through its attention to the effects of literary affect on both character and narrator, “Green Onions,” like Allegories of Reading, makes us cognizant of the misrecognition that gives way to sentimentality in literature: what de Man calls the tendency to construe pathos as ethos. Nietzsche, on whom de Man draws to elaborate his theory of literary pathos, explains that pathos always masquerades as ethos for those in its embrace: “We always assume that it is the only state that is possible and reasonable for us and… an ethos and not a pathos” (317). In other words, as in the case of O-Kimi, feelings give rise to the belief that they are grounded in real, not second-order, emotions. The ironic critical project of “Green Onions” is to point out the way these “real” feelings are based upon literary representations; this is true for the feelings of all dramatic agents in the work, including the narrator—and, inevitably, for readers themselves. Through the division between story and frame embodied in the bookending graphic lines, Akutagawa marks the distinction between the literary pathos and narrative ethos that sentimental reading would take as one. Moreover, the text challenges us to undertake the difficult theoretical work of accounting for our own affective responses in the absence of any epistemologically grounding reality-effect. What is there to move us in a blatantly allegorical tale of a character who exists merely to put food on the narrator’s table?

If even supposedly primary and physiological affective responses prove refracted through expressly literary representations, then the ethics modeled by Akutagawa’s fiction may have “real” ethical import precisely because of its self-consciously fictional status. That is, the fictional “Green Onions” may be truer to life than Vogler assumes literature can be precisely because real life involves negotiating the relationship between fictive ideals and reality. By presenting itself as fiction rather than creating an illusory air of reality, “Green Onions” paradoxically takes one step closer to the real. This possibility does not reverse the assumptions of Vogler’s argument (that literary representations of real life can never exceed their aesthetic dimensions as there-for-us objects), but leaves the question she poses more open than Vogler herself believes. For Akutagawa actually agrees with Vogler that literature does not model real-
life ethical situations, and that the particularity of literary representation cannot be universalized into general ethical principals or schema. Taking literary representation as real life models for behavior is exactly what O-Kimi and Tanaka do in this story, to unfortunate and potentially injurious effects. Yet “Green Onions” leaves us with the impression that what we take for reality may itself be constituted by fiction, and that it has no less power really to move us for that fictionality. As in deconstructionist accounts, literary pathos, defined as an emotion “for another,” may in fact be more “real” than the specific and presumably primary emotions (pity or infatuation, for example) that give rise to it, because it is the condition of our recognition and construction of emotions toward others from our affective responses. “Green Onions” may engage the real, social world all the more for its apparently self-absorbed refusal of the reality-effect that would seem necessary to ground its affect in real-world relations.

It appears that “Green Onions” maintains the same kind of tension between pathos and ethos as Akutagawa’s earlier work—the pathos of its self-conscious allegorization in O-Kimi’s oscillation between reality and fantasy, on the one hand, and the ethos of its ironic portrait of the narrator’s oscillation between reflexive undoings of the tale’s mimesis and his repeated insistences on its “really” compelling emotional appeal, on the other. In the end, however, the text appears to subsume its pathos within the ethos it generates, crossing back to the authorial side of the dividing line with its conclusion. This is not to say it misrecognizes pathos as ethos, as in the kind of sentimentality it lampoons. Rather, it insists that we recognize that pathos as a literary effect in the service of a narrative ethos which itself proves a fictional trope of the story. “Green Onions” thus does not merely offer an allegory of reading, but also undoes the possibility of straightforward thematic reading—much as de Man theorizes Rousseau’s Julie to work by foregrounding questions of authorship and authenticity in its prefaces. De Man finds Julie an “allegory of unreadability” in which

the imperatives of truth and falsehood oppose the narrative syntax and manifest themselves at its expense. The concatenation of truth and falsehood within the values of right and wrong is disrupted, affecting the economy of narration in decisive ways. We can call this shift in economy ethical, since it indeed involves a displacement from pathos to ethos. Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems. The ethical category is imperative to the extent that it is linguistic and not subjective... Ethics (or one should say, ethicity) is one discursive mode among others. (206)

81 Apropos of de Man’s suggestion that irony is the “reversed mirror-image” of allegory, the narrator’s emotional stance toward his story inverts O-Kimi’s own emotional stance toward literature. De Man’s concluding remarks on irony in Schlegel capture the effects of the narrator’s self-conscious exposure of the fictionality of “Green Onions:”

[Irony] is the permanent parabasis of allegory.... Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological conditions.... As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration. (301)

By suspending us between the allegory of the narrated story and the irony of its narrative frame, “Green Onions” seems ultimately a “deconstructive” response to the epistemic crisis of literary self-consciousness.
De Man locates ethics squarely in the domain of reading practices raised by the self-conscious reference to authorship in the preface of the text. For him, ethics does not concern the will of a subject or the relationship between subjects so much as it represents a “linguistic category,” or “one discursive mode among others.” It manifests itself as a “shift in the economy of narration” that disrupts conventional associations of truth and falsehood with right and wrong, and instead confronts readers with the “linguistic aporia” that results from the displacement of conventional reading practices that the “allegory of unreadability” enacts (206).

