

Rethinking Nature in Japan: From Tradition to Modernity

From Tradition to Modernity

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Nature as a Problematic Concept in Japanese Literature Looking for Reality

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Abstract The outlines of modern Japanese literature were drawn in the 1880s; while strongly influenced by the literary concepts of the West, it also carried on the styles and concepts of premodern literature, creating a revolution in the regulated concept of ‘literature’ in all its aspects from form through content and story. An important part of this was the perspective on ‘nature.’ In his epochal essay on literature, *The Quintessence of the Novel* (published as 9 magazine volumes by Shogetsudo in 1885-86), which proved the beginning of modern Japanese literature in a detailed account covering both literary theory and literary methods, Tsubouchi Shoyo includes the now-famous passage “The pulse of the novel is human affection, to which setting and styles come second. What is human affection? Human passions, the failings to which humans are prone.” Here he argues that the main focus of the novel is to depict ‘human passions,’ as human affection. The issue here is also one of how to describe inner human motivations and awareness down to the last detail, and it is understood here that the concept arises that the fictional mechanism of the novel is able to depict human interior life. This is so-called realism; when we consider its division into the direction of descriptive writing and that of naturalism, the major issue of the awareness of ‘nature’ in Japanese literature arises. In the late Meiji period, that is around the year 1900, the form of literature moved toward “unifying the spoken and written language’, but a diverse variety of forms and expressions were being used. There was no consistent format of notation, idiom, even of punctuation or transliteration of characters. This is a significant issue in the study of Japanese literature. Conversely, one might say that at this period notation, storytelling, the depiction of styles and affections had just that much freedom. This strategic jumble is perhaps what gave rise to the fertile production of modern Japanese literature. Eventually, as a result of all this, the ‘I-Novel’ came to be—it is said to be an original Japanese literary form—and went on to become a stranglehold on writers within the long literary tradition. The major innovations of the late Taisho period, including modernist literature such as the neo-sensualists and proletarian literature as well, also struggled within the grip of this bondage. The “proletarian realism” advocated by Kurahara Korehito was indeed a concept reflecting the issue of the awareness of ‘nature’ within Japanese literature. This presentation will present an overview of the grasp of the multifaceted concept of ‘nature’, discussing how ‘nature’ has been approached in modern Japanese literature and what characteristics of Japanese literature it has formed.



Keywords Nature. Japanese modern literature. Realism.

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tion in the regulated concept of 'literature' in all its aspects from form through content and story. An important part of this was the perspective on 'nature'. In his epochal essay on literature, *Shōsetsu shinzui* 小説神髓 (*The Quintessence of the Novel*, published as nine magazine volumes by Shōgetsudō 松月堂 in 1885-6), which dealt with the beginning of modern Japanese literature in a detailed account covering both literary theory and literary methods, Tsubouchi Shōyō 坪内逍遙 (1859-1935) includes the now-famous passage:

The pulse of the novel is human affection, to which setting and styles come second. What is human affection? Human passions, the failings to which humans are prone. (Tsubouchi 1974, 40-165; 1983)

Here he argues that the main focus of the novel is on depicting 'human passions', such as human affection. This issue regards also the description of inner human motivations and awareness down to the last detail, and it is understood that the fictional mechanism of the novel is able to depict human interior life. This is the so-called realism; when we consider its division into the direction of descriptive writing and that of naturalism, the major issue of the awareness of 'nature' in Japanese literature arises.

In the late Meiji period, that is around the year 1900, the form of literature moved toward 'unifying the spoken and written language', but a diverse variety of forms and expressions were being used. There was no consistent format of notation, idiom, even of punctuation or transliteration of characters. This is a significant issue in the study of Japanese literature. Conversely, one might say that at this period notation, storytelling, the depiction of styles and affections had just much freedom. This strategic jumble is perhaps what gave rise to the fertile production of modern Japanese literature.

In *The Quintessence of the Novel*, Shōyō had already stated that writing a novel was 'applied psychology'.

