

## Representations of Death in Modern Japanese Literature of the 1920s and 1930s

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How was the nature of death, which had heretofore provided the catastrophic event essential to tragedy, transformed in twentieth-century literature that saw the loss of reality of such concepts as personality and individuality as well as the complete disintegration of the tenets of classical drama?

Interestingly, in the case of Japan of the 1920s and 1930s, it was almost in inverse proportion to the decline of naturalistic realism that a new mental landscape of death began to appear in various literary works. Moreover, these stood in an intimate relationship to the efforts at reinterpreting the “self” that were characteristic of this period. As the intellectual and aesthetic ethos of personal cultivation (*kyōyōshugi*) typical of the Taisho period (1912-26) collapsed, the concept of death received new attention as a “screen” upon which an amorphous “I” could be projected. In the following pages, I wish to provide an overview of how out of a schism of the self — a conflict between the depicting self and the self which is depicted — found primarily in the first-person novels (*ichininshō shōsetsu*) of this period, a richly fictional representation of death arose. First, I will define the phenomenon to be considered in a general manner, and then examine its

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concrete historical development through a discussion of the early work of DAZAI Osamu (1909-1948), a writer representative of the literary trends of this era.

I.

“It was almost as if death had commenced a new season.” — the line with which HORI Tatsuo (1904-1953) opens his “Sei kazoku” (The Holy Family)<sup>1</sup> — symbolizes the beginning of Showa period literature (1926-89). The suicide of AKUTAGAWA Ryunosuke (1892-1927) in 1927 had evoked an enormous response as the event marking the end of the literary world of the Taisho period. In “The Holy Family,” Akutagawa’s favorite disciple Hori (called Henri in the story) deals with the funeral of his teacher (the character Kuki in the story being a stand-in for Akutagawa).

Toward the end of his life, Akutagawa had gradually shifted his approach from stories reworking material taken from classical literature to the literary forms known as *shishōsetsu* (an autobiographical genre often rendered as “I-novel”) and “state-of-mind fiction” (*shinkyō shōsetsu*), displaying an increasingly pronounced aspiration to draw forth an extraordinary world from the familiar materials of everyday life. Examples of this are short stories such as “Yuki / Shi / Piano,” (Snow / Poem / Piano)<sup>2</sup> and “Shigo” (After Death),<sup>3</sup> which depict surreal phenomena and the author’s own afterlife. Akutagawa’s skepticism with regard to the Taisho period ethos of personal cultivation characteristically manifests itself in his interest in “the subconscious self,”<sup>4</sup> and in matters “beyond the threshold of consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> As symbolized by “the second I” — the doppelgänger that appears in his posthumous manuscript “Haguruma” (Cogwheels)<sup>6</sup> — the more intently the “I” who is identical with the novelist examines the “I” who is not, the

1. *Kaizō*, November 1930.

2. *Shinshōsetsu*, May 1925.

3. *Kaizō*, September 1925.

4. This phrase appears in his short story “Umi no hotori” (By the Seaside), published in *Chūō kōron*, September 1925.

5. This concept can be found in Akutagawa’s short story “Shinkirō” (Mirage), published in *Fujin kōron*, October 1927.

6. *Bungei shunjū*, October 1927.

more detached from reality the comprehensive “I” that incorporates these two elements becomes divorced from reality, eventually drifting into a hallucinatory realm.

Hori Tatsuo<sup>7</sup> was intimately familiar with his mentor Akutagawa’s compositional style, and though he showed signs of attempting to develop his own style,<sup>8</sup> he ended up reproducing it in his own work. An example is this passage from “Kaifukuki” (Period of Recovery)<sup>9</sup> based on Hori’s experience with a near-fatal bout of pleurisy:

In that doubled room (in other words, this room of mine) something was gradually going out of phase, as if dreams had merged with reality. Yes, I felt that if I stepped out onto the balcony in the dead of night like this, and peered stealthily back into the room through the window, it would be exactly like looking through a piece of doubly refracting calcite—everything in the room, including myself, would appear as a hazy double image....

From the self that continued to lie in its endless, bizarre half-waking state, another self had slipped away to roam the corridors of a railway train.... This hallucination of the previous night had now at some point gotten mixed up with the strange illusion he had just experienced, creating a composition as complex as a painting by Blake, and just as disturbing, oppressing him in a way that made it even more difficult to sleep.