In “Green Onions,” Akutagawa flushes out a concept of ethics as a domain of literary language and affect rather than a rational or behavioral domain by disrupting the readability of the tale itself. Even at the most essential physiological level, that of affective response, the worldviews and stances of his subjects toward one another prove thoroughly mediated by literary representation (the characters view each other on distinctly literary terms and the narrator literally possesses the power to subject his heroine to ethical or unethical treatment by virtue of his literary writing). That all of the dramatic agents are framed as fictional representations themselves does not make them unavailable for ethical inquiry as Vogler suggests. Rather, it renders them allegories of de Manian “ethnicity,” figures of human subjects as linguistic beings for whom reading practices prove constitutive.

Insofar as the text reproduces the deconstructive move of de Manian ethical inquiry, it does not answer Vogler’s question so much as it takes it upon itself the theoretical task of “articulating the perplexity” that ethical inquiry itself supposedly accomplishes. Even in his most tightly structured and formally controlled literary works, Akutagawa does not create particular ethical or aesthetic effects so much as he both reproduces and embroils readers in the very “perplexity” of the interrelationship of ethics and aesthetics in literature. The self-consciously theoretical dimensions of these effects surface in his earlier work as reflexive remarks and prefaces by narrators that put ethics and aesthetics in irresolvable tension. In “Green Onions,” it expands into a full-blown metaliterary structure in which a fictionalized narrator reflects on the writing of the story we read. And in his last writings, the metaliterary self-consciousness culminates in a totaling collapse of discursive structures that results in the fragmentation of the very form and style of his language itself. “Cogwheels” and “A Fool’s Life” go considerably farther than “Green Onions’s” ironic representation of fictional characters whose blindness to the difference between real life and literary representation threatens their integrity. In the late quasi-autobiographical works, the integrity of the narration itself is threatened by the disintegration of the divide separating the literary and the real, a disintegration so totalizing that subsequent scholarship has since struggled with the complex task of distinguishing the author from his act of self-representation.

Akutagawa’s “A Fool’s Life” opens famously with the protagonist atop a ladder in the Maruzen bookstore (famous for its abundance of translated works), surrounded by books. According to Carole Cavanaugh, it is through this self-representative “Portrait of the Writer as a Young Reader” that “Akutagawa draws us into his reading, its procedures and effects” (152). Cavanaugh emphasizes the foreignness of the books which constitute our entrance into the world of the work, arguing that for Akutagawa “the creation of this persona depended on his participation in other, usually foreign, texts. Akutagawa’s subjective response to the writing of others was the process through which he achieved subjectivity in writing about himself” (152). She reads the work in terms of an anxiety of influence she finds intrinsic not only to the narrating persona and Akutagawa himself, but also to the literary, cultural and political situation of Japan:
“The reader-to-writer relationship he constructs in *Aru aho no issho* is correlative to Japan’s status vis-à-vis the West: Europe and America authored the modern era, Japan decoded its categories of discourse. His ambivalence is both cultural and personal: like Japan in the Taishō era, he is the insatiable reader of a foreign canon, anxiously on the verge of writing his own text” (153). For Cavanaugh, the dizzying and destructive self-consciousness of the protagonist occurs through contact with the cultural Other that the West represents; she reads the “breakdown” the protagonist experiences as a matter of cultural self-awareness, rather than as a crisis precipitated by Akutagawa’s past literary explorations of reflexivity, ethics, identity, and literary representation.82

In her assumption that an “anxiety of influence” is at work in the *authorship* of the text, rather than as an intentional topic of representation, Cavanaugh authorizes a psychologized interpretation of the novella. She places Akutagawa at “the verge of writing his own text,” even though *both author and narrated persona* complete that act of writing.83 Contrary to this claim, I argue that the anxiety of this work does not stem so much from the persona’s inability to create original literature as it does from the problematic relation to himself and to the real which his self-reflective writing opens up, and the consequences this poses for his relationships to others. As the first scene in the bookstore emphasizes, the world is always already a textualized one for the narrator, which puts him in the complex metaliterary position of being not only reader, but also simultaneously written self and creator of that self, as well as creator of the textual reality it inhabits. This goes some way towards explaining the terrifying potency of symbols for him, since they are no less “real” than reality itself in this metaliterary world (which is why his encounter with “A Stuffed Swan,” as the symbol of the chapter of the work in which he appears, brings him to the brink of madness or suicide). Through the act of writing, he appropriates the (fearful) potential to author his own life, literally insofar as he writes “A Fool’s Life.” The narrator thus confronts an overwhelming existential crisis: if he is author of his own world, on what ground does he exist as a subject? What room is there for any kind of genuine relationship to others that is not merely a projection of the self? Cursed with the recognition of his capacity for self-representation, he is haunted by the futility of his efforts to “realize” himself through art, and finds himself at the mercy of a world, ostensibly of his own creation, always threatening to collapse into solipsism.84