His characters must be psychologically convincing. Should he contrive to create by his own invention characters at odds with human nature, or worse, with the principles of psychology, those characters would be figments of his imagination rather than human beings, and not even a skilful plot or a curious story could turn what he wrote into a novel. (Tsubouchi 1983)

Nishi Amane 西周 (1829-97), after returning from his study in the Netherlands, opened a private school, the Ikueisha 育英舎, in his home in 1870; he later gave lectures there on the *Encyclopedia* (*Hyakugaku renkan* 『百学連環』, 1870) written by his disciple Nagami Yutaka 永見裕 (1839-1902). These included mentions of psychology. Here Nishi pointed out the division

of science into the intellectual and physical forms, and that of the psyche into the mental, the moral, the spiritual, and the metaphysical ones; he stated that the most important were the non-physical fields of study. In 1875-9 he published a two-volume translation (*Shinrigaku* 心理学) of Joseph Haven's *Mental Philosophy* (1857). This was Shōyō's introduction to psychology. As Toyama Masakazu 外山正一 (1848-1900) was lecturing on psychology in 1877, Shōyō was most likely one of his students. Distinct from these Scottish-derived studies, an American father of psychology was William James (1842-1910), under whose spell Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 (1867-1916) fell. It was 1888 when Motora Yūjirō 元良勇次郎 (1858-1912), a student of G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924) and through him influenced by the father of psychology, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), began lecturing at Tokyo University; Sōseki also paid attention to this cutting-edge field. William James was hired as an educationalist, reflecting the current influence of American pragmatism on Tokyo University. This rapid development of an academic structure fascinated the writers of the earliest period of modern Japanese literature. That is, 'human affection' became the desires of the 'I who is not I' (Mori Ōgai 森鷗外, *Maihime* 舞姫) (Ōgai 1971) deep inside and psychology a significant item in the search for that mechanism.

Here 'the psyche' represents the reality based on human actuality and related to the concept of 'nature'. By connecting the search for the human interior world with literature, a new demand for the grasp of reality was made. Shōyō tells writers to depict human affections rather than styles and settings, but the outside world exists as an influence on the human spirit, and the outer environment is taken as an object in opposition to the spirit. However, around 1900, the modernising process washed by the waves of 'civilising' displayed a scenery of recursive nostalgia. Here, the 'objective description' told through the metaphors of the pictorial method Shōyō promotes to depict objective human affections is applied also to the landscape. The landscape is genuinely discovered. In *Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen* Karatani Kōjin 柄谷行人 writes that the 'landscape' that Shōyō could not see was establishing itself around 1900. As a reason for this, he points out that the landscape that Shōyō's written style could not fully describe being established around 1900 could not be grasped by the topsy-turvy reality of the outer world as the landscape of Shōyō's realism. That is, description was not only depicting the 'outer world' but finding the outer world. It is, he understands, not in opposition to the spirit and the psyche, the human interior world, but something that coexisted with these as a reflection thereof. The wide acceptance of the 'descriptive writing' lauded by Masaoka Shiki 正岡子規 (1867-1902) surely derived from its dramatic connection of the awareness of a grasp of the outer world that traditional literature in the form of short poems had always had, with the 'realisation of the outer world that was suppressed in the modern world. Here landscape is not simply a general word for the outer world, but a

new awareness as a vessel for the spreading of the concept of nature. Karatani writes:

The subject/object locus of awareness theory developed within 'landscape'. That is, it was not there from the beginning, but was derived within 'landscape'. (Karatani 1980)

Going back in time, Sōseki writes the following in his *Shaseibun* 写生文 (Descriptive Writing) of 1907:

The sympathy of the descriptive writer for humanity does not struggle helplessly along with the people described, weeping bodilessly, leaping in the air, or running madly in all directions. It is a sympathy which stands by and watches, full of pity which enfolds a slight smile. It is not cold-blooded. It simply does not scream along with the rest of the world. (Sōseki 2016)

Here Sōseki is explaining the method of objective description in a novelistic description, which is common up to the present day. He is presenting the need to depict human interiors with the same detached method as that of depicting the outer world, for the generation of writers who, as Karatani says, established the difference between *thou* and *I*. This shows that the methodological awareness of landscape as natural description was already established.

However, another significance was being attached to the concept of landscape. In 1888, the Seikyōsha 政教社 group was founded as a criticism of the excessively Europeanising government, and its journal *Nihonjin* 日本人 (The Japanese), later *Nihon oyobi Nihonjin* 日本及日本人 (Japan and the Japanese) was first published. Group members included Shiga Shigetaka 志賀重昂 (1863-1927), Sugiura Jūgō 杉浦重剛 (1855-1924), Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858-1919), and Miyake Setsuryō/Setsurei 三宅雪嶺 (1860-1945). In 1894 Shiga's *Nihon fūkei ron* 日本風景論 (*On the Japanese Landscape*, Seikyōsha) (Shiga 1995) became a bestseller, and later a bible for the connection of landscape and nationalism. The Seikyōsha and its conservative nationalism located nature as a connection from earlier eras in a newly discovered landscape. The agreement of the national territory and nationalism was deeply involved in the establishment of the nation-state. However, when one thinks about it, the borders called national territory were 'discovered' within the imagination. Modern Japan had matured to the point that its 'nationals/Japanese' could share these. Shiga's *On the Japanese Landscape* is positioned as a forerunner of the representation of 'the Japanese' in deep agreement with nature, which is seen, among others, in Yanagita Kunio's folklore studies, Watsuji Tetsurō's *Climate and Culture*. A