The image of death that appears to the narrator in his half-waking state creates an uncanny amalgamation of dream and reality, and the separation into the seeing self and the self which is seen resonates with the division between this world and the next. This relationship, in which both mani-

7. Hori came under Akutagawa’s mentorship in 1924, while still a student at the First Higher School in Tokyo. In the summers of 1925 and 1926 he accompanied Akutagawa to the resort town of Karuizawa. In his graduation thesis at Tokyo Imperial University, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ron — Geijutsuka toshite no kare o ronzu —” (On Akutagawa Ryūnosuke as an Artist), Hori especially praised the stories of Akutagawa’s final years.

8. For example, in “Geijutsu no tame no geijutsu ni tsuite” (On Art for Art’s Sake, published in *Shinchō*, February 1930), he proclaimed his intention not to imitate his mentor.

9. *Kaizō*, December 1931.

festations ultimately represent the same “self,” creates a new liminal realm that can be either dream or reality, this world or the world beyond.

Although being a writer of a quite different quality and style from Hori, the young KAWABATA Yasunari (1899-1972), having wandered the ruins of Tokyo together with Akutagawa in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, was driven in his own intense way to depict this sort of “third realm.” When he was a fledgling writer, Kawabata was obsessively fixated on his tragic fate as an orphan. He became locked in a vicious cycle of attempting to depict this in his fiction, failing in his attempts, and then trying to turn this failure itself into a theme in his work. Eventually this thematic struggle to objectify the reality of the self would lead him in exactly the opposite direction.

I think it is also quite shallow to settle comfortably into an epistemology that privileges only one’s own spirit, loses itself in abstract thought, and believes that only the perceiving self exists. When it comes up against the reality of death, this type of thinking is bound to run into difficulties....

For myself, I hesitate to believe that the doctrine of transmigration holds the sole key that can unlock all the mysteries of the universe, but I do think that it is one of the most beautiful philosophies that the human race has yet produced....

It is the feeling of flow, of flexibility, of indestructibility contained in that phrase. Things flow. It is no exaggeration to say that a single cell in the tip of my little finger flows outward toward the entire universe.<sup>10</sup>

This passage is an excellent example of the themes of the unity of all being (*banbutsu ichinyo*) and of transmigration and rebirth (*rinne tenshō*) that can be found in Kawabata’s work. But this world of dreams, the liminal

10. “Shoshū sankan no kūsō” (Reverie Amid Early Autumn Mountains), *Bungei shunjū*, November 1926.

realm between this world and the next, also seems to be an expression of a formless phenomenal world that appeared at the end of repeated efforts by the narrative “I” to give itself form. In his famous essay “Matsugo no me” (Eyes at the Moment of Death),<sup>11</sup> he holds up as his ideal “an icy, crystal-clear world of neurasthenia” — a concept based on the treatment of death found in Akutagawa’s suicide note. Here, too, we see a continuation of the idea of the uncanny “third realm” — simultaneously both life and death — derived from Akutagawa’s late works.

In the mid-1920s, at the end of the Taisho period, the literary world came to see state-of-mind fiction (*shinkyō shōsetsu*) as a further refinement of the autobiographical I-novel (*shishōsetsu*) and as the ideal fictional form. NAKAMURA Murao defined this state-of-mind fiction as “not so much a depiction of ‘life’, but rather as an effort to write of the author’s own perspective and feelings, in other words, the ‘stirrings of the heart’ of the writer himself.”<sup>12</sup> According to KUME Masao, the principle aim of such writing was to “condense the ‘I’ — to harmonize, filter, concentrate, blend, and reproduce it as a harmonious whole, with fidelity to its psychological states.”<sup>13</sup> These statements share a common interest in the issue of the narrative “I,” not as an objective reality but as a way of seeing, and the state-of-mind novels of this period, which repeatedly took the mental landscape of death as their subject matter, actually had more in common with the modernist literature of the rising generation represented by Kawabata than might be apparent at first glance. For example, SHIGA Naoya’s “Horibata no sumai” (House by the Moat)<sup>14</sup> depicted the “ineluctable fate” of the life of the small animals he could observe in his surroundings, while in “Kohan shuki” (Lakeside Notes),<sup>15</sup> KASAI Zenzo portrays the radiance of life that reveals itself in contrast to the progressive worsening of his tuberculosis. In “Remon” (Lemon),<sup>16</sup> KAJI Motojiri presents the psychological illusion—

11. *Bungei*, December 1933.