In this textual and overwhelmingly subjective reality, *pathos* and *ethos* have become indistinguishable—not because of a sentimentality that mistakes *pathos* for *ethos*, but because there are no ontological or epistemic grounds for distinguishing the *ethos* of narrative perspective from the *pathos* of its representations of consciousness and affect. For perhaps the first time in Akutagawa’s fiction, the narration does not even make pretenses toward emotional distance from the story it represents. The split between the representing and represented subjectivities does not open up room for reflection or irony so much as it signifies a deep internal self-alienation, one that translation into literary representation fails to sublimate into the closure of a socially-

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82 The “Other” is in quotes for Cavanaugh because she is borrowing the term from other (psychological) discourses (she even refers to it as the “unconscious ‘Other’” at one point). It is in quotes for me, however, because I strenuously object to the widespread misapplication of the capitalized term to represent cultural difference, however foreign and implicated in the formation of identity it may be.

83 See analysis of “A Stuffed Swan” below.

84 This is where Miyamoto Kenji gets Akutagawa’s relation to “life” somewhat topsy-turvy— he sees Akutagawa as somehow “outside” life in an elitist space he tried to carve for himself, rather than trapped within the language and textuality which constitutes it, overwhelmed not only by the endless possibilities of signification but also the moral vacuity of reference without any grounding, transcendental signified to anchor it in “truth” or the “real.”
oriented telos. Whereas in his earlier works he explores the capacity of literary affect to provide the kinds of emotional intensities necessary for making the epistemic leap from the subjective experience of individual consciousness into some kind of projected social identity, his last writing follows this process through to a frightening conclusion. If aesthetics proves a means of entry into the ethical because it models the kinds of purposive structures through which sensation can develop into meaningful identificatory stances that situate the self really in relation to others, what ethical possibilities exist for a self that has lost faith in the very category of telos that gives aesthetics meaning? Put another way, if an ethical project of literature is to bring the self into felt awareness of the way its affective responses commit it to certain ethical positions (in his early writing), or the way aesthetic interpretive practices translate into real world ethical practices (in “Green Onions”), what happens when the self becomes too conscious of these processes to “believe” in the world of the work and feel moved by the representations of alterity (nani mono ka) that can supposedly transport it beyond the limits of its self-projections? From a perspective where ethos has collapsed into pathos and that productive, unsettling tension between the two can no longer be felt as the result of aesthetic orchestration, what room exists for the “poetic spirit” that defines the novel as such to manifest itself and move readers?

For the narrator, self-consciousness followed through to its logical conclusion results in a radical questioning of reality and a loss of faith in any kind of stable subjective identity. It is not that he is no longer capable of being moved by aesthetic encounters—quite the contrary, the narrators of “A Fool’s Life” and “Cogwheels” are more sensitive to stimuli than any Akutagawa protagonist, and find themselves gripped by feelings of alienation, excitement, despair, and, more vaguely, “intensity” or monotony as a result of encounters with various people, objects, or environments. However, these encounters do not add up into any kind of meaningful portrait of selfhood, or provide means of identifying with others. The narrator cannot sustain faith in the meaning of these encounters or even the exemplary texts he reads (the Bible and Dostoyevsky feature prominently), and fails to apprehend his affective responses as anything more than temporary sensations incapable of transcending the solipsism of his self-consciousness.

The threatening nani mono ka that pervades these final texts refuses any productive marshalling of sensation into identifications or stances toward others that might bring the self into the realm of the social. It also proves a destructive and even malevolent force that exists in a purely negative relation to the self. Although occasionally “tantalizing” the narrators with promises of salvation through mercifully restorative images or soothing colors that he encounters, more often than not some all-encompassing force seems to manipulate his world, leading him into repeated encounters with portentous objects or words that fatally fray his nerves. Critics such as Sakamoto Toshihiko have readily pointed out that the narrator of “Cogwheels,” perhaps like his author, suffers from a kind of paranoia in which hallucinations or random encounters get read as “signs” that lead him further into madness. Yet unlike a classic paranoiac, he suffers not so much from his misinterpretation of phenomena as intentional “signs,” but rather from an acute awareness of the failure of all such interpretations to produce a meaningful account of his life—a problem that has obvious metaliterary consequences for the author of an autobiography. Encounters tantalize him with possible significances that ultimately refuse to form coherent patterns, conspiratorial or otherwise. His “breakdown” is a failure of faith in the kind of sustained narrative that would render those experiences significant—by his account, even his most powerfully felt emotions and affects amount to nothing more than the discrete sensations of a body no longer held together by its imaginative projection of itself as a unified or social being.
The body in these final works has become “all nerves” (shinkei), and reacts helplessly to stimuli without any organizing or unifying conception of identity. The appearance of wallpaper or debris on the ground and the reverberation of distant voices can send the narrators spiraling into despair or soaring into confident, though fleeting, euphoria. Direct contact with others almost always sends them into extremes of one mood or another without relation to the others’ intentions, as though the narrators were reacting to something more physiological than the intentional acts of interpersonal communication. It is in the midst of such experiences that the late narrators are most likely to feel the presence of the nani mono ka, which the narrator discusses directly in “Cogwheels:”