Philosophical Study, (Watsuji 1935, 1961)¹ and Kamei Katsuichirō's *Scenes from Ancient Japanese Temples* (Kamei 1943).² However, in addition, while these bristle with the excess energy of finding the outer world and translating it into 'national territory', they do not yet find the later direction of the communalisation of the Japanese in terms of destiny, blood relationships and land bindings. This is a phenomenon that should be considered along with the thriving Orientalism and Asianism of the period.

The discovery of landscape also produced the phenomena of 'homeland' and 'national territory', as well as 'homesickness' and 'patriotism'. It produced regionalism and also encouraged the development of nationalism within the framework of the nation-state, as well as fomenting statism and fascism. Tokutomi Roka's *Shizen to jinsei* 自然と人生 (*Nature and Life*) (Roka 1929),³ published in 1900, avoided this problem, which was endemic to the discover of nature, through literary expression. Readers were gripped by the new literary style, reverberating as Shiga's scientific sentences had failed to do. These days it would be called an essay, focusing on the description of various forms of nature, that is landscape.

Again, there were no established genres yet at this time. The method of giving over one's senses to nature had been used since premodern times. It was the main focus of short poetry as well. Roka expressed it in the new format of prose.

"One gardenia in the corner of the garden. In the gloom of May darkness, it opens fragrant white blossoms. Well suited to this house of quiet people" (A pun on the Japanese word for gardenia, which also means 'mouthless')

The story proceeds as nature and the feelings of the writer interchange. Through the focus on this kind of nature observation, fragments of societal observation appear here and there. The section on "The Nation-State and the Individual" describes the festivities as the Meiji Emperor (Mutsuhito) returned from Hiroshima, and the sight of a starving beggar amidst the crowds, gobbling a cake dropped by a child. At the end, Roka did not hesitate to write this: "I leave arguments of nationalism or loyalty to you. I would not like to see the Emperor's child starve".

Here, Roka is trying to see the interior of the beggar, a part of the landscape, which ends up as a criticism of the nation-state. At the bottom is not so much humanism as a quest into the discovered interior of the self through objectivity. *Nature and Life*, with its Wordsworth epigraph, shares blood with the pastoral ideology of the West while boldly criticising society: this is worth focusing on. It is the moment just before naturalism.

1 Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889-1960).

2 Kamei Katsuichirō 亀井勝一郎 (1907-66).

3 Tokutomi Roka 徳富蘆花 (1868-1927).

Through realism and the ‘realist baptism’ of social novels, dark novels and tragic novels, the real approach to realism began. It may be argued that naturalism was the first literary theory in Japan, and its generative process shows us that the collusion of the description of the outer world as nature with the exposure of nature as ‘interior’ is the focal point of this creative theory. As Shimamura Hōgetsu 島村抱月(1871-1918) writes,

[i]t is clear that if perfect description is indistinguishable from natural beauty and imperfect description no better than a lifeless photograph, extreme realist description is far from the truth of art. It is thought that when describing a person the physical and spiritual aspects cannot be done as one, and that realist description is no more than faithfully describing the physical and missing the spiritual; but this is a prejudice. A perfect physical description would naturally contain some of the spiritual as well, since the heart is not a separate object. (Shimamura 1894)

The exemplars of naturalist literature are said to be Shimazaki Tōson’s *Hakai* 破戒 (*The Broken Commandment*, 1906) (Shimazaki 1974) and Tayama Katai’s *Futon* 布団 (*The Quilt*, 1907) (Tayama 1981). If we put the point of departure here at least for novels, it is startling that more than ten years earlier Hōgetsu was laying out the rules for naturalism at the age of just 24. He was pointing out the possibilities of expressions divided into two: interior and exterior, spirit and material, abstract and realist. The theme of accusation against social discrimination is clear in Tōson’s *The Broken Commandment*, but the landscape of the Shinano region, which he describes so vividly to bring out his theme, is a perfect example of the call and reply between exterior and interior. The human affect of sexual desire, which also Katai pursues, comes out clearly through finely detailed descriptions of clothing and behaviour. Katai became better known as a travel writer later on, with *Tōkyō no sanjūnen* 『東京の三十年』 (*Thirty Years in Tokyo*, 1917) among other books, but there his description is not only surface expression but fully succeeds, as we see even now, in representing the interior awareness.