12. “Honkaku shōsetsu to shinkyō shōsetsu” (Genuine Fiction and State-of-Mind Fiction), *Shinchō*, January 1925.

13. “Shishōsetsu to shinkyō shōsetsu” (I-Novels and State-of-Mind Fiction), *Bungei shunjū*, January-February 1926).

14. *Fuji*, January 1926.

15. *Kaizō*, November 1925.

16. *Aozora*, January 1926.

the discordance with reality — attendant upon premonitions of death, and his exploration, through a *doppelgänger*, of the illusory realm between this world and the next in “K no shōten” (The Ascension of K)<sup>17</sup> also joins this particular literary stream. The fact that all of these works employ a first-person narrative structure is certainly no coincidence. They clearly demonstrate that irrespective of generation or stylistic tendency, many of the writers of this period employed the bifurcation of the “depicting self” and “the self which is depicted” as a vehicle for entering the liminal realm on the margins between life and death.

## II.

Historically, this tendency to represent fictional death based on a bifurcation of the self in first-person narratives, has had the following two peaks. The first peak occurred in the period from 1924 to 1927, during which the works we have touched on so far were written. The second spans the period between 1932 and 1936, when an even younger generation of writers — among them DAZAI Osamu, TAKAMI Jun (1907-1965), and ISHIKAWA Jun (1899-1987) — made their successive literary debuts wielding a style that has been described as “overly self-conscious and logorrheic” (*jiishiki kajō no jōzetsutai*). The first peak, as we have seen, responded to the collapse of the ethos of personal cultivation of the Taisho period by imagining a world divorced from everyday life — a liminal realm that partook both of this world and the next. This tendency eventually played itself out as the Marxist literary movement rose to dominance. The characteristic of the second peak lay in the fact that with the phenomenon of *tenkō* (the more or less coerced “ideological conversions” of leftist intellectuals in the early 1930s), the unambiguous “ideal self” envisioned by leftist ideology was once again reduced to an inscrutable black box and the “real self” had to be painstakingly reassembled from a mosaic of fragmentary and subjective “ways of seeing” in response. In this tendency there coexisted an external vector that sought to establish a new and tangible relationship with reality by positing death as a concept; and an internal vector in which the infinite

17. *Aozora*, October 1927.

replication of self-consciousness ultimately sought the sweet repose of unconsciousness, i.e., death. It should also be pointed out that in contrast to the works of the first period, which frequently used the motif of the bifurcated self in the form of a doppelgänger, the works of the second period are characterized by a tendency to relate an excessive self-consciousness to the temptations of suicide. For example, in “Kajin” (Fair Women),<sup>18</sup> the story that marked Ishikawa Jun’s debut on the literary scene, the first-person narrator/protagonist is a writer who finds it impossible to write anything, and is “fed up with myself to the point of bursting.” Eventually this excess of self-consciousness seems to him “evidence perhaps that I have fallen into a state of confusion without will or purpose,” which leads him to pass his days in a sort of listless fugue state.

— Void! Why yes, it’s void. I am filled with void! I am empty to begin with....

My god manifested itself in the form of nothingness ... Thus stigmatization for me meant to fit my entire self into a hollow frame drawn in mid-air. It took me awhile to realize that I was actually thinking about death. The idea of death approached me so stealthily and slowly at that time that I was no longer shocked when it finally came. I was rather dreamily calm. Now I beg of you not to threaten me with the cruel word “suicide.” I cannot write this word down without curse and horror. I have never thought of killing myself. Somehow, I will suddenly die. The important thing is for me to remain conscious of my dying. To me, taking sleeping pills to enter death from sleep is not dying at all. I have to see my own death in a clear mirror, be it feeling the point of a sword cutting my flesh apart and breaking my bones, or feeling a bullet sinking into my brain.<sup>19</sup>

What an immensely different aspect the death being described here presents compared to death as manifested in classical tragedy. At the very least, the “why” of death — the concrete relations of cause and effect —

18. *Sakuhin*, May 1935.