“A— Sensei” -- that was for me at this time the unhappiest phrase. I believed that I had committed all kinds of crimes. And yet on any occasion they kept calling me “Sensei.” I could not help but feel in this a nani mono ka laughing at me. Nani mono ka? And yet my materialism would could only refuse such mysticism. Just three months earlier I had published these words in a small literary journal: “I have nothing like an artistic conscience, or any kind of conscience at all. What I have is only nerves. (52-53)

The narrator experiences an intense moral guilt (guilt over his extramarital affair especially haunts him throughout these last works) in response to the way he is identified by others and interpolated into the exemplary social position of Sensei. The irony of the disjunction between his inner awareness of personal transgressions against the social order and his public identity as a renowned author lead to his experience of a threatening otherness, one that overshadows the good will of the student who speaks to him. The narrator’s response to this feeling of guilt ties affect and morality together, only to deny both any positive role in his life. He says that his rational skepticism rejects belief in this nani mono ka, even though its presence in the narrative as an affective force is undeniable—in the same way, perhaps, that his declarations that he lacks a conscience are belied by the repeated emphasis on his feelings of guilt throughout the narrative. In the same stroke that the narrator refuses the organizing ethical schema available to a conscience, he also refuses the powers of consciousness and the imagination to assign significance to affective experience, breaking it down into mere sensations of a body that consists only of “nerves.” In response to the negative affect, the narrator attempts to deny not any particular guilt per se but, far more radically, the existence of any transcendental ground of social identity—and therefore forecloses the possibility of transcending the limits of subjectivity and forming meaningful social relations or grounding the identity of the self in anything beyond itself.

His guilt leads to coldness in his response to the student who hails him as Sensei (the narrator simply walks away from him). The stiffness of this response and his guilt-driven scorn of the naïveté of those who call him “Sensei” play on the parallel between Akutagwa and the fictional “Sensei” of the novel Kokoro by Akutagawa’s own teacher, Natsume Sōseki (who also figures prominently in “A Fool’s Life,” especially in a chapter suggestively entitled “Sensei’s Death”). In Kokoro, the student narrator arbitrarily chose the term “Sensei” to designate a man he befriended, a man painfully suffering from guilt over a moral crime against someone close to him, who expressed considerable chagrin at the irony of the narrator’s admiration and the appellation “Sensei.” Like Akutagawa, Sensei also wrote an autobiographical narrative which he sent to a friend shortly before committing suicide—a letter in which he attempted to pass on the story of his life to the one person, apparently following in his footsteps, with whom such a connection might be possible (in a manner similar to Akutagawa’s professed sense, in “A Fool’s
Life,” that only the few close to him who had lived similar lives might understand his work), and whom he could not manage to tell directly. Sensei, also like the late Akutagwa narrators, had lost faith in the value of living, and the narrative he constructs represents an effort to let his death serve as an organizing principle through which meaningful communication might finally become possible. Yet whereas discussions of Sensei’s suicide almost always touch on this outward-reaching communicative effort, and tend to invoke his theory of social ethics and his struggle with a guilty conscience, discussions of the endings of Akutagawa’s last two works, both of which intimate his yearning for death, tend to frame his end as a fatal inward turn, a failure of creative power, loss of “faith in art,” or a matter of mental health and his ability to write and think coherently about his life.

We have seen, however, that throughout his career Akutagawa explored the possibility that the inward turn of reflexive literature could constitute an other-directed move insofar as it brought readers into felt self-consciousness vis-à-vis the way literary aesthetics may engage us in ethical stances through our affective responses. In “Green Onions” he allegorizes the situation, self-consciously dispelling the reality-effect that leads to unself-conscious fantasizing and ethical blindnesses in his characters. The irony in that text is that real life turns out to be constituted by the same kinds of fictions the text supposedly eschews through its self-conscious gesture; even the intrusion of “reality” at the end proves no more (or less) than literary affect. “A Fool’s Life” and “Cogwheels” follow this ironic self-consciousness through to its metaliterary conclusion: self-conscious recognition of the essential fictionality of life leads his protagonists to despair of any transcendental ground for organizing their aesthetic experience in meaningful ways. Everything appears as mere representation; “politics, work, art, and science” feel like nothing more than a veneer of lies, a “multicolored enamel” sealing the narrator from the mechanisms of human interrelationship (55).