However, while naturalism appeared in this way and flourished as a theory expressing both the natural self and the natural outer world, disharmony began to intervene as early as 1908. The major naturalist theorist Hasegawa Tenkei 長谷川天溪 (1876-1940) published “Shaseibun no myōshu” 写生文の妙趣 (Aspects of Realism, *Taiyō* 太陽, June 1908) this year, drawing a certain conclusion about naturalist literature. Tenkei was not logically gifted, or perhaps let himself go a little too far given the magazine he was writing for, but even so the banal generalisability in his point cannot be brushed aside entirely.

The ego of each individual, embracing this statism, has no collision with reality. Because we are Japanese does not mean we must agree with every movement or ideology in Japan. Even if we expand our ego to the scope of the Japanese Empire, dragons [??] separate from reality with no contradiction.

And, encouraging the uprising of a national literature at the end,

[t]he literary arts which were originally naturalistic must, as a natural result of focusing on reality, become expressions of the nation's people.

Uozumi Setsuro 魚住折蘆 (1883-1910), of the next generation, took this as solid criticism and, two years later in August of 1910 – that is, two months after the Great Treason Incident – published on the 22nd and 23rd, in the *Tōkyō Asahi Journal*, *Jikoshuchō no shisō to shite no shizenshugi* 「自己主張の思想としての自然主義」 (Naturalism as an Ideology of Self-Expression), making fun of Tenkei's 'ire' with "What's the point now of going on about the energy of the nation-state or the destiny of the Orient?"

Ishikawa Takuboku 石川啄木 (1886-1912), much stimulated by this, poignantly argued about what position the 'self' of 'self-expression' might exactly be in.

Right now we young men, in order to escape our state of self-destruction, have come to a time when we must be aware of the existence of that 'enemy.' This is nothing we hoped for, but something that must be. We must stand up as one and declare war on this state of a closing era. We must throw away naturalism, give up blind rebellion and nostalgia, and focus our whole spirits on considering tomorrow – we must throw ourselves into an organized consideration of our own era.⁴

This young man, who had once written that "the naturalist movement of recent years is the budding philosophy woven from forty years of modern Japanese life",⁵ is now calling for naturalism to be thrown out; this struggle is that which the culture of Japan itself was dealing with at the end of the Meiji period. One edge of the possibilities of newly altered cultural production had been closed. But their disappointment would be salved by the rich soil left by Ōsugi Sakae 大杉栄 (1885-1923) for the Taishō avant-garde to cultivate.

It is necessary to view this sudden turnaround in literary ideology through its connections with the ideologies and philosophies of the underlying aca-

4 *Jidai heisoku no genjō* 「時代閉塞の現状」 (This state of a closing era, written late August 1910).

5 "Yumi chō yori" 弓町より (From Yumi-chō), *Tōkyō Asahi Journal*, 30 November 1909-7 December 1909.

democratic world. In January and February 1905, just after the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War, Kuwaki Gen'yoku 桑木巖翼 (1874-1946), assistant professor at Tokyo Imperial University and the introducer of neo-Kantian philosophy of pure reason into Japan, published the volumes of *Tetsugaku zasshi* 哲学雑誌 (Philosophy Journal) his *Puragumatizumu ni tsuite* 「プラグマティズム」に就て (On Pragmatism), sharply criticising pragmatism as a false philosophy and beginning a fierce argument on the topic with Tanaka Ōdō 田中王堂 (1868-1932). Tanaka had met John Dewey at the University of Chicago while studying in America between 1889 and 1898. He received a baptism of pragmatism and, after returning to Japan, energetically argued on literature, philosophy and ideological criticism in *Tetsugaku zasshi* (Philosophy Journal), *Teiyū rinrikai* 丁酉倫理会 (Teiyū Ethics), and *Myōjō* 明星. Notably, he structured aesthetic and symbolic art as concrete forms of pragmatic life awareness. From an anti-naturalist perspective, he also debated with Shimamura Hōgetsu. Taking on the top theorists of the field, he never gave an inch, even opening battle with Sōseki.⁶

Pragmatism spread instantly through the post-Russo-Japanese-War cultural milieu. In particular, it seems to have become a solid theoretical outpost for the anti-naturalism side of the debate. Hasegawa Tenkei, a pillar of the naturalist literature movement along with Hōgetsu, published *Rironteki yūgi wo haisu* 「論理的遊戯を排す」 (Disposing of Theoretical Games Arguing for the Naturalist Position) in October 1907 in *Taiyō*, to an argument by Kinoshita Mokutarō 木下柰太郎 (1885-1945), who patiently took on Hasegawa's violently incoherent demand to “fling everything left by the religion, morals, philosophy of our fathers into the sea and face up to the real world” with an urging to “pay close attention to the recent spread of experimental philosophy and pragmatism”.