19. Translated by Lucy Loh in *The World of Ishikawa Jun’s Fiction* (PhD. Thesis submitted at Princeton University, 1986), p. 45-6.

does not even enter the question here. The “I,” unable to apprehend itself in its relationship to everyday reality, attempts to fit the self into a variety of “voids,” and eventually, by positing the concept of death as absolute nothingness, is at last able to feel a “dreamy calm.” Yet at the same time, insofar as this is the product of self-consciousness, an easeful “natural death” is not permitted; the narrator insists that until the very last he has “to remain conscious of my dying.” An excess of self-consciousness summons death as the ultimate unconsciousness, but in the next instant the consciousness is already dismembering that conceptual death, in an endlessly recirculating dyadic relationship between logorrhea and silence (the stillness of death).

At precisely this time, YOKOMITSU Riichi (1898-1947) was proposing in his “Junsui shōsetsu ron” (Pure Fiction)<sup>20</sup> the existence of what he called “the fourth person,” defined as “the self perceiving the self.” Following this approach, KOBAYASHI Hideo (1902-1983) praised Andre Gide’s “laboratory of self-awareness,”<sup>21</sup> and Takami Jun was writing in a similar vein in “Byōsha no ushiro ni nete irarenai” (We Cannot Hide Behind Description)<sup>22</sup> when he asserted that “the author has a responsibility to set things down in black and white, but I do not believe that responsibility can be fulfilled through a mode of representation that allows him to conceal himself safely behind a screen of objectivity.” And this excess of self-consciousness — the endless struggle between the perceiving and perceived selves — always exists in an intensely ambivalent relationship with “a suicidal logic,”<sup>23</sup> as described by Kobayashi Hideo in “X he no tegami” (A Letter to X)<sup>24</sup> as a sense that “death can come calling at any time.”

The principle by which the turmoil of self-consciousness in first-person narratives calls forth a highly fictionalized representation of death simultaneously embodies two vectors — one in which the positing of a concept of death is used to explore a new relationship with reality; and another in which self-consciousness, having exhausted itself in the replication of possible selves, seeks the ultimate unconsciousness, the “sweet repose” of

20. *Kaizō*, April 1935.

21. “On the ‘I-novel’” (“Shishōsetsu ron”), *Keizai Ōrai*, May August 1935.

22. *Shinchō*, May 1936.

23. This phrase is borrowed from Eto Jun, *Kobayashi Hideo* (Kodansha, 1961).

24. *Chūō Kōron*, September 1932.



death. Post-*tenkō* literature, while initially appearing to be headed along the first vector, ultimately fell into the trap of tending almost inevitably along the second — death as *thanatos*.

For example, let us examine the following passage by the young YASUDA Yojuro (1910-1981) found in an early manuscript entitled “Intellectual Catastrophe.”<sup>25</sup> The first-person narrator has just taken poison, “and now, as my body gradually wends its way toward death,” he speaks of his yearning for the revolutionary ideology he used to espouse, and unleashes the following torrent of words:

I want to be writing something, anything, I tried saying to myself with some passion. And then — I had no idea. So I tried picking up my pen, but where should I begin, where indeed was I to begin? That I could still be in such a relaxed mood seems completely incomprehensible. I can’t say for sure that this feeling of my oppressive and ugly impatience was not forced onto me. The more I think about it, the more it seems to me that the things I said and the things I did once upon a time may be an embarrassment to me now, but in their total absurdity and squalor they also make me feel all the more that the suffering that led up to my present decision is even more ridiculous and pointless.

This short story, including its recounting of the author’s conflicted relationship with the Marxist worldview, ought to be an embodiment of the “second peak” referred to above, but his subsequent turn towards the “aestheticization of death” represented by the literary movement of the Japan Romantic School (*Nihon rōmanha*) is already foreshadowed by the motif of excessive self-awareness being absorbed into the ultimate unconsciousness of death. Such narcissistic flirtation with death always harbors within it the potential for veering into a fanatical nationalism. On the other hand, after the outbreak of war, a number of writers would accompany Japanese troops to the front, and gain firsthand experience of death in an altogether rawer and more genuine form. As part of the resulting polarization of the depiction of death, the conflict between the depicting self and the depicted self — the effort to conceptualize death as a void — was also forced to a rapid culmination from this point onward.

25. *Cogito*, April 1932.

## III.

Based upon what we have seen thus far, I will now examine Dazai Osamu as a writer representative of the “second peak.”