The despair of his characters has generally been attributed to the author as well, and for good reasons. Akutagawa indeed despaired of life and committed suicide soon after writing these texts. “A Fool’s Life” and “Cogwheels” present themselves as records of the breakdown of a reflexive consciousness unable to escape from the prison-house of language. Nervous, disrupted prose constructs an unstable reality always threatening to collapse into linguistic aporia. The texts break from the signature stylistic mastery and tightly controlled plot structures of his early work into highly fragmented vignettes, disjunctive ellipses and shifts in both tone and scene that seem to betray an authorial consciousness unable to create sustained narrative or distinguish between art and life, literature and biography. Seiji Lippit, in his book Topographies of Japanese Modernism, writes that the moment of self-reference in “A Stuffed Swan” exemplifies Akutagawa’s own “failure” to bring resolution to his writing. The passage shows, he argues, an “inability to maintain the distinction between art and life. . . . [T]here is an inevitable excess, as the work continues. The passage reflects Akutagawa’s ultimate inability to provide closure to the work, which remains essentially open, unfinished” (53).

The lack of closure in this work, however, may be more an irreducible problem of the kind of reflexive consciousness that Akutagawa deliberately explored, rather than just the sign of an “inability” on the part of its author. The “inability to maintain the distinction between life and art” powerfully characterizes the experience of the narrated persona of the work, for whom those boundaries are in fact expressly described as collapsing (he “sees” Van Gogh in the street after being amazed by the “life” in his art). But the portrait of the breakdown of these boundaries seems all too cognizant of the difference, carefully tracing the numerous times its narrative

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85 See page 43 below for the Akutagawa narrator’s hopes that his writing will communicate with an intimate few.
persona hallucinates or projects its fantasies onto the real in ways that clearly demarcate the two while powerfully rendering the narrated persona’s inability to do so. The supposed failure to provide “closure,” furthermore, finds itself made an explicit object of inquiry when the narrator specifically described as having finished “A Fool’s Life:”

He knew not everyone would be moved by a work of art. There was no reason to expect that those his work would affect would be anyone other than those close to him who had lived lives close to his own—this feeling was at work in him. For that reason, he decided he must briefly try writing his own “Poetry and Truth.”

After he finished writing “A Fool’s Life,” he happened across a stuffed swan in a used stationery store. Although it stood with its head held high, its yellowed wings had been eaten through by insects. He thought of his own life, and felt the brimming of both tears and a cold smile. What lay before him was only madness or suicide. On his sunset return as he walked by himself, he decided to wait with acceptance for the fate that would come to obliterate him. (16: 65)

The projection of closure here embodies the displacement that occurs through the narrator’s reflection. “A Fool’s Life,” once it reflects on itself as a literary object, can never simply be the text on which it reflects, because that very reflection implies supplementary awareness or realization. It displaces itself, and the possibility of its “closure,” in the very self-conscious gesture through which it attempts to imagine itself as a closed, coherent structure. Unlike his past works, in which self-conscious narrative frames present more conventional literary stories, Akutagawa’s final writings internalize that self-consciousness; the narrated personae themselves appear aware of their own fictionality (as both textual and epistemic condition) in ways that O-Kimi, for example, does not. They consciously confront the metadiegetic problem of providing closure to a work that literally sustains their existence, and find themselves led inexorably toward death as the only means of uniting literary and real “life.”

Criticism that reduces these texts’ confrontation of this paradox and its deathward impetus to artistic or psychological failure on the part of the author tends to focus on way the narrative jumps from experience to experience, on the despair it expresses that his life (and representation of that life) amount to no more than a decaying stuffed swan, or on his lament about the inefficacy of the reach of his work, to prove its merely symptomatic qualities. Yet this and other passages’ purposeful and repeated concerns with literary affect (the capacity of literature to move individuals, his own emotional response to the swan) and semblance (with its repeated use of no yō na and mitai na (“like,” “resembling”), as in people like the narrator, a biography like “Poetry and Truth,” and the swan like his life) reveal a carefully structured representation of the thematic absorption with the relationship of affect and literature that we have seen even in his earliest and most carefully structured works. It is striking that a work supposedly characterized by an “inability to provide closure” should tie themes explored throughout Akutagawa’s career to a final act of self-representation that involves both literal and metaphoric closure—in the act of finishing the story of his life and walking off into the sunset in anticipation of the penultimate form of closure itself. The proleptic projection of the closure of the text suggests the relevance of Cavanaugh’s observation that Akutagawa portrays himself as reader—not of others’ writing, however, but of his own work. His self-reading here situates him in a position of simultaneous proximity and distance to his own narrative representation, one reflected in the mixed response he feels on reflecting on his own autobiographical work—the affected tears and detached smile. This response internalizes the tension between sympathy and
detachment that we have seen thematized in so many of his earlier stories. What appears as possible modes of responding to literary representations of alterity in previous works here becomes the condition of the narrator’s interior self-consciousness. Rather than oscillating or leading readers to oscillate between these possible stances, in this text the narrator experiences them simultaneously; the division between these contrasting literary affects has become constitutive of a subject no longer represented in a trajectory leading to some kind of cohesive social identity. Instead, we find the literary subject of these last writings irreparably divided by the self-consciousness intrinsic to his efforts to represent himself—a division embodied by the unbridgeable gap between representing and represented selves in the genre of autobiography itself.86