Hōgetsu later complained that “the root of the problem is how to unify all the contradictions of life, in the past, present and future, and pragmatism hasn't solved this”⁷ but that, in the contemporary ideological status as of *Waseda Bungaku* 早稲田文学 November 1907, in philosophy ‘human-centered pragmatism’ was said to be effective for a new ‘self-development’.⁸

Nakazawa Rinsen 中沢臨川 (1878-1920) reconciled this opposition with naturalist literature. His *Shizenshugi hanron* 自然主義汎論 (“General Thoughts on Naturalism”, *Waseda Bungaku*, September 1910) states that “while moving towards realism, philosophy was drawn in that direction too.

6 “Natsume Sōseki shi no “Bungei no tetsugakuteki kiso” wo hyōsu” 「夏目漱石氏の『文芸の哲学的基礎』を評す(抄)」筑摩書房〈現代日本文学大系 96〉、1973年。

7 *Kaigi to kokuhaku* 「懷疑と告白」 (“Doubt and Confession”, *Waseda Bungaku*, September 1909).

8 *Ryōsen, Chogyū, jisei, shinjiga* 梁川、樗牛、時勢、新自我 (“Ryōsen, Chogyū, the Times, the New Ego”, *Kindai bungei no kenkyū*, 近代文藝之研究, November 1909).

It is William James' pragmatism that shows that tendency most strongly now". Thus, he pointed out the similarities between the two. Rinsen later extended his reach to *James yori Bergson he* 「ジェームスよりベルグソンへ」 ("From James to Bergson", *Waseda Bungaku*, May 1913) and *Bergson* ベルグソン (*Jitsugyō no Nipponsha*, 1914), becoming the leading Bergson scholar in Japan.

We may also not leave out Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870-1945). From 1906, still a student at the Fourth High School, he was fascinated by James and published "Junsui keiken to shii, ishi, oyobi chiteki chokkan" 「純粹経験と思惟、意志、及び知的直観」 (Pure Experience, Thought, Will, and Intellectual Intuition) in *Tetsugaku zasshi* in August 1909 (*Philosophy Journal*). This eventually became the first section, "Junsui keiken" (Pure Experience), of his 1911 *Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究 (*Research into Good*, Kōdōkan 弘道館). His departure point was the moment he describes as "in the state of direct experience, giving up subject and object, the one true reality cannot be doubted even if one would, and there is the certainty of truth". That is, we must not forget that the Japanese-style theory of consciousness (the 'natural perspective') produced by Nishida was connected to this. At the root of the regionalism passed on from Nishida to Watsuji, which resulted in backing up fascism, was this similarity with the theoretical form of naturalism. It also continued to influence the creative theory of socialist literature, anarchist literature, and communist literature.

The creative theory system of the "I-Novel" that came about in the 1920s has this as its background. The problem attached to the 'traditional' and so-called uniquely Japanese format of the I-Novel is the stunting of the swell against society found from realism through naturalism in the push for true realism. The binding of the I-Novel within Japanese literature became a stranglehold on writers. The major innovations of the late Taishō period, including modernist literature such as the neo-sensualists and proletarian literature as well, also struggled within the grip of this bondage. The 'proletarian realism' advocated by Kurahara Korehito 蔵原惟人 (1902-91) was indeed a concept reflecting the issue of the awareness of nature within Japanese literature.⁹

This is an issue that must be narrated as a problem of fascism and colonialism. Paradoxically, it met with the question of how the nation-state used the Japanese perspective on nature as a part of the national ideological apparatus, and how it tamed, taught and educated people.

Granting the premise, we need to stop here and go back to Shōyō, Sōseki, Ōgai, Takuboku etc. We need to go over the form of their ideas again. It may be added, finally, that the concept of nature has indeed continued to function as a bitter testing place for and a stranglehold on

9 『プロレタリア芸術と形式』天人社(新芸術論システム 1930).

modern intellectuals.

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