Born TSUSHIMA Shuji, he adopted the pen name Dazai Osamu beginning with the short story “Ressha” (Train), published in February 1933.<sup>26</sup> His first collection of stories, *Bannen* (Final Years), largely comprising early works written from the autumn of 1932 to the winter of 1934, was published in 1936.<sup>27</sup> As the author was fond of recounting,<sup>28</sup> the title was selected because he intended the volume as a last testament prior to his actual death.

“Ha” (Leaves), the story that opens the collection, begins with the following brief paragraph (quoted in full):

I planned to die. In January I received a New Year’s gift of a gray-striped robe. It was clearly a summer kimono. I thought I might as well go on living until summer.<sup>29</sup>

Like this one, many of the stories in *Bannen* are characterized by representations of death, and coupled with the author having committed his third suicide attempt in March 1935, there is a deeply rooted tendency to directly equate death as represented in Dazai’s work with the death he pursued in actual life. But in fact, as we see in this passage, the concreteness of death — an explication of the life history leading to the selection of death as the only option — is very carefully and completely elided. By so doing, the author succeeds in weaving the interplay of life and death into a contrasting set of lyrical symbols. As pointed out earlier with regard to Ishikawa Jun’s “Kajin,” this is not a death embodying the materiality of drama, but death as a void, a blank, a conceptual screen upon which the self may be projected. There has been a strong tendency to immediately attempt to

26. *Tōdō Nippō*, February 19, 1933.

27. *Bannen* (Sunagoya Shobo, June 1936).

28. For example, in “Speaking to Others” (“Tanin ni kataru”), *Bunshō*, February 1938.

29. Translated by Alan Wolfe in *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan* (Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 132.

fill this void with biographical material, but it seems to me that we need to look afresh at this concept of “final years” itself within the historical context of evolving modes of expression in modern Japanese literature — that is, in relation to the “second peak” we have been discussing.

Dazai first began to think of himself as a writer in 1925, while still a student at Aomori Middle School (in the prewar educational system, more the equivalent of a high school). Chronologically, this happens to more or less correspond to the “first peak” mentioned above. However, in Dazai’s fledgling works we do not see the bifurcation of the self fostering hallucinations of the next world that was symptomatic of the fiction of this first peak. Given his age and his distance from the center of the literary world at the time this is hardly surprising, but the fact remains that in his formative years as a writer, Dazai had virtually no relationship with the theme of the divided self. In his writings from his higher school and university days there are a number of pieces that incorporate death as a motif, but all of them are depictions of what is in one sense a quite clearly delineated theme — the suffering resulting from being a member of a social class that the progressive thought of the day declared was destined to disappear.<sup>30</sup> However, about the same time that he adopted the pen name of Dazai Osamu, he renounced writing any more on this theme of class conflict. In this he was responding to the pressures of the times that produced the “second peak”: the wave of defections from the left that had once again rendered the self into an inscrutable black box, an enigma that must be reconstructed from a fragmented mosaic of subjective impressions. Simultaneously, one can discern in this shift the process through which Dazai adopted with a certain personal inevitability the “overly self-conscious and logorrheic” style with which he is associated and began to turn death into a poetic concept.

Of the fifteen stories collected in *Bannen*, fourteen were written between the summer of 1932 and the autumn of 1934.<sup>31</sup> If we examine them in chronological order, from late 1933 to early 1934 an abrupt prolifera-

30. See, for example, “Mugen naraku” (Limitless Abyss), *Saibō Bungei*, May 1928; “Gakuseigun” (Student Group), “Go, Karera” (5, Them), and “(C) Haisansha” ([C] The Defeated), in *Zahyō*, August 1930.

31. YAMANOUCHI Shushi’s bibliographic notes to volume one of *Dazai Osamu zenshū* (The Collected Works of Dazai Osamu; Chikuma Shobo, June 1989) provide detailed information on the dating of these works.