In self-consciously employing the autobiographical form, Akutagawa juxtaposes the existential crises of his narrators and the epistemic problems intrinsic to literary representation as co-extant crises of self-consciousness that prevent authentic self-realization. He appears to have at his disposal only the kinds of solipsistic self-projections through which O-Kimi sustained her dreary existence, but none of the faith O-Kimi had in the reality of those imaginings. The only kind of authenticity his self-representations can achieve paradoxically consists in the representation of the inevitable failure of his efforts to transcend the limits of subjectivity through literary representation:

At the age of twenty-nine, life no longer held any light for him. Yet Voltaire was able to supply him with artificial wings.

He spread these artificial wings and easily soared into the sky. At the same time, the joys and sorrow of the world, bathed in the light of reason, disappeared beneath his eyes.

Dropping ironies and smiles down upon the miserable towns below him, he climbed straight toward the sun, through a sky without obstacles. As though he had forgotten the ancient Greek whose same artificial wings had been burnt by the sun, and who had in the end plunge to his death in the sea. . . . (Lippit, 249-250)

He soars above the fallen world only “as though” he had forgotten the Icarus myth, in a self-consciously fictional gesture through which he attempts to will an act of forgetting he cannot actually accomplish (in contrast with O-Kimi’s self-deceptive bliss). The self-consciousness that his artistic flight makes possible keeps him devastatingly conscious of the distance between

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86 The fragmentation and paranoia that feel as though they are threatening the narrator’s existence are of course carefully selected devices on the part of the author himself, who if only for this supplementary self-consciousness can never fully coincide with his represented self. In the segment “Sickness,” the narrator thumbs randomly through a dictionary and comes across the following words:

Talaria: Shoes that have wings growing from them, or sandals
Tale: Story
Tailpot: a palm tree indigenous to East India with a trunk reaching fifty to one hundred feet in height, and the leaves are used for umbrellas, fans, and hats. Its flowers bloom once in seventy years. . . . [my translation] (244)

The first two words are strongly resonant with symbols encountered throughout the text. The wings foreshadow the “Icarus” passage we shall read below, and the English word for story clearly evokes the pervasive preoccupation with authorial activity and fictionality (as well as the anxiety of influence that Cavanaugh overemphasizes in her analysis). Even if the narrator did randomly encounter these terms, however, their inclusion in a narrative that in which they have such clear thematic resonance can only be intentional.
himself and the “real world.” He can offer only “ironies and smiles,” once again invoking the poles of distance and intimacy we have traced in his oeuvre, now coalesced in a bifurcation within the narrator’s own feelings. In this image, the artifice of his literature only serves to further distance him from the social world that occasions these contradictory feelings—a distance that results in a decrease in the affective intensity (“the joys and sorrows of the world, bathed in the light of reason, disappeared beneath his eyes”) that acted as a potentially unifying force in his earlier work. Having taken metaliterary flight into his own artistic creation, his only means of return to the world consists in a deathward fall, a return to a purely physical state of being against the metaphysical dizziness of his intensely reflexive artistic self-consciousness. In this sense, Akutagawa anticipates and complicates Miyamoto’s criticism that he was “trapped in the artificial armor of his writing,” by having the “self” of this work aware of his agency in creating that very predicament, portraying himself held aloft from the world by artificial wings of his own fashioning. The real historical irony of this is that Miyamoto and others were so compelled by this self-conscious portrait of the artist’s failure that they have reproduced it in claims about Akutagawa’s own failure.

That Akutagawa did not succeed in securing a grounded social or ethical identity through his writing should not prevent us from appreciating the value of his insight into the role of affect and the body in literary ethics. Akutagawa pushed Ōgai’s discovery of the interrelation of ethics and aesthetics in the novel much farther than his predecessor, through his attention to the complex relationship between consciousness and the physical dimensions of selfhood. That is, Ōgai held that the amalgam of subjective and objective perspectives embodied by the literary object’s representation of reality constituted its aesthetics. Therefore, the narrative representation of alterity, of what lay beyond the subjective horizon of the narrating perspective, seemed paramount in determining the efficacy of those aesthetics. The ideal novelist in Ōgai’s early thinking could step back from his subjective point of view and apprehend with relative detachment an objective reality, one he would then refine through the fires of his imagination to forge a work of art. The key to aesthetic success consisted in working through the subjectivity of imagination and linguistic expression to represent the autonomous, objective qualities of the world and people described without stifling or distorting them.