tion of self-consciousness on the part of the narrator — in the sense of an increasing intrusion of the narrative voice into the content of the stories — is clearly apparent. In the earlier group of stories in *Bannen* beginning with “Gyofukuki” (Undine) and “Chikyūzu” (Map of the World) that predate the logorrheic narrative style,<sup>32</sup> death is imbued with a strongly cathartic character as a means of self-release from the tragedies of fate and the oppressiveness of reality. For example, “Gyofukuki” is a story of incest between a father and daughter eking out a living as charcoal-burners in the mountains of Tsugaru that ends with the daughter, Suwa, throwing herself into a waterfall, though her estrangement from the father is not really given sufficient attention. “Chikyūzu” is the story of a Jesuit missionary, Shiroote,<sup>33</sup> who comes to Japan in the middle of the Edo period but dies in prison without having had the chance to spread the gospel. When he is finally given an opportunity to expound his faith, it is only in the context of the tragic relationship with his interrogator, the Confucian philosopher ARAI Hakuseki (1657-1725), who “for some reason pretends not to hear him.” In both stories death provides an escape from the tragedy of failed communication, and this in a sense might be said fulfills the classic role of achieving internal dramatic catharsis. Parenthetically, “Chikyūzu” is based on Arai Hakuseki’s *Seiyō kibun* (Tidings from the West), and follows a pattern of “thematic fiction” that closely resembles the early works of Akutagawa.<sup>34</sup> However, with the social phenomenon of *tenkō* outpacing any concrete examination of its substance, and “Shestovian anxiety”<sup>35</sup> be-

32. The hypothetical classification of the stories in *Bannen* into earlier and later works I have adopted here follows Yamanouchi’s analysis and the fruits of other previous research. The earlier group is made up of the six stories “Ressha” (Train), “Omoide” (Memories), “Gyofukuki” (Undine), “Suzumeko” (The Little Sparrow), “Sarugashima” (Monkey Island), and “Chikyūzu” (Map of the World); the later group by the eight stories “Ha” (Leaves), “Sarumen kanja” (The Monkey-Masked Clown), “Dōke no hana” (Flowers of Farce), “Inka” (Foxfire), “Gangu” (Toys), “Kare wa mukashi no kare narazu” (He Is No Longer Himself), “Romanesuku” (Romanesque), and “Gyakkō” (Against the Stream). The remaining story, “Mekura zōshi” (Blind Man’s Tale), was completed in 1936.

33. Based on the historical figure Giovanni Battista Sidotti.

34. The term “thematic fiction” as used here refers to the body of Taisho period short stories, chiefly by Akutagawa and KIKUCHI Kan, that emphasize the problematic nature of their themes.

35. “Shestovian anxiety” refers to the philosophy of Lev Shestov (1866-1938) which enjoyed quite a vogue in Japan after Japanese translations of his work were published as *Higeki no tetsugaku* (The Philosophy of Tragedy; Shiba Shoten, January 1926) and *Kyomu yori no sōzō* (Creation from the Void; Shiba Shoten, July 1934). His motif of existential anxiety came to symbolize the confu-

ing loudly proclaimed as the spirit of the times, circumstances were already inhospitable to writing that attempted to continue the clear-cut drama — the dramaturgy of tragedy — of the past. Perhaps the biggest issue arising here was what kind of language could go beyond the framework created by Taisho period novels and express the amorphous state — the murky relationship between self and other — that was so difficult to elucidate as a priori reality. This in turn contained the issue of how the narrator was to convey to the reader, as other, the tragedy of failed communication.

In the earlier group of stories in *Bannen*, the narrator almost never aggressively intrudes into the story itself and there is little evidence at this point for Dazai's participation in what had become the expressive standard of the time — the “second peak.” But beginning with “Sarumen Kanja,” (The Monkey-Masked Clown) completed at the beginning of 1934, the narrator's consciousness of the narrative suddenly became a prominent feature. A number of the later group of stories in *Bannen* are believed to be reworkings of manuscripts Dazai had abandoned earlier, and by engaging this process of restructuring within the works themselves, he seems to have arrived at a unique meta-level discourse — a kind of “story within the story.” The narrator, who is identified with the author, questions what a story is, and the process of this questioning is incorporated into the stories in what might be argued is a conscious attempt to transcend the limits of the prevalent literary framework.

For example, let us consider “Dōke no hana” (Flowers of Farce),<sup>36</sup> believed to be a reworking of the objective third-person narrative of the sketch “Umi” (The Sea), and see what it achieves by allowing the opinions of the writer, voiced in the first person, to freely intrude into the narrative. The story has its origins in Dazai's double-suicide attempt of 1930, but the narrative concerns itself primarily with the aftermath, and devotes little ink to the events leading up to the incident itself.<sup>37</sup> There is a scene in which the protagonist, OBA Yozo, in the hospital after the incident, is asked why

sion of Japanese intellectuals in the post-*tenkō* era, and “Shestovian anxiety” came to be widely perceived as a contemporary social phenomenon.

36. *Nihon Rōmanha*, May 1935.

37. On this point, YOSHIDA Hiroo, “Kyokō no hōkō” (Fictitious Wanderings) in TOGO Katsumi and WATANABE Yoshinori, eds., *Sakuhinron Dazai Osamu* (Sobunsha Shuppan, June 1974) has some instructive comments.

he tried to kill himself, and he answers, “To tell you the truth, I don’t really know. I guess there were all kinds of reasons.” The narrator (“I”) then steps in to explicate this remark:

Yozo has just mumbled “all kinds of reasons,” and by doing so may have inadvertently exposed his true state of mind. In their hearts there was only confusion; that and an inarticulate rebellion. Or perhaps nothing more than pride. And a finely honed pride at that. One that would tremble in the slightest breeze. One that readily imagined insult, and would respond with a tormented contemplation of death. So it’s no wonder that Yozo was at a loss when asked about the reason for his suicide. — There were all kinds of reasons.

In this way, the comments offered by the narrator are skillfully employed to obscure and evade the specific details of the incident in question. The clearer the explanation attached to this double-suicide attempt, the more the story would end up resembling the drama of “thematic fiction.” No matter what form death takes in the narrative, it must not be explicable, for it must remain death itself, unalloyed with meaning — as a blank screen upon which that which is not death may be projected.

The narrator “I” confesses over and over to the reader, directly addressed as “you,” that it is impossible from the beginning to present any causal explanation of the suicide attempt, and moreover, that he has no intention of doing so. And to make matters worse, he cannot get his point across, which simply results in a further outpouring of verbiage.

I will say no more. The more I say, the less I am telling you. I feel like I haven’t even begun to touch on the heart of this matter. Inevitably, I suppose. There’s a lot I’ve neglected to mention. That’s probably inevitable as well. It’s common knowledge in the writing game that the author is the last to know the value of his own work. It’s a painful truth but I have to acknowledge it. I was a fool to expect my work to have the effect I wanted. Especially since I should have never said anything about that effect in the first place. The moment I let it slip, some other, completely different effect is created. As soon as I even have the no-

tion of the effect I want, some new effect leaps forth. This has me playing an eternal and idiotic game of catch-up. I don't even want to know if what I am writing is trash or has some redeeming qualities. Then maybe this story might engender some tremendous value I can't even imagine.

This passage is a classic example of the “overly self-conscious logorrheic style,” and I think it can be argued that Dazai adopts it here in order to demolish the framework of “thematic fiction” and rescue death from any fixed, determinate meaning. At the same time, this style is also entrusted with the aim of conveying to the reader the failed communication — the “demolished pride” — of the “young men” of the story. Yet however much he tries to explain, the “I” of the narrator cannot envision the “you” of the reader that will understand him, and in the end what surfaces is merely the self-contradictory stance of “anticipating the effect of my own works.” This in turn gives rise to a reflexive awareness that the very employment of this style is itself a “sham” and a “performance.”

We also see this in another work from the later group of stories in *Bannen*, “Romanesque.” The passage is from the section of the story devoted to Saburo the Liar, whose extraordinary talents are about to be impaired by a sudden attack of self-awareness.

One lies to seek a bit of relief from a ponderous, suffocating reality, but the liar, like the drinker, gradually comes to need larger and larger doses. The lies become blacker and more complex, they mesh and rub together until in the end they shine with the luster of truth.

A life free of lies! Ah, but that, too, was, by definition, a lie. To praise good and condemn evil? Another lie. Surely a lie already dwelled in the heart of anyone who sought to make such distinctions and stand in judgment. Every way of life Saburo could think of seemed tainted, and he agonized over the problem night after sleepless night. Finally, however, he discovered an attitude that seemed to offer hope. He would learn to become an idiot, without will or emo-

tion. To live like the wind.<sup>38</sup>

Originally, for Saburo lies were something coined as an antithesis to the utilitarian demands of everyday life, but here they have also come to represent an over-awareness of the creative act. The balance between these two aspects — in other words, awareness of lies as a method and awareness of the method itself as a lie — is a subtle one, and it should be clear that if this precarious balance is disturbed, the creative act itself will become impossible. To “live like the wind” and “to become an idiot, without will or emotion” — these are hints in the direction of the final unconsciousness of death, which, we learned in Ishikawa’s “Kajin,” will naturally serve as the ultimate release from self-consciousness. “Gyakkō” (Against the Stream) the last story to be completed among those collected in *Bannen*, opens with a passage that expresses this exquisite balance between the awareness of lies as a method and awareness of method itself as a lie.