The idealism of this pre-1900 aesthetic theory of the novel had its complement in the strong undercurrent of cynicism present in his creative work. From the very start of his career as a literary writer, Ōgai recognized the impossibility of transcending subjectivity. The closest thing to objectivity that the novel could achieve consisted in its exposé of the limitations of its very mode of representation, its confession that the account of reality it gave inevitably co-opted alterity under the false banner of an aesthetic unity that thinly concealed the critical desire of the author. Such was manifestly the case in “Vita Sexualis,” where a self-centered narrator flattens out descriptions of others to produce a literary work, a sexual history of what turns out to be the prudery not of his sexual experience, but of his capacity to represent or relate to others as anything but objects of his own desires.

We see the beginnings of Ōgai’s self-consciousness vis-à-vis narrative form and self-centered desire as early as “The Dancing Girl,” in which the narrator’s purposeful account of his history with Elise attempts to confer the stamp of inevitability on decisions of dubious ethics. Ōgai’s brilliance in that work was to underscore the connection between the ethics of the literary form he employs and the desire that underwrites it. By aiming at an authenticity that consisted in reflexively framing the very gestures through which novels attempt to legitimize the authenticity
of their representations, Ōgai created an illusion of realism whose realism consisted in the exposé of the illusion itself. His last work of pure fiction, “The Wild Geese,” epitomizes this trend I find in Ōgai’s work. The story self-consciously foregrounds the relationship between its own rendering of narrative perspective and the ethical dangers of the kinds of narrative appropriations the novel makes in its representations of others.

For Ōgai, the recognition of the ethics of aesthetic engagement with novels was itself an ethical end, one the novel could offer to readers. As his novels increasingly foregrounded the relationship between truth and fiction, and between the real Ōgai and his literary self-representations, they sought to bring about a self-consciousness that confronted readers with mirrors of the interpretive practices in which they found themselves engaged. This was, for Ōgai, chiefly an intellectual engagement, with intellectual rewards of improved ethical understanding. Akutagawa, however, deeply mistrusted such intellectual satisfactions, as his scathing indictment of complacent philosophers and scholars of ethics or society in “Kappa” and numerous other short stories plainly demonstrates. An inheritor of self-consciousness not as an ethical end but rather a kind of nervous condition of modernity, and a sufferer of depression keenly aware of the impact of the health of the body on states of consciousness, Akutagawa emphasized the role that the body played in determining the identity of the self and the nature of its relations with others. In effect, he sought to translate the analytical self-consciousness of Ōgai’s rational literary ethics into the felt experience of the modern individual.

Like Ōgai, Akutagawa self-consciously worked through literary aesthetics as a means of engaging ethics, but not to bring about ethical improvement through the enlightened understanding that the “mirror” of literature provided. Rather, for Akutagawa, aesthetics presented itself as a venue for effecting ethical transformations because it engages the self in both physiological and cognitive response to the intentional design of a consciousness other than our own. Mind and body are caught up in one experience, the nani mono ka that constitutes the aesthetic effects of a work of art and thus embodies alterity itself. The physiological represented a kind of middle ground between the subjectivity of the self and the objectivity of the physical world. With no other ground of reference for the dizzying abstractions of hyper self-awareness, Akutagawa turned inward toward physiological experience for the means to establish the self as a socially and ethically grounded being.

Through the affective intensity of aesthetic experience, Akutagawa hoped that the sensations of the body and cogitations of the mind could be modulated into the coherence of an identity stance that resulted directly from its rootedness in the external world, and to others. The body acted as a counterweight to the self-indulgent intoxication with the mytho-poetic power of consciousness, a weight that could bring the self plummeting down when those powers reached their limit. The Icarus myth represents the penultimate metaphor for the tension between the perilous flight of the intellect and the pull of the physical toward the collective world represented by the “miserable towns” below.

Balance in Akutagawa’s model of ethical identity was unfortunately not possible; the states of affective intensity that he explored cannot be maintained. One either falls into the doomed misery of physical existence, as the Rashōmon servant did in sacrificing his ethical sense of himself and succumbing to his physical needs, or loses all sense of being grounded in reality, as his late narrators do. The art of living ethically -- that is, for Akutagawa, in some kind of authentic, genuinely reciprocal relationship that honored the needs and autonomy of both the self and others -- would seem to require constant (and exhausting) oscillation between these
extremes. The literary subject in Akutagawa is forever caught in movement up and down the
Maruzen bookstore ladder, between the shabbiness below and artificial light above.