He was not an old man. He’d only just turned twenty-five. And yet he was an old man. An old man who’d lived his years at a full three times the rate of a normal person. He’d failed twice at suicide. One of them was a love suicide. He’d been thrown in jail three times. As a thought criminal. Though he hadn’t sold a single one of them, he’d written more than a hundred stories. But the old man had done none of this with any conviction. It was all grass by the wayside.... The old man died today. There were only two things in his long life that were not lies: his birth and his death. He spouted lies right up to the moment he died.

This passage might serve as the epigraph for *Bannen*. The “death” of this “old man” who had only just turned twenty-five and spouted lies right up to the moment of his death is clearly a death different in nature from the death described in “Chikyuzu” or the death whose concrete reality is intentionally obscured in “Dōke no hana.” Here, the writer who has employed lies as a method can no longer dispel the self-awareness that his method

38. Translated by Ralph McCarthy in *Blue Bamboo* (Kodansha Intl., 2001), p. 128.



itself is nothing but “lies” and “grass by the wayside,” and anticipates death conceptually as the space in which his exaggerated sense of the act of writing can be liberated.

This is precisely what titling this collection of stories “Final Years” is meant to signify.

#### IV.

Let me sum up. Death, which had been narrated — in fairly clear and concrete terms — as a symbol of the intellectual anguish of the time in Dazai’s early writing attempts, was eventually stripped of its specificity with the advent of the persona “Dazai Osamu,” though in the earlier group of stories in *Bannen*, it still remained within the matrix of the catastrophe central to tragic drama. In order to demolish this framework, Dazai weaves the web of verbiage that has been labeled the “overly self-conscious logorrheic style,” shaking death free of any determinate meaning in an even more thoroughgoing manner. An excess of authorial consciousness pushes toward a deconstruction of this method itself, and death unmoored from specific signification takes on a new role as the space into which the artist’s creative consciousness will ultimately be liberated.

As suggested before in the discussion of Yasuda Yojuro, when death makes its appearance as the last refuge of self-consciousness, a cycle is completed. Contextually speaking, *Bannen* was published in 1936, just when the “second peak” was coming to its conclusion. In its attempt to explicate the “tragedy” of failed communication between a vector groping towards a new post-*tenkō* reality and another seeking a kind of self-involved, autistic escape into a conceptual realm, the logorrheic style eventually becomes a conceptual presentiment of death, and here Dazai’s trajectory as it inscribes the culmination of the “second peak” is highly suggestive. By 1936, he had reached a temporary dead-end with the “overly self-conscious logorrheic style.” After a brief hiatus, Dazai’s writing would see the reconstitution of the relationship between the self as artist and the world of everyday reality as can be seen in his “Fugaku Hyakkei” (One Hundred

Views of Mount Fuji).<sup>39</sup> This development is embodied in a passage in this story, which sums itself up in the line “The evening primrose suited Mt. Fuji perfectly” (*Fuji ni wa tsukimisō ga yoku niau*). In this case, the evening primrose is a stand-in for the artist, while Mt. Fuji represents everyday reality. The fact that Dazai was in a sense taken in with surprising ease by the “ideology of death” promulgated under Japan’s wartime regime<sup>40</sup> is certainly not unrelated to this shift. Yet precisely because of this, it is the world of *Bannen* that seems to most vividly express to us the possibilities and impossibilities of death as rendered in the “overly self-conscious logor-rheic style.”

The foregoing has been a small exercise in the interpretation of how “death,” in literary terms, arises out of the conflict between the depicting self and the self which is depicted. At least in the context of fiction, death is not something that can be limited to the conditional role it plays in plot formation, nor is it simply a reflection of the author’s worldly views of life and death. The literary tendencies of the 1920s and 1930s examined here present a “third death” that is neither of these, but instead serves as a screen upon which the concepts woven out of the narrator’s self-consciousness may be projected — a notion that should present us with a variety of new issues for investigation.

39. *Buntai*, February–March 1939.

40. See, for example, “Sange” (Fallen Blossoms), *Shin Wakodo*, March 1944.