Such oscillation is not coincidentally what we have seen demanded by contemporary
theories of novel ethics, which generally entail a shuttling between sympathetic immersion and
detached reflection. Akutagawa’s literature insists, however, that this is no matter of mere
apprehension or interpretive stance toward novels. On the contrary, such movement is only
possible if indeed the subject is moved by the poetic spirit manifest in the novel. Whereas Ōgai’s
literature seems constantly to pull back from the intensities of subjective experience, self-
consciously framing its representations from increasingly detached and reflexive points of view,
Akutagawa plunges more and more deeply into those intensities. The plots of his stories “break
down” in his later works, as many critics point out, but not the effects of his writing.

“Cogwheels” and “A Fool’s Life” powerfully explore the capacities and limits of literary affect
to breach the “enamel” of self-consciousness separating us from others, and to move us into
different versions of ourselves – the socially recognized “sensei,” the alienated paranoiac, the
guilty lover, the caring husband, etc. – that position us in new ethical relationships.

Akutagawa’s literature invokes affect to mediate between the subjective self and the
alterity it encounters in the literary object, and to translate literary effects into real world identity
stances. In Akutagawa, literary self-consciousness problematizes this process, but it also makes
it possible. Insofar as acute consciousness of the role of fiction in constituting the self and others
in his narration threatens to preclude any kind of authentic relationship (in his literary personae,
the devastating self-conscious awareness that the characters author themselves and “reality”
cannot exist for them beyond the representational powers of consciousness), self-consciousness
problematizes the movement toward ethical and authentic identity supposedly inaugurated
by aesthetic experience. Yet the modern subject of Akutagawa’s writing must experience the felt
self-consciousness of a confrontation with its fundamental condition of alienation or solipsism in
order to move beyond it. This felt self-consciousness is brought about through encounters with
alterity, thematized by the repeated intrusion of a nani mono ka and reproduced by the uncanny
disjunctions between pathos and ethos that move us in ways resonant with the unsettling
experiences of the characters.

The inward turn in modern Japanese literary ethics that this dissertation has begun to
trace, the effort to arrive at ethics through rather than in opposition to self-consciousness and
even self-absorption in the novel, represents a prescient and insightful if incomplete exploration
of the ethical positioning intrinsic to the narrative form of the genre. In the movement from mid-
Meiji work on the ethics of the novel to that of Akutagawa we find an increasing incorporation
of self-consciousness in the form of writing itself. Akutagawa’s narratives take the self-
referential reflection of Ōgai’s last work of fiction as their point of departure, making
metafictional reflexivity increasingly a part of the theme of his works as well as the major mode
of the narrative frames. We find over time an internalization of self-consciousness that appears
exterior to the thematic content of “Rashōmon.” In the early story the narrator comments
obliquely on the method of narration as a means of framing the story he tells. But the fact of
story writing overwhelms the story itself in “Green Onions,” and the autobiographical act, the
effort to achieve some kind of telos through writing, devastatingly becomes the only raison
d’être of both the final works and their narrators, who cannot project any life for themselves
beyond the final lines. As the tangible world and conventional stories of relationships and events
recede from the horizon of Akutagawa’s work, to be replaced by reflexive narrative reflections
on the relationship of life and art, self-consciousness emerges in part as the corporeal, as
physiological response to the sensation of the presence and design of another. The experience of literary affect appears the only means of uniting a body of “nerves” and an alienated consciousness in some kind of coherent ethical identity.

In the decade following Akutagawa’s death, the Japanese writers and critical thinkers who most closely pursued the relationship between ethics and self-consciousness, including Yokomitsu Riichi and Kobyashi Hideo, would attempt to work through reflection on the abstraction of literary language to arrive at some more concrete and tangible theory of literary ethics. In other words, they would attempt to bring full circle the work begun by Ōgai and Akutagawa in exploring self-consciousness by working through it to arrive at something un-self-conscious, more rooted in real life and experience than in the abstractions of literary and theoretical writing. Yokomitsu’s work, especially his long novel Shanghai, establishes parallels between physical and national bodies, and seeks to destroy what he saw as stultification in the language through which we apprehend those bodies in order to allow us to position ourselves in more ethical relationships to them. Kobayashi, in works like “Multiple Designs” and “The Face of the Author,” opposes flesh-and-blood subjectivity to literary representations of bodies and subjects in an effort to work against the regressive self-absorption he found endemic to literary language, while at the same time deliberately employing reflexive literary self-consciousness as a means of imminent critique. Kobayashi’s ethical project, while too complex and fraught with real and apparent contradiction to explain at any length, involved bringing about recognition of the obfuscating force of the language both constitutive and representative of human relationships. His revolutionary and self-consciously meta-critical writing might be said to have culminated a transition from tentatively reflexive literary and academic writing to something more like full blown literary theory.
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